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Ingvild Flaskerud

Preface

As the new managing editor of the *Scandinavian Journal of Islamic Studies* (SJIS), I am delighted to present this topical issue in which we explore the interplay between Islam, art, and popular culture as sites for possible configurations of Islam, Muslim cultures, and identities. As noted in the introduction by the editors, Ragnhild Johnsrud Zorgati and Douglas Mattsson, approaching religion through the medium of artistic/aesthetic expressions is part of a broader trend in the academic study of religion/s. In the first of the four studies presented in the current issue, Alma Munk Kronik explores conceptualizations of interreligious relation and religious coexistence between Muslims, Jews, and Christians in Copenhagen. The discussion is based on ethnographic studies at the Goldschmidts Musikakademi, the Islamisk–Kristent Studiecenter, and MuJu & Co. In the second article, Jonas Otterbeck introduces readers to a Muslim ballet school in London where students dance to poetry with the purpose of cultivating Islamic *adab* (etiquette) and *akhlaq* (ethics). Shifting the to Iran, Ingvild Flaskerud next explores how signs associated with Twelver Shiite visual, material, and performative religious culture were used by the ‘Green Movement’ to mobilize opposition against the Iranian authorities in 2009. In the last article, Thomas Brandt Fibiger turns to the Gulf region to examine some of the spectacular new museums established in recent decades. Focusing on how ‘religion’ is exhibited, he discusses how its presentation connects with notions of ‘cultural heritage’ and ‘Islamic civilization’ so as to situate the nation as a global actor. In “Meet the Doctor”, Douglas Mattsson presents an interview with Gustav Larsson who recently (2024) defended his dissertation, “Positioned orthodoxies: Muslim diversity in contemporary Sweden”, at Linnaeus University. In the thesis, Larsson examines the ways in which notions of Islamic orthodoxy are constructed within and used to maintain boundaries

around certain Muslim congregations in contemporary Sweden. In his conversation with Mattsson, he reflects on results he found particularly interesting and surprising and on challenges he encountered.

The editorial board of the journal has undergone some changes since the publication of our last issue. Jesper Petersen has resigned as managing editor and I am honoured to accept the invitation to take over the managing editorship as the journal continues in its work of strengthening the connections between research communities across Scandinavia studying Islam and Muslims. The editorial board would like to thank Jesper Petersen for the time and energy he has invested in the journal, and for his work in steering its profile from the well-established Danish journal of Islamic studies, *Tidsskrift for Islamforskning* (TIFO), to a Scandinavian-based and Scandinavian-oriented journal publishing articles on Muslims and Islam in Scandinavia as well as on Muslims and Islam across the world by researchers affiliated with Scandinavian universities. Jesper Petersen has also connected our journal with the Directory of Open Access Journals, with the result that the journal now follows an internationally approved standard for peer review and open access. We believe that these changes will strengthen the journal's quality and accessibility and enable it to become a valuable platform for mediating and discussing research into Islam and Muslims in Scandinavia and elsewhere, as well as to strengthen collaboration between Scandinavian researchers and colleagues internationally. The editorial board would also like to thank Sara Jul Jacobsen for her valuable editorial contributions to the journal over many years.

The board is now in the process of strengthening its Scandinavian profile, and we are excited to be joined by three new members who will make this possible. From the University of Bergen we are joined by Eirik Hovden, research professor in Arabic and Middle Eastern history, from Stockholm University we are joined by Susanne Olsson, professor in the history of religions and from the University of Lund we are joined by Anders Ackfeldt, who also acts as Deputy Director at the Swedish Research Institute in Istanbul. I myself am affiliated with the University of Oslo. These additions will renew the board's expertise and broaden its network. Hovden has worked on Islamic law, legal history, and Islamic history in Yemen, with a focus on the Zaydi Islamic tradition. From 2020 to 2025 he led the

TMF starting grant on mechanisms of change in Islamic legal texts, using the conceptual lenses of canonization and codification. Olsson's research interests include the Egyptian philosopher Hasan Hanafi and his interpretation of Islam, Islamic preachers, mass media and social change in Egypt, in addition to juridical interpretations related to minority Muslims and Salafi-oriented Islam in both a global and a European context, including Sweden. Ackfeldt holds a PhD in Religious Studies and his research interests include how Islam is produced in American and global hip-hop culture by both Muslims and non-Muslims. Analyzing lyrics, sounds and images, he has explored the Islamic semiotic resources used by artists and through a social-semiotic exploration, discusses how Islamic themes feature in US hip-hop culture. My own research similarly moves between Muslim majority and minority contexts. Focusing on Twelver Shiism in Iran and Norway, I have conducted ethnographic research on the use of images for devotional and ritual purposes, on women as ritual experts, and on various material and embodied methods in the formation of virtue ethics.

As always, we extend our thanks to the Independent Research Fund Denmark for their generous funding, and to all our peer-reviewers, without whose contributions we would not be able to share our research with you.

Islam, Art, and Popular Culture

SJIS special issue, spring 2025

In this issue of the *Scandinavian Journal of Islamic Studies* we explore the interplay between Islam, art, and popular culture. We could have begun by defining the three terms involved, all of them multivalent and complex. 'Islam', as all readers of this journal know, covers 1,400 years of human religious history, involving continuities and breaches, coherences and contradictions, and referring to different branches, interpretations of scripture, authority structures, legal requirements, rituals, and ethical and moral considerations. 'Art' and 'popular culture' are also complex terms riddled by value debates. Is there a hierarchy between them? Do we talk of 'fine arts' or 'high art' versus 'popular culture', or do we have a concept of art that is less elitist? And what does 'culture' refer to in 'popular culture'? Is it the same 'culture' as in 'multiculture' or 'a plurality of cultures'?

Given the complexity of all the terms involved, we have opted for pragmatism: what the terms mean depends on context and on the various authors' use in their respective contributions. Hence, in this special issue, 'Islam' in one contribution provides a repertoire of potent references that may be translated into culturally significant images, capable in turn of being used to raise political awareness and engagement; in another, 'Islam' is understood as something representable – one religious tradition among others that are to be exhibited in a museum; and in a third, 'Islam' is perceived as a set of values that can provide arguments for engagement, whether in interreligious dialogue or in pedagogical programmes of ballet instruction. In similar vein, the authors of these contributions engage with various aspects of 'art' and 'popular culture', ranging from orchestral music, religious images on political posters and religious artefacts in museums to classical ballet and motorbike rides.

The study of Islam, art, and popular culture is part of a trend

in the academic study of religion/s, whereby over the past few decades approaching religion through the medium of artistic/aesthetic expressions has gained momentum (Gilmour 2005; Partridge and Christianson 2009; Nieuwkerk 2011; Klassen 2014; Cutrara 2014; Nieuwkerk, LeVine, and Stokes 2016; Lund 2016; Forbes and Mahan 2017; Piela 2018; Coody, Clanton, and Clark 2023; Rashid and Petersen 2023, Endsjø and Lied 2011; Peter, Dornhof, and Arigita 2014; Zorgati 2023). The focus of this special issue is not on religious foundational texts, rituals, or experiences alone, but on how discourses, lived experiences, and representations of religion are produced, adopted, and negotiated in art and popular culture. Scholars have remarked noticed that religious imagery, themes, symbols, and ideas have become more frequent in popular culture, and hence that popular culture as a medium offers a ‘pool of resources’ from which individuals can draw ideas, symbols, practices, and beliefs, and thus shape their own conceptualization of and relation to religion (Partridge 2004, 2005). In the call to this special issue, we chose to use the word ‘configuration’, asking how art and popular culture may be explored as “sites for possible configurations of Islam, Muslim cultures, and identities.” In order to question the assumption that the connection between art and Islam is the religious identity of the artist (Muslim artist creates Islamic art), we underlined that “configurations may stem from Muslims producing art and popular culture, or from Islam and Muslims being represented or portrayed in art and popular culture (*independently of the producers’ self-identification as Muslim or non-Muslim*), or from Muslim theological/juridical/ethical discussions about art and popular culture.” The contributions we have received address different trajectories of/in the intersection between Islam, art, and popular culture.

In her article, “Muslimer, jøder og kristne i samspel, dialog og på motorcykel: En feltstudie om interreligiøse foreninger i København”, Alma Munk Kronik explores the issue of interreligious dialogue and ‘living together’ among Christians, Muslims, and Jews in Copenhagen. In an atmosphere of increased tension both between majority and minority/ies and between different minority groups due to ongoing conflict and war in the Middle East, Kronik underlines the urgency of doing research on interreligious and interethnic communication and dialogue. Taking the UN ambition of creating a ‘Culture of Peace’ as a point of departure, she asks how interreligious groups in Copen-

hagen practice ‘living together’ (*sameksistens*). Her study focuses on three associations: Goldschmidts Musikakademi, Islamisk–Kristent Studiecenter (IKS), and MuJu og Co. Danmark. Combining field work and interviews with theories on lived religion and affect theory, Kronik demonstrates that although the goal of the three groups is similar, their practices differ considerably. While IKS represents an organization that favours verbal dialogue about (potentially contentious) religious issues, the other two groups engage in nonverbal practices of coexistence – playing music or riding motorbikes together. For the founder of the Musikakademi, words often create tensions, while music produces shared feelings among the participants that transcend religious and ethnic differences. The academy seeks to create a space and communal feeling for children, hoping to provide tangible alternatives to paths that might lead towards interreligious or interethnic conflicts. Its founder therefore seeks to reach out to children to foster this communal feeling before they are claimed by interreligious or interethnic conflicts. Kronik labels the practice of the academy as ‘bricolage’, arguing that “sammenblanding af kulturer og religioner gennemsyrrer gruppernes praksis, f.eks. idet der spilles musik fra forskellige kulturelle og religiøse traditioner på musikskolen.”

While Kronik sheds light on how music is used to build bridges between children from different religious and ethnic backgrounds, Otterbeck draws attention to ballet instruction for Muslim children in “Grace & Poise: A Muslim ballet school in the UK”. At the Grace & Poise Academy in London and Birmingham, children (boys are accepted up to the age of 6–7 years) learn classic ballet steps and movements accompanied by rhythmic poetry. The school does not employ music, as its founder, Miss Maisie, deems music as a possible hindrance when marketing the school. Combining her background as a professional ballet dancer with insights from Montessori pedagogy and Islamic *adab* (etiquette) and *akhlaq* (ethics), the school’s founder aims to install bodily integrity and a culture of excellence and endurance in the children through ballet. The school is open to all children but follows what the founder defines as Islamic ethical standards, and most of the participants are Muslims. Unlike the Copenhagen Musikakademi, which aims to recruit children from different minority groups, Miss Maisie’s school is structured in such a way as to be accommodating to Muslim families. Still, in combining a classical (European) art form with a

pedagogical programme building on Islamic ethics and values, the ballet school, like the music academy, stands out as an example of what Otterbeck refers to as blending that is not so unlike Kronik's 'bricolage' or 'hybridity'. Moreover, and despite their different approaches to music, the examples of the ballet school and the music academy illustrate how Muslims actively engage in various cultural and popular cultural forms, and in so doing, create new ways to relate to Islam.

Kronik and Otterbeck study the intersection of Islam, art, and popular culture in Denmark and the UK, both contexts in which Islam represents a minority religion. What happens with the intersection in countries where Islam represents the religious tradition of the majority? While Ingvild Flaskerud explores the topic of religiously inspired political art in Iran through the theoretical lens of semiotics, Thomas Brandt Fibiger analyses how museums in the Arab Gulf represent different religious traditions, including Islam.

In "Visual Culture, Religion, and Politics in the Modern Iranian Public Sphere: Recontextualizing Twelver Shiite Culture in the Mobilization of Protest", Flaskerud sheds light on the visual strategies used by the protest movement, known as the Green Movement, mobilized in the aftermath of the Iranian presidential election on 12 June 2009. More precisely, she studies the visual and verbal language of four posters produced by the movement, all of which draw on a repertoire of cultural codes connected to Twelver Shia. Understanding the movement as a 'counter public', she investigates how the protest movement "use[s] religiously anchored visual language and cultural codes to unite people against the authorities." Religiously and emotionally charged references, such as the colour green or scenes from the battle of Karbala, have a long political history in Iran; Flaskerud's contribution consists in demonstrating how these codes are recirculated and reinterpreted in the post-2009 political context to contest the current theocratic regime in Iran.

In "Religion på museer i de arabiske Golf-stater – Islam og universalisme", Fibiger compares the representation of religion, and particular Islam, in the various museums of the Gulf region. Giving a short overview of the history of museums in the region, he demonstrates a process of change, from the establishment of relatively modest historical and ethnographic museums in the early 1970s to that of recent, important institutions in buildings designed by internationally renowned architects and with the

ambition of becoming centres of the global museum industry/sector. Examples in point are the Museum of Islamic Art (MIA) in Qatar, the National Museum in Qatar, the National Museum in Bahrain, and Louvre Abu Dhabi. Fibiger finds that while Islam is presented as a natural part of local history in the national museums of Qatar and Bahrain, Louvre Abu Dhabi has another ambition. In exhibiting religious artefacts or holy scriptures from different religious traditions – Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam – side by side, Islam is represented as one among other important religious traditions of the world. According to Fibiger, “I et Golf-område, som ofte fremhæves som konservativt, er denne sammenstilling af forskellige religioner bemærkelsesværdig.” He discusses whether the universalist ambition reflected in the format of the exhibition may be explained in terms of the museum’s close connection to the Louvre in Paris, and to a specific French form of universalism “hvordan den universelle sammenstilling af ‘store traditioner’ og ‘civilisationer’ er det væsentlige fokus.” In a later passage, Fibiger conducts an interesting discussion where he contrasts Louvre Abu Dhabi’s outspoken postcolonial ambition with the colonial legacy of its ‘mother’ institution, the great Louvre in Paris.

In both Flaskerud’s and Fibiger’s contributions, the interrelationship between aesthetic expression/representation and politics is explicit. While Flaskerud demonstrates how protesters in Iran use religious imagery to contest the politics of the regime, indicating how such images can be installed with new oppositional meaning, Fibiger shows how museums form part of diplomatic ‘soft power’ and national branding for both local and global audiences.

A common thread in the articles in the current issue is the observation that art and popular culture need to be studied contextually, and that different actors may use them for different, even competing purposes. The articles cover very diverse geographical locations – Iran, the Arab Gulf states, England, and Denmark – and artistic expressions – political posters, ballet, museum exhibits, and orchestra music. Still, there are overlapping themes, such as integration, tolerance, and nation building; the articles show that religious art or religion in art and popular culture are often used to pursue further ends – interreligious understanding and dialogue on a local level (Kronik, Fibiger, Otterbeck), political purposes, such as freedom of speech (Flaskerud), or attempts at global positioning (Fibiger). Another inter-

esting feature common to all is the encounter between Islam and a cultural repertoire which is traditionally associated with European culture: classical ballet, museums, and Montessori pedagogy.

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Alma Munk Kronik

Muslimere, jøder og kristne i samspil, dialog og på motorcykel.

Et feltstudie om interreligiøse foreninger i København

Keywords: Minoriteter, æstetik, dialog, *lived religion*, interreligiøsitet, religiøse foreninger, sameksistens.

Abstract This article explores and identifies an organized and collective type of (inter)religious movement, that evolves around coexistence and interreligious relations, expressing themselves through aesthetics, dialogue, motorcycles and/or music. It seeks to explore the concept religious coexistence, based on empirical studies of groups in Copenhagen that work with interreligious activities, dialogue and relations – Goldschmidts Musikakademi, Islamisk-Kristent Studieceter and MuJu & Co. MC Danmark. I argue that these groups are examples of a type of interreligious *lived religion* drawing on theoretical perspectives from Meredith B. McGuire, Brian A. Jacobsen and Nancy T. Ammerman. Second, I find that the groups have similar understandings of religious coexistence as a form of knowledge. However, they differ in their methods of achieving it, using respectively verbal and non-verbal communication strategies, which I explain drawing on Sara Ahmed's affect theoretical framework.

Introduktion

FN indstiftede i 2017 "International Day of Living Together in Peace" for at sætte fokus på "the desire to live and act together, united in differences and diversity, in order to build a sustainable world of peace, solidarity and harmony" (un.org). Den bærende idé, som har rødder i FN's værdigrundlag, er, at vi skal skabe en "Culture of Peace", som skal forebygge og bekæmpe krig (UNGA 2007). Læser man videre i dokumenterne fremhæves særligt religiøs splittelse som det, vi skal overkomme for at opnå 'sameksistens', og interreligiøs dialog fremhæves som vejen dertil. Det rejser spørgsmålene om, hvilken sameksistens der stræbes efter, og hvad sameksistens er? "Culture of Peace" peger

Alma Munk Kronik (f. 1998), kandidatstuderende i religionsvidenskab ved Tværkulturelle og Regionale Studier på Københavns Universitet.

på en fredspraksis – hvordan kan en sådan praksis se ud? Denne problemstilling er kun blevet mere aktuel i lyset af den seneste udvikling i Mellemøsten, som også sætter sit præg i Danmark – særligt hos palæstinensiske, muslimske og jødiske minoriteter, men også i samfundsdebatten i medier og hos politikere. Dialogen og samarbejdet bliver sværere, som vi eksempelvis så til Brobyggernes Ramadanmiddag, hvor fremtrædende danske muslimer fandt det problematisk at dele bord med personer, som ikke tager afstand til Israels bombning af Gaza. Vigtigheden af forskning om interreligiøs og interetnisk kommunikation og relationer tager til. De seneste 10-20 år er der sprunget flere og flere initiativer op, som eksempelvis Brobyggerne, Islamisk-Kristent Studiecenter, Jødisk-Kristent-Muslimsk Forum, som alle baserer deres arbejde omkring verbal dialog, mens andre grupper som MuJu & Co. MC Danmark, Radiant Arcardia, Middle East Peace Orchestra og Goldschmidts Musikakademi arbejder med nonverbale elementer som fundament for deres praksis (Galal 2015).

Jeg vil i denne artikel argumentere for at forstå religiøs sameksistens som et levet, praktiseret fænomen, som skabes af aktører i samspil og i reaktion på det omliggende samfund. Med afsæt i feltarbejde og interviews præsenterer jeg, hvordan sameksistens forstås, praktiseres og kommunikeres blandt aktører i interreligiøse grupper i København. I samspil med Meredith B. McGuires, Nancy T. Ammermans og Brian A. Jacobsens forståelser af *lived religion* argumenterer jeg for, at denne bevægelse kan forstås som en reaktion på splittelse og religiøs diskrimination og som et eksempel på en ny organiseret type religionsdyrkelse. Jeg har fokus på deres motivationer, praksis, opfattelser og kommunikation af religiøs forskellighed og sameksistens. Her inddrager jeg Sara Ahmeds affektteoretiske begreber fra *The Promise Of Happiness* (2010a) til at belyse muligheder og begrænsninger i gruppernes kommunikation, i deres praksis, gennem objekter, sanser og følelser.

Metoder og materialer

Jeg har i perioder af 2022 og 2023¹ lavet feltarbejde hos tre grupper: Goldschmidts Musikakademi, Islamisk-Kristent Studiecenter (IKS) og MuJu & Co. MC Danmark (MuJu). De er alle placeret i København og forsøger på forskellige måder at fremme

1. Feltarbejdet og fire af de seks interviews var afsluttet før 7. oktober 2023 og bombningerne af Gaza.

interreligiøse og interetniske relationer og forståelse gennem eksempelvis kunst, musik, motorcykler eller dialog. I løbet af feltarbejdet har jeg lavet deltagerobservation af gruppernes kerneaktiviteter, samt seks løst-til semistrukturerede interviews med aktører i grupperne – ledere, initiativtagere og aktive medlemmer.

I mit feltarbejde har jeg besøgt grupperne og deltaget i deres 'kerneaktiviteter'². Hos MuJu består de af lørdagskørsel på motorcykel, hos Goldschmidts Musikakademi af musikundervisning og eventuelle koncerter³ og hos Islamisk-Kristent Studiecenter af dialogmøde. I deltagerobservationen har jeg særligt været opmærksom på de sanselige aspekter af felten. Det knytter sig både til feltens karakter og til studiet af levet religion/*lived religion*, hvor materialitet og sanser typisk spiller en stor rolle. Antropolog Paul Stoller beskriver i *The taste of ethnographic things: The senses in anthropology* (1989) tilgangen som "A Return to the Senses" (Stoller 1989, 3) og forklarer, at den i højere grad inddrager materialitet og dennes indvirkning på menneskene i ens felt. Som dokumentation har jeg taget feltnoter både under og efter deltagerobservation og suppleret med billeder og videoer.

Igennem feltarbejdet har jeg mødt de informanter, der danner grundlag for studiets seks interviews, hvoraf tre af interviewene var med medlemmer af forskellig rangering fra MuJu, to med Goldschmidts Musikakademi, hvor jeg har interviewet en underviser og grundlæggeren og forstanderen af skolen, og et interview med et medlem og medgrundlæggeren af Islamisk-Kristent Studiecenter. Alle interview-informanterne er mænd over 40 og minoritetspersoner, med hhv. jødiske eller muslimske baggrunde. De er aktive medlemmer af deres grupper, og tre af dem har været med til at grundlægge grupperne. Deres forskellige baggrunde og roller bidrager med forskellige lag og perspektiver på, hvordan det interreligiøse arbejde foregår og opleves forskelligt, samt hvilke motivationer der driver medlemmerne.

Dét, at alle informanterne er mænd over 40, kan have en betydning for studiet på den måde, at jeg ikke har adgang til eksempelvis unges og kvinders oplevelser af interreligiøst arbejde og praksis – man kunne forestille sig, at der kunne være andre referencerammer ift. Israel-Palæstina-konflikten, og hvordan den har påvirket dét at være minoritet i Danmark og interaktionerne mellem både minoriteter og mellem minoriteter og majoriteter. Eksempelvis ser vi en ny gruppe, Palæstinensisk/

2. Kerneaktiviteter forstås som centrale aktiviteter, der er hyppige hos gruppen og italesættes af medlemmerne som vigtige eller afgørende.

3. Deltagerobservation til Copenhagen Opera Festival på Den Røde Plads, august 2023.

Jødisk Alliance, som er opstået umiddelbart efter 7. oktober 2023, hvor unge såvel som gamle mænd og kvinder går sammen i dialog og storytelling for at skabe bedre relationer og forståelse mellem jøder og palæstinensere i Danmark og sammen skabe fundament og håb for fred og et frit Palæstina baseret på religiøs sameksistens (pers. kom. 2024). Derudover kan man forestille sig, at intersektionalitet kunne spille en rolle ift., hvad det betyder at være dobbeltminoritet eller at være religiøs eller etnisk kvindelig minoritetsperson. Pga. tidsbegrænsninger er disse vinkler ikke inkluderet i dette studie. Det sagt, er det interessant at udforske midaldrende mænds følsomhed og oplevelser af både diskrimination og sammenhold som basis for opstarten af disse grupper og foreninger.

Alle interviews har fokuseret på religiøs sameksistens, praksis og interreligiøst arbejde og samvær. Alle informanter har givet informeret samtykke og de informanter, som ikke ønskede at fremgå med navn, har fået et pseudonym.

Karakteristik af felten

Goldschmidts Musikakademi blev stiftet i 2011 af Henrik Chaim Goldschmidt. Det startede på forskellige skoler på bl.a. Nørrebro, men har siden 2018 haft egne lokaler i Nordvest. På skolen går der i dag 250 elever i skolealderen, og skolen har som målsætning, at 70 % af eleverne skal være børn med enten etnisk, religiøs minoritetsbaggrund, børn med diagnoser eller børn i udsatte positioner. Skolens filosofi er, at musikken er et særligt "livsforandrende" redskab for børn, idet den "forstærker evnen til at arbejde sammen på tværs" og giver dem en "følelse af tilhørsforhold" (goldschmidts.dk). På musikskolen undervises der gratis i instrumenter fra hele verden, som ellers sjældent udbydes på musikskoler i Danmark, f.eks. saz, darbuka og harmonika. Idéen er at blande religioner og kulturer og skabe "et forpligtende og tryghedsskabende fællesskab på tværs af religiøse, kulturelle og etniske forskelle og potentielle konfliktområder" (ibid.) og på den måde formindske konflikter.

Islamisk-Kristent Studiecenter (IKS), også kaldet Center for Sameksistens, blev grundlagt i 1996 af en gruppe kristne og muslimer⁴. Det startede som et studiecenter med idéen om, at kristne og muslimer skulle lære om hinandens religioner gennem dialog og fælles undervisning. De sidste mange år har teolog og

4. I IKS er der både sunni- og shiamuslimer, med et flertal af sunnimuslimer.

tidligere fængsels- og stiftspræst Lissi Rasmussen været forperson for gruppen (Fenger-Grøndahl 2021; ikstudiecenter.com). Siden er det blevet udvidet til flere grupper, herunder Etnisk Ressourceteam, som laver omsorgsarbejde på hospitaler, og Katalysator, som tilbyder praktisk hjælp og samtale til tidligere indsatte og unge, der vil ud af kriminalitet. Derudover tilbyder centeret at facilitere og “velsigne” tværreligiøse vielser, hvor imamer og/eller præster, som er medlemmer, udfører ceremonien (ikstudiecenter.com). Centeret er startet og drevet af privatpersoner, men flere af medlemmerne arbejder også som præst eller imam eller i organisationer, som fokuserer på etnicitet og religion. Deltagerne til dialogmødet, jeg deltog i, var akademikere og religiøse autoriteter: to imamer, en fængselspræst, en ansat i foreningen Folkekirken & Religionsmøde og akademikere fra forskellige discipliner (Feltnoter d. 4.10.23).

MuJu er “verdens første motorcykelklub med et initiativ, der demonstrerer, at muslimer, jøder og andre religiøse og etniske minoriteter kan indgå i aktiviteter, der bygger på tværkulturel dialog, gensidig forståelse, fred, samvær og motorcykler” (muju.dk).⁵ Klubben blev stiftet i 2019 af Dan Meyrowitsch og Sohail Asghar. Klubben er opbygget som en traditionel motorcykelklub, styret af valgt ledelse (en præsident, en vicepræsident m.m.) og er registreret hos Bikerfonden (ibid.). Gruppens demografi var i 2022 mænd⁶ mellem 40-60 år, mange med akademisk baggrund og blandet jøder, muslimer og ‘andet’. Deres primære aktivitet er lørdagskøreture, hvor de nogle gange inviterer gæster, f.eks. politikere eller religiøse autoriteter, men de deltager også i f.eks. ramadanmiddage i hinandens hjem og demonstrationer (ibid.).

5. Det skal nævnes, at der findes en anden interreligiøs interetnisk MC-gruppe, The Holy Land Bikers, som blev grundlagt i 2016 og fokuserer på muslimske og kristne relationer.

6. Ifølge traditionen i MC-kulturen oplyser man ikke, hvor mange medlemmer der er i gruppen. Jeg spurgte samtlige informanter, som alle nægtede at besvare netop dette spørgsmål. På lørdagskøreturen, jeg var med på, var der otte deltagere. Ud fra billeder på deres Facebookside vil jeg anslå, at der er omkring 15-20 medlemmer.

Lived religion

Jeg trækker i denne artikel på Nancy T. Ammermans, Meredith B. McGuire og Brian A. Jacobsens forståelser af *lived religion* samt Sara Ahmeds affektteori fra bogen *The Promise of Happiness* (2010a). Disse forskere har bl.a. det tilfælles, at de mener, at der er behov for et fokusskifte i forskningen af menneskers praksis, ord, følelser og sans for at organisere sig på nye måder. Igenem artiklen argumenterer jeg for at forstå religiøs sameksistens som et eksempel på en ny religionsform, en kollektiv og organiseret type levet religion.

McGuire (2008) forstår begrebet *lived religion* som 'hverdagsreligion', hvor lægpersoner selv skaber, sammensætter og bruger religion i deres hverdagsliv. Denne forståelse og brug af begrebet er en implicit kritik af, at religionsforskningen ofte simplificerer individets religion, og at de analytiske og metodiske redskaber ofte fejler i at belyse "individuals' religion-as-practiced [...], in all their complexity and dynamism" (McGuire 2008, 5). Levet religion er et teoretisk felt i udvikling, og hvor McGuire ønsker at tage religionsforskningen ud af institutionerne og ind i folks liv, ønsker Ammerman og Jacobsen at blande de to horisonter (Ammerman 2020, 11; Jacobsen et al. 2023, 192). Sammenblandingen skubber *lived religion* i en sociologisk retning med fokus på, hvordan religion *lever* i institutioner, og hvordan *lived religion* skaber institutioner og nye kollektive, organiserede religionsformer.

Dette sidste perspektiv flugter med mit projekt. For selvom grupperne, jeg arbejder med, ikke grundlægger deciderede religiøse institutioner, så organiserer de sig og former en kollektiv *lived religion*. Institutioner og religiøse bevægelser opstår ikke ud af ingenting, men fra aktører og individer, som går sammen i fælles projekter (Jacobsen et al. 2023, 187). Ammerman skriver i *Studying Lived Religion: Contexts and Practices* fra 2021 om *resistance* og tager netop fat i, hvordan grupper som reaktion på tendenser i samfundet aktiverer deres religion i nye praksisser. Følgende vil jeg, inspireret af netop denne tanke, undersøge de tre ovennævnte gruppers baggrunde og drivkræfter. Herefter vil jeg se på, hvordan de tre gruppers praksisser udgør en *bricolage* af religioner og religiøse praksisser, som skaber en kollektiv fælles hybrididentitet.

Resistance – reaktion, energi og trods

Ammerman skriver bl.a. om religiøse praksisser, som vedligeholder den moralske status quo, men påpeger også, at der findes religiøse praksisser og grupper, som udfordrer status quo (Ammerman 2021, 168). Hun taler her om to grupper: føjelige grupper og modstandsgrupper (*compliant* og *resistance*). Hun pointerer, at når vi arbejder med den moralske dimension af religiøsitet ud fra *lived religion*-paradigmet, er vi ikke blot interesseret i, hvad grupperne bekender sig til og fralærer sig af moral, men også i, hvordan moral *leves* – hvordan de implemen-

terer moral i deres egne kategorier, regler og adfærdsmønstre – altså i deres praksis (ibid., 161). Min felt kan forstås under kategorien modstandsgrupper (*resistance groups*)⁷, pga. deres motivationer i forbindelse med opstarten og drivkraften i projekterne. Ammerman opfordrer til at undersøge denne form for religiøs praksis som *projekter* frem for blot at se det som adfærd – og som en *bevægelse* mod noget, som de praktiserende finder godt eller smukt. Dette motiveres og drives af følelser, fordi “attention to emotional, moral, and aesthetic qualities of religious practice can provide a window on both the patterned, taken-for-granted reactions and the emergent energies that motivate action” (ibid., 160).

Denne bevægelse med reaktion og energi ræsonnerer med mit felt, hvor initiativtagerne har lignende erfaringer ift. at have oplevet antisemitisme og islamofobi, hvilket forstærker deres etnisk-religiøse identitet og skaber en energi, som er fundamentet og motivationen for et organiseret fællesskab med religiøs sameksistens som mål. En informant fra MuJu, som har været med fra starten, fortalte mig, at hans oplevelser med antisemitisme i sit arbejdsliv fra 80'erne og op gennem 90'erne gjorde, at han blev mere interesseret og “trukket ind” i den jødiske identitet og dét at have en minoritetsbaggrund (Ib, interview, april 2022). Polariseringen og profileringen gjorde, at han begyndte at interessere sig for, “hvad det var for nogle dynamikker [mellem minoritets- og majoritetsbefolkning]”. Derudover sagde han: «Hver gang det her sker, må jeg ligesom gå tilbage til mit jødiske bagland og fortælle om det her og henvende mig – og så, der er noget sikkerhedsmæssigt og sådan noget, som jeg bliver nødt til at dele” (ibid.). Følger vi Ammermans tankegang, er dette et eksempel på reaktioner og energi som motiverer handling, idet vi ser en reaktion på religiøs profilering hos Ib i forbindelse med hans arbejde og medierne, som han finder ubehagelig og sommetider truende. Han nævner det især i forbindelse med en debat, som ofte blusser op i Danmark, og hvordan han har oplevet at blive gjort utroværdig i debatten pga. sin baggrund. Reaktionen på dette vækker en interesse, en energi, i ham og fører til en trods. Energien leder til engagement og interesse i minoritets-majoritet-debatten – og i sidste ende til oprettelsen af MuJu.

Et lignende udsagn fra et andet medlem af MuJu med muslimsk baggrund, Said, gjorde indtryk på mig, da han gennem hele interviewet og flere gange i løbet dagen, hvor vi var ude at

7. Ammerman skriver ikke direkte *resistance/compliant groups*, men forklarer det som to typer af grupper.

køre motorcykel, gentog at “[...] jamen der er jo nogen, der ønsker den her splittelse mellem muslimer og jøder” (Said, interview, april 2022). Han fortalte, hvordan denne splittelse både kommer fra medier og politikere, men også internt fra hans eget bagland. Her nævnte han Israel-Palæstina-konflikten som et eksempel på, hvordan der er folk, som prøver at skabe splittelse. I interviewet blev det tydeligt, at han er meget bevidst om, hvad MuJu repræsenterer og symboliserer, når de kører sammen jøder og muslimer med Hamsas Hånd⁸ som rygmærke, samt hvilket forbillede han ønsker at fremmane (ibid.). Denne reaktion på splittelse virker særligt relevant, når man læser den i den nuværende kontekst med krigen mellem Israel og Hamas, som vi også ser, påvirker særligt jøder og muslimer her i Danmark. Her kan man spørge, hvilke reaktioner vi ser, og hvilke projekter det motiverer, og hvordan det påvirker det religiøse landskab – nu og i den nære fremtid.

Samme reaktionsmønster kan ses hos IKS. Min informant fra IKS, Omar, har sunnimuslimsk baggrund, er religiøs og har været med til at starte IKS tilbage i 90’erne sammen med bl.a. Lissi Rasmussen, som er forperson i dag og repræsenterer den kristne del af IKS. Han fortæller, at dialoggrupperne tog fart i efterskælvne af 9/11 i 2001, hvor han oplevede, at den offentlige debat og profileringen af muslimer blev intensiveret, og “hvor man begynder at have den der meget bevidste snak om religion og de andres religion” (Omar, interview, oktober 2023). Han fortæller, at efter 9/11,

[...] begyndte mange muslimer jo at blive truet, så blev det meget ‘os og dem’. Og det var også en af de ting: Jamen vi er jo af forskellig tro, men hvorfor kan vi ikke sidde og snakke om det og måske være med til at give noget forståelse om hinanden. Og specielt om muslimerne, som man jo ikke vidste noget om, andet end det, medierne sagde. (Ibid.)

Vi ser samme mønster som hos Ib og Said fra MuJu. Omar reagerer på en oplevelse af stigende polarisering og religiøs profilering. Vi ser også, at Omar reagerer på uvidenhed og forbinde det med polariseringen: at man ikke vidste noget om muslimer udover det, som blev bragt i medierne. Ifølge Ammerman skaber denne reaktion en energi, som motiverer til handling, idet Omar, nærmest i trods, siger: “[...] men hvorfor kan vi ikke sidde og snakke om det?” og heraf kommer handlingen i form

8. Symbol, som både jødedommen, kristendommen og islam bruger – bl.a. som amulet til at holde onde ånder væk.

af dialoggrupperne i IKS. Energien kan beskrives som en følelse af trods og fører til handling imod den *framing* om, 'at man ikke kan sidde og snakke sammen om det'. Derfor oprettes en gruppe, hvor de gør lige netop det for at få "forståelse om hinanden".

Hos Henrik, grundlæggeren af Goldschmidts Musikakademi og Middle East Peace Orchestra, ser vi lignende erfaringer med antisemitisme og oplevelsen af polarisering i medierne og fra politikerne. Her er der tale om en lidt anden tilgang, som giver en anden energi (jf Ammerman), da Henrik har en religiøs motivation. Henrik beskriver sit arbejde med musik, særligt musikskolen, som en del af hans *tikkun olam*. *Tikkun olam* kan oversættes til "at reparere verden" og er et begreb inden for jødisk mystik. Det stammer fra den talmudiske tid og bliver ofte forbundet med Kabbala. Kort opsummeret bygger det på forestillingen om, at mennesket skal reparere verden, for at den messianske tid kan komme. I 1960'erne og 70'erne til i dag bliver *tikkun olam* også forbundet med social retfærdighed og aktivisme. Henrik reagerer på 'skader' i verden, som had og religiøs splittelse. I reaktionen opstår en energi, som motiverer handling eller 'reparation' – nemlig hans projekter, hvilket understreges i titlen på hans biografi: *Manden, der ville reparere verden med musik* (Goldschmidt og Øhrstrøm 2019). I interviewet, jeg lavede med Henrik, spurgte jeg ham, hvad der fik ham til at starte musikskolen, hvor han svarede:

[...] efter jeg havde skabt Middle East Peace Orchestra, [...], og der var sådan en happy-clap-stemning, du ved, og [det var] fedt. Men de, jeg nåede ud til, var jo folk, som i forvejen var overbeviste om, at det var fedt. Jeg nåede jo ikke dem, der ville slå hinanden ihjel. De kommer ikke til koncerter. De sidder jo derhjemme og er fyldt af had og vrede. [...] Så jeg tænkte, hvis jeg skal lave noget, så må det have fat i børnene. (Henrik, interview, september 2023)

Det førte i første omgang til musikundervisning rundt på skoler i Nordvest og blev først senere til Musikakademiet. Senere, efter inspiration fra en musikskole i Ramallah:

[...] satte han [en ven i Ramallah] mig i forbindelse med nogle børn ude på Vestbredden, altså i Palæstina. Og så opdagede jeg, at det var muligt at spille sammen og lave noget musik, selvom vi ikke kunne tale sammen. Og det

inspirerede mig så til at komme hjem og lave en skole, fordi jeg synes, at ude på Nørrebro, der var der meget social nød [...]. (Ibid.)

Senere i interviewet, da jeg bad Henrik uddybe “social nød” på Nørrebro, nævnte han bandekriminalitet, og at der er nogle “områder, hvor det er svært at være jødisk dreng” (ibid.). ‘Skaderne’ beskrives her som diskrimination, antisemitisme og utryghed, f.eks. ift. til at være jødisk dreng på Nørrebro. Derudover reagerer han på nogle af de samme ting som IKS og MuJu ift. mediernes og politikernes profilering og polarisering af religiøse minoriteter og deres tendens til at ville assimilere dem:

For der skal være plads til alle mennesker og deres religiøse ritualer, men her i Danmark er vi ved at få et debatklima, hvor alle helst skal være som alle andre, hvis de skal passe ind. Nu har man indført burkaforbud, men mange steder er tørklæder heller ikke accepteret, og et forbud mod omskæring har allerede folkelig opbakning. [...] Retorikken er rystende og uvidende. (Goldschmidt og Øhrstrøm 2019, 106)

Her ser vi, ligesom hos MuJu og Omar, et fokus og en reaktion på majoritets- og minoritetsforhold, hvor der er en oplevelse af, at minoriteten skal give afkald på deres religion og kultur og assimilere sig for at “passe ind”. Henrik forbinder uvidenhed i retorikken eller “debatklimaet” og dét, at religiøse minoriteter ikke får lov til dyrke deres kultur og religion. Derudover får vi et indblik i følelsen, det vækker i ham, når han siger, at det er “rystende” – en følelse, som jeg kan genkalde fra interviewet, jeg lavede med ham, hvor jeg spurgte ham om, hvad han synes om begrebet sameksistens. Her sagde han, at det er “et fedt begreb”, men lige efter tilføjede han, lidt rystet og bestemt: “Der er noget andet, som jeg har lidt sværere ved, det er begrebet integration og assimilation” (Henrik, interview, september 2023). Jeg bemærkede hans reaktion og umiddelbare association til, at sameksistens i hvert fald ikke er den assimilation, han oplever i debatten (ibid.; Feltnoter d. 14.09.23).

Henriks reaktion på ‘skaderne’ ser vi i hans forsøg på at ‘reparere’ ved at skabe en musikskole, som skal skabe “respekt for hinandens kulturer” og åbne “mulighed for venskaber”, som musikskolen skriver på deres hjemmeside (goldschmidts.dk). Det kan sammenlignes med både IKS og MuJu, som blev motiveret til at lave projekter, hvor det interreligiøse er i centrum,

og som bygger på et ønske om forståelse. Energien, som motiverer til handling, adskiller sig til gengæld lidt fra de andre på den måde, at den er religiøst motiveret:

Man får ingen bonus ved at sidde fordybet i bøn, hvis man ikke følger bønnen op med handling. Derfor har jeg valgt at gøre noget. Det er min måde at være troende på. Måske kommer jeg til at springe synagogen over en lørdag, men jeg dyrker min tro ved at prøve at gøre noget, sætte initiativer i gang. Det er måden, jeg udlever det, der hedder Tikkun Olam. Det lykkes ikke altid, men det er derfor, at jeg har etableret min musikskole. (Goldschmidt og Øhrstrøm 2019, 107)

Henrik beskriver her sine initiativer, og specifikt Goldschmidts Musikakademi, som måden, han dyrker *tikkun olam* og sin tro, og fremhæver generelt et praksisorienteret religionsideal frem for en trosorienteret. Det harmonerer med *lived religion* på den måde, han beskriver sit religiøse liv som noget uden for det institutionaliserede, og snarere i hverdagens handlinger og initiativer.

Aktørernes reaktioner, følelsesmæssige engagement og den energi, som skabes i reaktioner og fører til hhv. musikskolen, motorcykelklubben og dialoggruppen som projekter, kan ses som dele af én bevægelse, idet de reagerer mod lignende tendenser som religiøs polarisering og minoritets-majoritetsforhold. Man kan se følelsen af trods som drivkraft gå igen på forskellige måder for de tre projekter, hvilket hænger sammen med deres moralske oprør, hvor de forsøger at bekæmpe det, de opfatter som uvidenhed, som bidrager til den splittelse og udgrænsning af religiøse, etniske minoriteter, som de oplever. De trodser *framingen* om, at muslimer, jøder og kristne ikke kan leve sammen og endda være venner, og forsøger som kernen af deres praksis at skabe interreligiøs forståelse og relationer og være forbilledet på, at dette – sameksistensen – *kan* lade sig gøre.

Bricolage

McGuire beskriver en type *lived religion*, hvor flere religiøse praksisser og/eller politiske ideologier blandes i samme praksis og skaber en hybrid religiøs identitet. Hun illustrerer det som en *bricolage*, hvor forskellige elementer sammensættes, så de pas-

ser ind i individets hverdag, altså en kreativ, eklektisk og individorienteret religionsform (McGuire 2008, 195-196). *Bricolage* og idéen om hybrididentitet kan bruges til at forklare medlemmernes forhold til deres respektive religioner og et fælles forhold til religion. McGuire betoner særligt individets religion – her bruger jeg begrebet som et eksempel på en kollektiv tilgang til religion og argumenterer for, at deres praksis udgør en *bricolage*. Mit felt er interreligiøst i sin kerne – det interreligiøse og sammenblanding af kulturer og religioner gennemsyrrer gruppernes praksis. Der spilles f.eks. musik fra forskellige kulturelle og religiøse traditioner på musikskolen, og der studeres og sammenlignes religiøse fænomener i IKS – denne praksis udgør *bricolage*. Som McGuire skriver: “Religious hybridity is often a result of the practice of bricolage, because individuals’ blended elements can become culturally shared for future individual or group synthesis “ (ibid., 195). På den ene side kan man sige, at personerne i grupperne får en religiøs hybriditet i kraft af deres blandede praksis. De dyrker alle en religiøs pluralisme, så på den måde er det mere passende at betegne deres gruppeidentitet og praksis end deres individuelle religiøsitet som “religious hybridity». På den anden side er grupperne alle anti-missionerende og ønsker ikke at lave om på nogens religiøsitet – heller ikke blot til en hybrididentitet (Henrik, interview, september 2023; Omar, interview, oktober 2023).

Bricolage og hybrididentitet kan ses i forlængelse af gruppernes moralske oprør, hvor *bricolagen* knytter sig til kropsliggørelsen og det æstetiske og symbolske aspekt af deres modstand og moralske budskab (Ammerman 2021, 160). Et eksempel, som illustrerer dette, er de farverige vægtæpper (se billeder nedenfor), som hænger på Goldschmidts Musikakademi. Tæpperne er lavet af eleverne og forestiller forskellige flag, *smileyer*, *peacetegn* og religiøse symboler: kors, davidsstjerne, halvmåner (Feltnoter d. 18.09.23). Det er ikke blot fordi, det er en faktisk *collage*, men fordi det er et eksempel på, at børnene har udført en aktivitet, hvor de har været fælles om at sammenblende forskellige aspekter af deres liv – deres religioner, deres kulturelle baggrunde, deres sprog, deres fælles interesse musik og den fælles ideologi om at sameksistere i “fred“, som der står på arabisk med gylden skrift. De hænger på skolens vægge og markerer på den måde skolens fælles hybrididentitet og moralske budskab.

En lignende praksis findes hos MuJu, hvor de på deres rygmærker har Hamsas Hånd som et fælles symbol for jødedom-

men og islam. De har endda lavet øjet på hånden til et motorcykelhjul, hvormed de blander det jødiske, det muslimske og interessen, der forbinder dem. Hos IKS kan selve navnet, Islamisk-Kristent Studiecenter, ses som en ord-*bricolage*, hvor de to religioner forbindes med det fælles element – studiet og læringen. Her tydeliggøres også en af de centrale forskelle på grupperne – Musikskolen og MuJu på den ene side, som helst udtrykker deres budskaber i æstetiske, nonverbale former som kunst og symboler, og IKS på den anden side, som har en eksplicit og verbal tilgang, hvilket jeg vil uddybe senere i artiklen. *Bricolagen* understreger det interreligiøse projekt og deres trods mod splittelse af etnisk-religiøse minoriteter og mod *framingen* af, at de ikke kan sameksistere. Det har både en bekræftende effekt inden for den enkelte gruppe, hvor det fungerer som en bekræftelse og påmindelse af budskabet, og udadtil, hvor det fungerer som et forbillede og bevis for, at religiøse grupper *kan* tale og gøre ting sammen.



Figurer 1, 2, 3. Billederne er taget på feltarbejde på musikskolen, hvor jeg observerede hhv. kor og samspilsundervisning. De viser udsmykningen i guldsalen, hvor eleverne øvede. Guldsalen er fyldt med ægte persiske tæpper og guldstole og har guld vægge, som både refererer til navnet Goldschmidt og symboliserer, at alle på skolen "er guld værd" (Goldschmidt og Øhrstrøm 2019, 209). Foto: Alma Munk Kronik.

Viden, forståelse og læring

På tværs af grupperne, MuJu, Goldschmidts Musikakademi og IKS, er der en lighed, idet de forstår sameksistens som en form for viden, forståelse og læring, som fungerer vaccinerende mod fordomme og had. Den forbinder og humaniserer og virker på

den måde både reparerende og forebyggende. Dét, gruppe-medlemmerne lærer, kan beskrives som en viden om dem selv, deres egen religion samt en forståelse af andres religion – således en gensidig forståelse. Sameksistens ligger da i forståelsen og indsigten, at der er værdi i samspillet mellem de to. Dog har grupperne forskellige forståelser af, hvor denne viden ‘sidder i kroppen’, og hvordan man bedst tilegner sig den.

IKS arbejder med at skabe forståelse mellem muslimer og kristne ved at snakke om tro og *lære* af og om hinanden i studiecenteret. Deres forståelse af viden kan beskrives som en ‘kognitiv viden’, som man lærer intellektuelt via dialog og information om hinandens tro og kulturer. De er interesserede i at lære om hinandens tro og vil høre det fra “hestens mule”, som Omar fortæller i interviewet. Jeg spørger ham om, hvorfor det lige er tro, de taler om. Her svarer han, at det jo er en studiekreds, ikke en bogklub, og at troen er det fælles interessepunkt:

Og den accentuering, som vi har set, og politisering, det var vi jo, for mit vedkommende som den muslimske del, interesserede i, at der også blev udbredt forståelse for, at det altså er almindelige mennesker, og vi vil gerne lære noget af nogen, og andre vil gerne lære noget af os, ikke. Så det er derfor, det er troen. Vi kunne have siddet sammen og snakket om bøger, eller det kunne have været hvad som helst, men det er ikke det – det her, det var kernen i det. (Omar, interview, oktober 2023)

Omar sammenkæder “politiseringen” og “accentueringen” af religiøse minoriteter med modsvaret at udbrede forståelse om muslimer og om, at muslimer er “almindelige mennesker”, som gerne “vil lære noget af nogen” og give den samme læring retur. Han giver på den måde udtryk for, at ens egen og den andens religiøse baggrund har en værdi, som vi kan og bør lære af. Vi ser en forståelse af sameksistens som noget, der udbredes ved læring, og at der med denne viden sker en menneskeliggørelse af, i dette tilfælde, muslimer. Samtidig ser vi et fokus på gensidighed, idet han understreger, at læringen går begge veje, hvilket er noget, han lægger vægt på senere i interviewet, hvor jeg spørger ham, hvad der kendetegner sameksistens for ham:

Alma: Jo, jeg kunne godt tænke mig at høre om det her sameksistens – fordi jeg prøver at finde nogle karaktertræk, nogle forskellige kerneværdier, sammenhænge eller

elementer. Og jeg er interesseret i at høre – hvad tror du er vigtigt for begrebet sameksistens?

Omar: Jamen det første, det er jo accept. At du accepterer, at der er en forskel. [...] Ja, vi er forskellige og for at kunne eksistere, *så skal man acceptere, at vi er forskellige*, og det har den anden lov til at være. Ligesom jeg har lov til at være det. Så det er den første. [...] Så det er jo ikke noget med, at det ikke kan eksistere – mennesker, ting eller begreber, som man synes er meget anderledes eller ikke bør være der, men der – det kan altså godt lade sig gøre, hvis der er nogen aktivt, der siger 'jamen det må godt eksistere'. Så det første, det er jo, at der er accept. Og så skal det være en gensidighed. Det kan ikke nytte noget, at den ene accepterer, og den anden ikke gør. (Ibid.)

Omar nævner her først "accept" og udvider til, at det skal være en "gensidig" accept. På den måde udvider han begrebet sameksistens fra 'tolerance', hvor man blot lever side om side, til noget, der ligger ud over selve tolerancen og rummer gensidighed, en mere aktiv accept af forskellighed.

Vigtigheden af "gensidighed" går igen hos Said fra MuJu. Til samme spørgsmål svarer han: "Gensidigt hensyn – det er jo det vigtigste i dag", hvorefter han fortæller om vigtigheden af at tage hensyn til hinandens forskelligheder (Said, interview, april 2022). Gensidigheden betyder, at begge parter skal anerkendes som værdifulde og som nogle, vi kan og bør lære af.

Senere i interviewet med Omar ses et nyt aspekt af denne viden, som betoner en mere interagerende læring eller relation:

Omar: Men jeg mener også, at man jo faktisk kan bruge det som noget positivt også [...].

Alma: Brug det til noget positivt?

Omar: Altså at sameksistens også er noget, hvor man lærer af hinanden. Man er jo ikke bare neutral og ikke påvirket. Når man er to kulturer, to religioner, to mennesker, så påvirker man hinanden.

Alma: Hvad lærer man?

Omar: Jamen, man kan jo lære alt, altså når du går i byen og er på vej hjem og tager en shawarma, så er det fordi, der er sameksistens. Der er nogen, der har taget shawarmaen herop til Danmark eller pizzaen herop, ikke.

Alma: Ja, gud ske tak og lov.

Omar: Ja, det er jo sameksistens, det er jo en af grundene

til det, fordi der er nogen, der kunne det. Øhm, du lærer, at der er andre måder at tro på, du lærer – det er måske en af de vigtigste ting, hvis man vil bruge det til noget. Det er jo at acceptere, at der er andre end dig selv. Altså end dem, du ligner. Og åbne din horisont og få en glæde ud af at møde noget andet også, nyt, noget, du ikke kender til måske. (Omar, interview, oktober 2023)

Omar beskriver her en interagerende, aktiv form for sameksistens – en sammenblanding eller *bricolage* af kulturer, som man kan tage en positiv læring og glæde ud af, hvor man lærer værdien i andres kultur. Noget interessant her er, at han nævner en nonverbal-dialogisk situation, med shawarmaen og pizzaen, som jo ellers adskiller sig en del fra IKS' praksis, som i høj grad er dialogbaseret, og fra en udtalelse tidligere i interviewet, hvor han giver udtryk for, at "fakta" om tro kommer fra "Bibelen og Koranen, og hvad du nu ellers bruger, Hadith og de fortolkninger". Selvmodsigelsen kan være et udtryk for, at det er et kompliceret emne, men måske også, at sameksistens, viden og læring ligger mellem kilderne og fakta og en mere kulturel, sanselig viden.

Hvad angår Goldschmidts Musikakademi og MuJu, så forstår de sameksistens og viden som en mere kropslig ting, som man tilegner sig gennem oplevelser, aktivitet og dét at besøge hinandens kulturer og religioner gennem f.eks. musik. I citatet nedenfor kan man se, at Henriks forståelse af eksistens betoner det aktive og interagerende, og at aktivitet sammen er afgørende for "reel sameksistens", hvor man "skaber noget" – i modsætning til en mere basal eksistens, hvor man blot "trækker vejret":

Henrik: To forskellige parter eksisterer i samme rum, uden at der er vold. Det er sådan, skal vi sige, den laveste fællesnævner, ikke?

Alma: Jo, jo. Så jeg er nysgerrig på, hvordan sådan noget her [musikskolen] kunne spille ind?

Henrik: Men her, der eksisterer vi jo. Der står vi jo ikke bare i samme rum og kigger på hinanden. Der eksisterer vi sammen. Altså, vi gør noget sammen.

Alma: *Gør noget?*

Henrik: Vi er aktive i samme eksistens. Altså, vi spiller musik sammen. Det er en aktiv handling, som man gør sammen. Og det betyder så, at der er en reel sameksistens. Hvis ikke man laver noget, ja, så eksisterer man

jo, man trækker vejret. Men eksistens har vel noget at gøre med at skabe noget, at gøre noget. Udrette noget. Og det gør vi jo. (Henrik, interview, september 2023)

Idéen om den aktive og interagerende eksistens møder vi også hos MuJu – både i et interview med Allan og i deres praksis, hvor det at besøge hinanden spiller en central rolle. Allan giver som Henrik udtryk for en anden mere kropslig opfattelse af, hvad *eksistens* og *sameksistens* indebærer ift. Omars: “Men det er jo ikke nok med bare, ligesom bare at være i samme rum. Altså eksistens vil jo sige, at man ligesom har nogle bånd sammen. [...] altså sameksistens, dvs. at vi er fælles – vi er sammen om nogle opgaver “ (Allan, interview, april 2022). Her lægger han, lig Henrik, vægt på det aktive og skabende element som essensen af sameksistens.

Hvad er det så, man lærer, når man “skaber “ noget og “gør noget “? At man har en sammenflettet, interagerende eksistens? Helt grundlæggende lærer børnene på musikskolen at spille musik og *om* hinandens musikkulturer, sprog og religion gennem musikken – det er en slags besøg, som er en “grundidé “ i skolens praksis (Henrik, interview, september 2023). Med McGuire i tankerne kan musikskolen ses som rammen om det, der skaber en kropslig, aktiv, sanselig *bricolage*, der illustrerer den komplekse, positive forståelse af flere religioner som noget æstetisk og værdifuldt. Denne forståelse af hinandens religion og kultur har også et andet formål: Den skal menneskeliggøre, nedbryde og forebygge fordomme. Det giver Henrik udtryk for, da jeg spørger ham, om dét at skabe noget også påvirker ens tanker og følelser:

Henrik: Det tror jeg bestemt. Jeg tror, de børn, som har lært hinanden at kende – der er jo mange fordomme, som er nedarvet, og had, der er nedarvet. Altså, i den arabiske verden er der mange, som har Israel som fjende. Og så sætter man jøder lig med Israel, og så pludselig kan man ikke lide jøder. Og så sidder man i sit arabiske miljø og kan ikke lide jøder. Men man har ikke set nogen eller kender ikke nogen jøder. Man aner ikke, hvor de er henne, og hvem de er. Og når de så pludselig står over for en jøde, som er venlig og sød, som er vokset op med de samme fordomme, at araberne er vores fjender, og dem kan man ikke stole på. Når de så pludselig møder nogle arabere, som “Hov “, men han sidder da og spiller på

tromme med ham der, og jeg spiller fløjte, vi kan spille noget sammen. [...] Så pludselig, så får man et meget mere nuanceret syn på hinanden. Det er i hvert fald meningen. Så jeg tror, at de børn, som har spillet sammen med hinanden – de slår i hvert fald ikke hinanden ihjel. (Ibid.)

Musikken skal altså skabe en viden, en kropslig erfaring, som nedbryder nedarvede fordomme og had og forbinder børnene menneskeligt og relationelt. Formuleringen “de slår i hvert fald ikke hinanden ihjel” går igen i interviewet med *saz*-læreren, Fuat, fra musikskolen, hvor jeg stiller samme spørgsmål om sameksistens og har nævnt den nuværende definition om sameksistens som ‘to forskellige parter, der eksisterer side om side uden vold’. Han grinede og sagde: “Når man spiller musik, så slås man ikke med hinanden” (Fuat, interview, oktober 2023). Fuats forklaring på dette er, at når man spiller musik, bliver man “tilknyttet” hinanden, fordi man gennem musikken deler samme følelse, hvilket jeg vil komme nærmere ind på i næste del af analysen, hvor jeg bl.a. vil undersøge musik som et *happy object*.

Praksis, objekter, glæde

Jeg vil nu præsentere, hvordan grupperne arbejder med at fremme viden, forståelse og moral ud fra Sara Ahmeds affektteori (2010a). Ahmeds hovedargument er, at vi påvirker hinanden, bevidst og ubevidst, gennem handlinger, ord og materielle objekter som steder og mad. Altså idéen om, at disse ting påvirker vores opfattelse af situationer, hinanden og os selv. Hendes bog, *The Promise of Happiness*, behandler følelsen ‘glæde’ (*happiness*)⁹ og det kulturelle imperativ, som er forbundet med den. Som med *lived religion* undersøger Ahmed det store i det små. Hun fokuserer på magtrelationer på individ- og hverdagsniveau og på, hvordan glæde bliver brugt i hverdagslivet, sproget og interaktioner, og hvordan de manifesterer sig i det institutionelle liv (UMBCtube, 2019). Hendes affektteoretiske begrebsapparat er brugbart til at afkode, hvordan aktører spreder glæde i deres praksis.

I Goldschmidts Musikakademi kommunikeres religion og religiøs forskellighed ikke verbalt, men æstetisk, gennem kunst eller musik. Med Ahmeds begrebsapparat kan musik ses som et

9. *Happiness* kan både oversættes til glæde og lykke. Her har jeg valgt at oversætte det til glæde, da det betoner det mere omskiftelige aspekt, som jeg mener passer til teorien om *happy objects*, hvor ‘lykke’ er en mere endelig, abstrakt tilstand.

happy object i denne praksis, mens *ord* er et *unhappy object*. Første gang jeg mødte Henrik, sagde han noget, der gjorde stort indtryk på mig: at der er sameksistens på skolen, og at skolen fungerer, fordi de ikke taler sammen (Feltnoter d. 13.08.23). Det samme sagde han i interviewet i september, da jeg spurgte ind til det, han sagde i august og til hans mening om dialogkaffe:¹⁰

Henrik: Men på vores skole kommer de ikke, fordi de skal hen og drikke en dialogkaffe. De kommer, fordi de skal lære noget musik, spille noget musik, og de er ret ligeglade med om ham, der sidder ved siden af, er jøde eller muslim. Hvis han spiller godt på sin klarinet, så er det bare fedt. Og så [at han] hedder Isak og kommer fra et jødisk miljø, og det finder de ud af langt senere. [...] Fordommene bliver nedbrudt helt af sig selv. Fordi det er noget andet, der er vigtigt. Og i virkeligheden tror jeg, at vores styrke er, at vi ikke bruger så mange ord, som man bruger, når man har dialogkaffe. [...] Fordi ord har det med at skille, synes jeg. [...] Men musik har det med at samle.

Alma: Er det nogle bestemte erfaringer, du har med dét?

Henrik: Ja, altså, hvis man nu siger, at ... 'Man kan jo ikke stole på de arabere'. Det er et udsagn, som så kommer til at hænge fuldstændigt forfærdeligt i luften. Men hvis jeg sidder ned og spiller sammen med arabere, så kommer sådan et udsagn aldrig til. (Henrik, interview, september 2023)

Ord ses som noget risikabelt og forbindes med potentiel konflikt og splittelse. Ifølge Ahmeds affektteori er (*un*)*happy objects* "sticky" og påvirker vores følelser og vores værdier, moral og verdenssyn. De positive associationer og følelser 'klistrer' sig til andre objekter, koncepter og ord (Ahmed 2010b, 29). Vi søger intentionelt mod *happy objects* og væk fra *unhappy objects* – det kalder Ahmed "the bodily horizon", hvilket betoner menneskets kropslige sanser i deres stræben efter glæde, det gode liv og det, de vurderer moralsk (Ahmed 2010a, 24).

Interviewet med Henrik vidner om, at Henriks dårlige erfaringer med ord og dialog om religion og etnicitet gennem f.eks. medier og "debatklimaet" har gjort dialog og ord til et *unhappy object*. Han er derfor søgt væk derfra og opbygger i stedet sin nonverbale praksis. Det minder om tanken bag *bricolage* ift. det eklektiske aspekt, hvor individer eller grupper udvælger de me-

10. Brobyggerne er kendt for at lave dialogkaffe til konfliktgrupper, f. eks. jøder og muslimer.

ningsfulde dele og fravælger dem, som ikke giver 'glæde' eller mening for dem. Musikken gør, ifølge Henrik det modsatte af ord og dialog, idet musik "samler", suspenderer religiøs forskellighed og "nedbryder fordomme helt af sig selv", blot ved at man er til stede med hinanden og musikken. Et eksempel på denne praksis bliver tydelig, når Henrik siger, at de ikke synger religiøse sange som "Et barn er født i Betlehem", og jeg spørger, om de kunne finde på at spille den uden tekst. Han nynnede melodien og sagde, at det kunne de godt. Her understreges det, at det er ordene, som er risikable. At tale om religion og religiøs forskellighed er på den måde tabu, men kan dog alligevel kommunikeres gennem æstetiske udtryk. Et andet eksempel er vægtæpperne med de religiøse symboler fra tidligere eller de danse, som er knyttet til religiøse traditioner og knyttet til musikundervisning på skolen – her oplevede jeg bl.a., at børnene dansede jødisk folkedans (Feltnoter d. 18.09.23). Ifølge Ahmeds affektteori kan man argumentere for, at musikken og symbolerne på kunsten har positiv indvirkning på børnenes syn på religiøs forskellighed og 'de andres' religion, idet tabuet, religion, pakkes ind i *happy objects*. Denne positive affekt 'klistrer' sig til religiøs forskellighed og 'de andres' religion og gør, at børnene opfatter andre religioner som sjove, smukke og værdifulde. På den måde bliver fordommene brudt ned «helt af sig selv» og uden et ord – selvom det selvfølgelig ikke sker helt af sig selv, men over tid med ugentlig musikundervisning. Man kan overveje, hvordan dette påvirker børnenes *bodily horizon*. Hvis vi følger Ahmeds tankegang, vil de søge mod *happy objects* og samle dem i deres *bodily horizon* (Ahmed 2010b, 24) – i dette tilfælde interreligiøs kultur og praksis (musik, kultur og personer fra forskellige religioner) – og på den måde dyrke den interreligiøse praksis som del af deres søgen efter glæde eller 'det lykkelige liv'.

Ved at kommunikere gennem musik skabes der en "fælles følelse", som forbinder eleverne og skaber den forståelse og viden, som vi undersøgte i den forrige analyse: nemlig en forståelse af hinanden som mennesker. Musikken skaber en fælles følelse og gør musikken, interreligiøsiteten og dyrkelsen af religion og kultur til et "et rart sted at være [og] et smukt sted at være", som Henrik beskriver det (Henrik, interview, september 2023). Saz-underviseren, Fuat, beskriver, hvordan eleverne forbindes i følelsesmæssigt til hinanden gennem musikken:

Alma: [...] Hvordan ser du den her musikundervisning i

11. Der er også en pointe i, at eleverne er børn og unge og på den måde mere formbare end voksne nødvendigvis kan være. Det er en væsentlig forskel mellem musikskolen og IKS.

forbindelse med sameksistens? [...]

Fuat: Jamen det øh – selvom man er forskellige fra hinanden – det kunne også være etnisk forskellighed eller religion eller politiske overbevisninger – det hele. [...] Tyrkerne og kurderne sidder og spiller sammen. [...] Det har ikke nogen betydning faktisk, når man sidder sammen og spiller og synger. Det giver noget andet – vi har noget fælles. Og når man – musik – det er også en følelse med sin kunst. Og der er nogen, der sidder sammen med nogen, der er meget forskellige, eller en, der tænker, at man er meget forskellige, men når du spiller sammen, synger sammen – så får du den samme følelse. Så man faktisk bliver knyttet mere sammen.

Alma: Hvad er det for en følelse?

Fuat: Ja f.eks. de der sange, vi spiller, om Muhammed eller en kurdisk [sang] eller en kærlighedssang – eller en kærlighed til Gud eller en kærlighed til verden eller kærlighed til natur, ikke? Så er det det der med, at hvis der er to mennesker eller tre mennesker, der sidder og spiller og får den der samme øøh ...

Alma: Den samme følelse ...?

Fuat: ... den samme følelse. Så tænker man 'okay, vi er ikke forskellige fra hinanden.' [...] Selvom vi har måske ... aah han er kurder, jeg er tyrker, han er araber, jeg palæstinenser. (Fuat, interview, oktober 2023)

Ifølge Fuat er musik en særlig måde at kommunikere på, idet "det giver noget andet", som er, at den forbinder folk følelsesmæssigt. Når man spiller eller lytter til den samme musik, får man "den samme følelse". Han fortæller, at følelsen giver en viden om, at "okay, vi er ikke forskellige fra hinanden", trods man er kurder eller tyrker, som typisk ses som fjende-identiteter. På den måde tilsidesættes de etniske eller religiøse forskelle. Fuat knytter det til deres praksis af sameksistens, hvilket understreger forbindelsen mellem sameksistens og den kropsliggjorte forståelse, som musikken giver.

Henrik beskriver det ligeledes som en inderlig, kropslig egenskab, når jeg spørger ham, hvad musik er for et sprog: Det "åbner ind til den der verden [...] inde i hjertekulen", hvor "tårer kan få lov til at blive glædestårer" (Henrik, interview, september 2023). Her smitter musikkens glade affekt af på kroppen, og tårerne transformeres. Samtidig fremhæves det kropslige ved, at det ligger helt inde i hjertekulen, allerinderst i kroppen. Ahmed

skriver om, at glæde kan skabe en ensrettet bevægelse eller mentalitet (Ahmed 2010b, 45), hvilket kan ses i forlængelse af min første analyse, om min felt som modstandsgrupper (*resistance*), som har moralske projekter og oprør. Når gruppen spiller musik sammen, kropsliggør og inderliggør de deres moralske projekt og retter elevernes opmærksomhed imod, at de er ens på mange måder, og at de bør besøge og forstå hinandens kulturer og religioner – og at de bør sameksistere.

IKS har en anden tilgang til at kommunikere religion og religiøs forskellighed. De pakker det ikke ind i objekter og æstetik, men har en mere 'svesken-på-disken'-tilgang, hvor de målrettet retter blikket mod den forskellighed, som af andre bliver portrætteret som et problem. De vil høre om andres religion fra "hestens mule", lære og fortælle om deres egen religion (Omar, interview, oktober 2023). På den måde er *happy objects* en lidt sjov samtalepartner til IKS, da *happy* ikke rigtigt passer til stemningen til det møde, jeg oplevede. I deres praksis er det i stedet ord, koncepter og rum, som er meningsskabende eller er engagerende. At konfrontere svære problematikker i dialog er, selv når det er ubehageligt, livsbekræftende for dem og får dem til at føle sig stærke og modige, og dialogen kan på den måde i sig selv have effekten af et *happy object*. At forstå, studere og vende og dreje ting er en engagerende og livsbekræftende aktivitet, hvilket hænger sammen med, at IKS er et akademisk rum – et studiecenter – hvor studiet og nysgerrighed forbinder medlemmerne og gør det meningsfyldt for dem at deltage. Omar var f.eks. væk fra gruppen i mange år, men kom med ind igen i den nye "superdialoggruppe", som jeg observerede. Omar fandt fornyet mening i gruppen pga. det nye koncept og sammensætningen af medlemmerne, som skulle være nogle af de mere garvede medlemmer (Omar, interview, oktober 2023).

Et af de engagerende objekter i gruppen er 'nørderi', hvilket påvirker medlemmerne på den måde, at de får energi, hvilket skaber en livlig stemning. Det oplevede jeg, da jeg kom ind til dialoggruppemødet i Lissis stue og sagde "Hej, jeg hedder Alma", hvorefter Omar og en anden begyndte at diskutere etymologien af mit navn og bad mig præsentere den etymologiske baggrund for "Alma". Jeg blev overrasket og lidt overvældet af den gejst, der kom af det, hvilket gav mig et indblik i deres glæde ved at 'nørde'. På sin vis kan man sige, at engagementet er en form for glæde – som Ahmed skriver: "Happy objects could be described simply as those objects that affect us in the best way"

(Ahmed 2010b, 22). Derved kan man sige, at nørderi-sproget er et *happy object* for gruppen, da det påvirker dem på den bedste måde. Nørderiet havde muligvis en slagside, da den gjorde stemningen saglig, sober og lidt trykket (Feltnoter d. 4.10.23). Den trykkede stemning går igen i mine noter og beskriver mit eget indtryk af situationen – her er det meget muligt, at det er, fordi jeg kommer udefra, og at de andre måske ikke oplevede stemningen som trykket. Dog var der et scenarie, som tyder på, at jeg ikke var helt alene i den oplevelse. På puffen i midten af sofa-gruppen var der et kagebord med kaffe, te og kager. Klokken var aftenkaffe-tid¹², men alligevel lagde jeg mærke til, at ingen tog kage eller kaffe fra kagebordet før 20 minutter efter, at mødet startede (ibid.). Kagebordet var nok tænkt som et *happy object*, men blev det ikke, før mødet var slut, hvor der opstod et markant stemningsskift. Der blev mere *smalltalk*, og folk grinede og smilede generelt mere. Den person, der havde arrangeret mødet, påbød mig, på en jokende onkelagtig måde, at jeg skulle tage noget kage, “fordi det kunne du da godt klare, Alma” (ibid.).

Denne oplevelse vidner om, som Ahmed understreger, at *happy objects* ikke nødvendigvis er *happy* fra starten, men bliver det over tid. Lise P. Galal skriver da også i sin artikel om interreligiøse dialogarrangementer, at det tager tid at skabe et “safe space”, hvor man trygt kan udtrykke sig (Galal 2015, 55-56). Hun beskriver også en trykket stemning til dialogmøde i Danmission, hvor deltageren placeres i “et spændingsfelt mellem frygt og utryghed [...]” (ibid., 55). Galal undersøger, hvorvidt man kan se dialogmøder som et overgangsritual og bruger derfor især de dele af Ahmeds affektteori, der fokuserer på, hvordan kroppen transformerer sig. Da det var et af gruppens første møder, giver det mening, at kroppen (som føler) og objekter stadig er i færd med at transformere sig i tid og rum for at skabe et *safe, happy space* (ibid., 56).

Nye perspektiver

Mit feltstudie kan bidrage med bl.a. to nye perspektiver: et non-verbalt aspekt til studiet om interreligiøs dialog og forskning om radikaliserings og minoriteters reaktioner på diskrimination. Både inden for religionsvidenskaben, kulturstudier og teologien er der en del forskning om interreligiøs dialog – heriblandt

12. Mødet startede kl. 19 og sluttede ca. kl. 21.

Galals om interreligiøs dialog som et overgangsritual (Galal 2015) og Anna Körs' antologi *Religious Diversity and Interreligious Dialogue*, som indeholder både teologiske og samfundsfaglige artikler om interreligiøs dialog (Körs et al. 2020). Også i FN er der fokus på religionsdialog som løsningen på religiøse splittelse (un.org). Fællestrækkene for begge er, at de fokuserer på verbal dialog og religiøse autoriteter eller eliter som aktører. Dette feltstudie er et eksempel på, hvordan interreligiøs dialog, kommunikation og samvær kan se ud, når det praktiseres af lægfolk og nonverbalt. MuJu, Islamisk-Kristent Studiecenter og Goldschmidts Musikakademi kan ses som en ny organiseret religionsform, hvor det interreligiøse dyrkes gennem en *bricolage* af ord og æstetiske udtryksformer. De og dette feltstudie kan bidrage med et nyt perspektiv på religiøs forandring.

Konklusion

Grupperne Islamisk-Kristent Studiecenter, Goldschmidts Musikakademi og MuJu kan forstås som eksempler på en ny religionsform, som organiseres omkring interreligiøsitet, trods og arbejdet om at fremme sameksistens. Gennem interviews med de initiativtagende aktører ser vi, at der er et mønster i, at oplevelser med diskrimination, religiøs profilering og splittelse skaber en følelse af trods, som motiverer til en modstand (*resistance*), hvoraf grupperne opstår. Modstanden er en drivkraft i den religiøse forandring, som grupperne er et udtryk for. Det understreger, at religiøse grupper reagerer på tendenser og begivenheder i samfundet og skaber religiøse, æstetiske og til dels aktivistiske projekter og organiserede fællesskaber. Feltstudiet viser også, hvordan nonverbale sanselige og verbale dialogbaserede kommunikationsstrategier bruges og skaber forskellige muligheder og effekt i arbejdet med interreligiøse relationer.

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Grace & Poise: A Muslim ballet school in the UK

Keywords: Ballet; Islamic Studies; Muslims in Europe; Migration and art; Islam in Europe; Creativity; Grace & Poise

Abstract: Grace & Poise Academy is a Muslim ballet school with a unique syllabus where students dance to poetry, not music, expectations of female modesty among parents, teachers and students are met and attention is paid to Islamic theology and morals. While cultivating Islamic adab (etiquette), akhlaq (ethics) and Islamic pedagogies, the academy is also inspired by classical ballet training and alternative holistic educational traditions. The result is both traditionalist and progressive, and points to a possible future for Islamic creativity, signalling openings rather than closures. The research for this article is based on interviews, media analyses and participant observation.

1. Grace & Poise is a CIC, Community Interest Company, i.e. not for profit. It became a limited company in January 2020; the CIC status was obtained 28th November 2023. A CIC requires a non-paid, volunteer-based board that is being set up in spring 2024. Becoming a CIC is prompted by legal, ethical and economic reasons. As a CIC, Grace & Poise better meets requirements to receive funding from external actors. It is facilitated by having a board and Miss Maisie employed as CEO rather than owner.

2. In the academy's communication and at classes, the teachers and assistants are known as Miss this or that. Thus, in her professional capacity, Maisie A. Byers is 'Miss Maisie' and this is how I refer to her.

3. <https://www.royalacademy-ofdance.org/people/maisie-byers-uk/>. Visited 11th June 2024.

4. For more information on London's commercial Muslim festivals, see Otterbeck 2024.

Grace & Poise Academy CIC¹ is a Muslim ballet school founded by ballet educationalist and choreographer Maisie Alexandra Byers (henceforth Miss Maisie²), a 2016 graduate of the Royal Academy of Dance (RAD) with a special focus on ballet education.³ Miss Maisie is the current CEO of the academy. Grace & Poise is probably the very first ballet Academy in the world to follow an Islamically inspired curriculum. I first noted the academy at the annual London Muslim Shopping Festival in 2022 where their poster (Figure 1) attracted my attention. The following year, I saw a performance by some Grace & Poise students on the main stage at Eid in the Square (London City's celebration of the end of Ramadan in Trafalgar Square).⁴ As a self-described 'ballet dad', I wanted to know more and initiated an exploratory study.

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Miss Maisie converted⁵ to Islam in August 2018. Soon after, in September, she founded the academy; it was ready to start trading and arranging classes in January 2019.⁶ As COVID-19 hit in spring 2020 classes were forced online, but the school survived and developed. Currently it organises classes at six London locations and one in Birmingham (since February 2022).⁷ The academy now has 15–20 regular employees on different contracts and some who freelance for specific classes. There is no requirement for students or employees to be Muslim, only to support the general vision and ethos of the school, although most seem to identify as such.

Grace & Poise is one of many initiatives undertaken by ‘Muslim creatives’⁸ working in the cultural industry in the UK, initiatives that are shaped by the economic conditions and laws of the country, but also by visions of the arts and crafts that the Muslim creatives believe will be appreciated by ‘the Muslim community’⁹. Clearly, there is a growth in new Muslim taste communities which value arts and crafts in non-traditional forms, leading to the renegotiation of aesthetics and also ethics among Muslims in the UK. This development encourages a cultural creativity wherein new forms are employed either to ex-

5. Some converts use convert, some revert. Miss Maisie uses both. I use convert, the more common term in writing.

6. The academy was started by Maisie Byers, initially in partnership with a Dr. Sajedah Shubib who left the company in February 2021 and is no longer associated with the academy.

7. Graceandpoiseacademy, Instagram 4th February 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CZka5UwINWE/>. Visited 11th June 2024.

8. ‘Muslim creatives’ is borrowed from Morris 2023. It is shorthand for Muslims who are engaged in creative work and either profile themselves as believers or who actively relate their craft to Islam.

9. There are several competing, parallel and sometimes overlapping Muslim Communities in the UK, at least from a sociological understanding of community. But the linguistic trope ‘the Muslim community’ is strong and ever-present among both non-Muslims and Muslims.

10. https://www.instagram.com/p/CcFw-Hrlif_/.



Figure 1: From graceandpoiseacademy Instagram 8th April 2022.¹⁰

press Islam directly or the artist's active relations to Islam (Morris 2023; Warren 2022; Otterbeck 2021). Grace & Poise is an example of the latter.

This article narrates the remarkable story of Grace & Poise and opens with a thick description of the school before contextualising and analysing its visions and practices. The article then discusses what Grace & Poise represents, finally developing an argument about how such creative endeavours relate to the continuous reconfiguration of Islam in England.

Aims, methods and material

If nothing else is indicated, information about Grace & Poise stems from a) my interviews with Miss Maisie,¹⁰ b) classroom observations by a research assistant,¹¹ c) Grace & Poise's webpages¹² and Instagram¹³ and d) media interviews, reportage and stage performances by Grace & Poise.¹⁴ Facts have been checked by using a variety of independent sources. Both interviews with Miss Maisie were conducted online. The first was an open-ended explorative conversation centred around a few themes deduced from the available information from webpages, social media and previous journalism. The second interview followed up the classroom observations to ensure understanding. As the academy is a new, small business, this article has taken extra care not to share Miss Maisie's intellectual property without authorisation; she kindly commented on a draft before the second interview and approved the information shared. It does not include any identifiable information about parents, students, teachers or assistants, apart from Miss Maisie.

I trained my research assistant, Anna Otterbeck¹⁵ – who has a BA in modern dance from Dundee and Angus College – in ethnographic methods of field observation. During and after observation sessions, she made written and audio notes, later transcribed and shared with me. She also took snapshots of objects and places, while avoiding photographing teachers, assistants, parents and students. We engaged in critical discussion and interpretation before, during and after the sessions. She has also read through a draft version of this article suggesting changes and additions for which I am very grateful. Grace & Poise webpages are approached knowing that they contain promotional material. Further, media interviews with small, struggling busi-

11. I have formally interviewed Miss Maisie on two occasions, 15th January 2024 and 10th June 2024.

12. Observations were made 6th–21st March 2024 at different locations in London by my research assistant Anna Otterbeck, presented below.

13. <https://www.graceandpoise.co.uk/>. Visited 11th June 2024.

14. Grace & Poise's Instagram account has archives back to autumn 2019; posts before that were erased because outdated or not professional enough.

15. Grace & Poise has been covered by both Muslim and non-Muslim media in the UK. I have seen two public performances: one at Eid in the Square (Trafalgar Square), 29th April 2023, and one at the Eid Festival at Westfield (Shepard's Bush), 14th April 2024.

nesses are generally very positive and again are used with caution. The short performances observed by me were parts of larger programmes at family friendly Eid celebrations in London where I was in the audience.¹⁶

Grace & Poise's activities

16. For more on Anna Otterbeck, see Lutra Dance & Movement Instagram account: https://www.instagram.com/lutra_danceandmovement/. Visited 24th June 2024.

17. This subproject has been ethically tested and approved by the Aga Khan University's Ethical Review Committee for the Social Sciences, Humanities and Arts.

18. In this article I will assume that Grace & Poise are referring to assumed biological sex. I have not discussed the definition of girls, women, boys and men with Miss Maisie. The issue did not surface, neither in interviews nor observations and trans- or non-binary gender identities were not the focus of the study. It is however possible to conjure up situations that could be challenging for any biological sex segregated teaching institution today but none of that were observed.

19. Graceandpoiseacademy, Instagram 8th February 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CZuLmAgItoQ/>. Visited 11th June 2024.

20. In the UK, students of, for example, music and dance proceed through grades that represent skill stages. In ballet, according to the RAD curriculum, there are eight grades (plus two pre-grades) for non-professional dancers. There is another scale for vocational training.

21. Graceandpoiseacademy Instagram 29th September 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CjFZopClva3/>. Visited 11th June 2024.

22. Graceandpoiseacademy Instagram 28th September 2022, for example. https://www.instagram.com/p/CjDvT4lIDp7/?img_index=2. Visited 11th June 2024.

Grace & Poise primarily focusses on girls and women.¹⁷ Currently, the academy offers regular classes up to the age of fifteen but envisions developing more classes in the future. Since February 2022, the academy has also arranged classes called 'Mummy and me' for infants up to two years old if accompanied by an adult woman.¹⁸ Boys may participate in ballet classes until year two, which implies an age of 6–7 years in the UK, after which classes are girls only. In early 2024 the academy developed and launched a 'creative movement' syllabus for physical education (PE) offered to Muslim primary schools and meant for all genders.

From the age of 4–5, the academy offers annual ballet exams so students may receive recognition of their progress.¹⁹ These form a regular reference point in the classroom, with students training to perform the exam in mock situations. The academy also caters for those who wish to take up ballet professionally, noting that in order

...to support our students in a career pathway, we intend to provide training and graduate programmes for them to train as Ballet Teachers. This will enable them to join our Ballet Teaching Faculty and teach our Ballet to Poetry Syllabus, in line with the values of our Academy.²⁰

Note that Grace & Poise does not support a career as a stage dancer as this would, as staged ballet is organised now, require a different ethos. The 'Ballet to Poetry Syllabus' mentioned is the original dance curriculum of the academy (discussed below). Apart from the regular classes, Grace & Poise organises shorter workshops for both younger and older children. At times, they have arranged 'ladies' ballet' classes, but these are not held regularly.²¹ For example, in 2024, the academy cooperated with the charity Muslimah Sports Association²² and offered ladies' ballet classes over a twelve-week period.

As for all small-scale business that must compete commer-

cially, the reality on the ground is challenging. Classes need to reach a certain size to be sustainable and competition when applying for funding support is harsh. Grace & Poise has been successful thus far and is currently stable and financially independent. It works hard for funding to keep fees down and enable all interested students to join regardless of economic situation. Many classes are in fact full and there are even waiting lists, although in some locations there are classes with fewer students.

The academy cooperates with and is recognised by professional organisations like the Muslim business organisation Sisters in Business²³ and the Empowered Women Network, which awarded Grace & Poise the Rising Star of The Year award in July 2023.²⁴ Many of these associations provide important network opportunities for small, local businesses, allowing them to share their experiences and seek advice from each other. Grace & Poise has won some even more prestigious awards. For example, The Islam Channel²⁵ named the academy the ‘community business of the year’ in 2022 and The Muslim News²⁶ awarded it for Excellence in the Arts, 2023. According to Miss Maisie, the academy has expansion plans, possibly even overseas, but only when they are prepared and the situation is right.

Visions of a Muslim Childhood

In its self-presentation, the academy expresses its vision in declaratory terms: ‘With a unique Ballet to Poetry Syllabus the Academy is founded upon a passion for Child Development and raising the Muslim community to make a positive impact in the world.’ ‘Child development’ is explained as aligning ‘mind, body and soul’ for positive development. It is further specified as nurturing cognitive, social, emotional and creative development. This is seen as corresponding to ‘Life Skills & Positive Islamic Identity’, stressing that a positive faith resonates with a healthy body and active mind.

When interviewed, Miss Maisie uses typical educational language when underlining that she aims to make ‘ballet accessible to girls from impoverished backgrounds’ as it will provide them with ‘transferable skills that will help them change their financial circumstances’.²⁷ She observes that there is scepticism about the performing arts and an emphasis on medicine and STEM subjects²⁸ within ‘the Muslim community’ (cf. Morris 2023; War-

23. <https://muslimahsports.org.uk/>. Visited 11th June 2024.

24. <https://www.sistersinbusiness.co.uk/>. Visited 11th June 2024.

25. <https://www.instagram.com/p/Cu6bWpnopiG/>. Visited 11th June 2024.

26. The Islam Channel started in 2004; it is one of the most established Muslim TV channels in the UK. <https://www.islamchannel.tv/>. Visited 11th June 2024. See Morris 2023.

27. Muslim News started in 1989 as a newsletter and is now one of the most established channels online for Muslim news in the UK. <https://muslimnews.co.uk/>. Visited 11th June 2024.

28. https://www.arabnews.com/node/1882006/art-culture?mc_cid=93c73b1c75&mc_eid=UNIQID. Visited 11th June 2024.

ren 2022). To raise awareness of the potentially positive impact of ballet, she and Grace & Poise refer to studies showing that activities like ballet strengthen academic results and physical and mental health (see Figure 2).

There is a separate page on the academy webpages briefly presenting a normative understanding of Islamic identity. It starts by declaring that in contrast to a generic understanding of religion, Islam is more; it is a complete outlook on life meant to be nurtured from childhood until death.²⁹ The text then stresses the importance of ‘Muslim etiquette’ in both manners and appearance, emphasising ‘modest wear’ as a female ideal.



Figure 2: Graceandpoiseacademy Instagram, 20 January 2023.³⁰

This is then extended to the grace and modesty of the art of ballet, with its elegance of movement perceived and presented as a moral quality. Islam is also connected to a ‘strong work ethic’, in turn associated with ballet training. Teachers and assistants are to inspire students to encourage and support each other. Thus, the text proclaims that training ballet will ‘support children in everyday life as they [i.e. work ethics, etc.] ensure they

29. Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics.

30. <https://www.instagram.com/p/CnpkaxmoR2l/>. Visited 11th June 2024.

pray on time, fast through Ramadan!’³¹ The webpage evokes the Islamic concept *ihsan* – excellence in morals and deeds – claiming it is reflected in the attention to detail and work ethic needed to become proficient in ballet. Further, success is connected to having the right intention in your deeds and trust in Allah who holds the ultimate key to development as ‘all strength and ability is from Allah’. The aim is to strengthen the children who will be humble in success and show *sabr* (patience) in hardship. By being taught to use common phrases like *mashaallah* (Allah has willed it) and *alhamdulillah* (praise be to Allah) the group is made aware of the importance of the two qualities (humility and patience). The Islamic profile is stressed in a passage on the Grace & Poise page ‘Our Story’ that I quote in full:

We feel passionately about contributing to Islamic Arts and honouring the significance of Poetry within Islamic heritage. Grace & Poise Academy offers the beautiful art form of Ballet in a way that is shaped by our Islamic ethos. Our values are founded in Islam and we are committed to working with passion, excellence and integrity to make a positive impact in all we do.³²

At the very heart of the above is the stress on ethical heritage. Heritage here should not be understood as continuity of the traditional arts in established forms but as a theologically established ethical heritage that – if taken seriously and approached responsibly – can be paired with forms of expressions previously unutilised in Islam, like ballet. Creative cultural forms like theatre, film, music and stand-up comedy are increasingly, and globally, being appropriated by Muslim creatives or Muslim movements for a variety of purposes (Rashid and Petersen 2023). Central to the theological debate about the possibility of doing so – and also important for Muslim creatives taking such initiatives – is a stress on ethics, especially the holistic understanding of Islam as a tradition primarily providing sound overarching principles and excellence (*ihsan*). This is observable throughout the first decades of the 21st century, not least in cities like London (Otterbeck 2021, 2024). It is also notable in the ethical virtues invoked through English rather than Arabic terminology, for example etiquette rather than *adab*, morals instead of *akhlaq*, intention not *niyya*, trust in Islam instead of *tawakkul*, humbleness rather than *tawadu’*, concepts that the Muslim target group likely associates with the English words. Only *sabr* and

31. Evidently, the statement aims to clarify how important Islam is to Muslims, but it also overlooks that many adherents of other religions make the same claims about their faith.

32. <https://www.graceandpoise.co.uk/post/islamic-identity>. Visited 11th June 2024.

ihsan are in Arabic, although Miss Maisie points out that there is no specific strategy behind making these words stand out. The main goal is to communicate the values. I cannot, however, help noticing the similarities between this text and the general contemporary stress in Islamic discourse on ethics as a set of key principals taking precedence over established, rule-based readings, not least in key questions about environmental responsibility and cultural creativity (Kersten 2019; Otterbeck 2021). Yet the rule-based interpretations are still important, and some community-specific, important rules are honoured, both generally in the discussion and by Grace & Poise.

In this case, two main adjustments to general ballet classes in the UK have been made. There is no music, only poetry, in class and at performances, and there is a separation between girls and boys from the age of about six–seven, for moral reasons. From then on, classrooms are all-female spaces.

From music to poetry

The reason for reimagining ballet to be danced to poetry is that music may not be ‘promoted or encouraged within their faith’,³³ ‘their’ being Muslim, ballet-interested children and families.³⁴ Rhythmically spoken poetry is instead used to enable the student to hit the beat and find flow. The academy claims that ‘Our poems explore Islamic Values and Celebrate the creation of Allah سُبحَانَهُ وَتَعَالَى’,³⁵ The Arabic reads *subhanahu wa ta’ala*, meaning ‘may he be praised and exalted’, a formula traditionally added after saying or writing ‘Allah’.

To use accompanying sounds other than music is not unheard of in dance, especially contemporary dance. Before converting to Islam, Miss Maisie had already used poetry in her own ballet choreography. As she says, ‘Poetry is very rhythmical so when I am talking about rhythm and poetry I’m talking about the poetic rhythm; poetry naturally requires rhythm.’³⁶ She points out that it is a different kind of rhythm, not technically music, and continues, ‘But I write poems on music scores, so it is just a creative way of transferring a rhythm that would apply to movement to poetry.’ Miss Maisie writes the poems herself with specific choreography in mind. She has already written hundreds of them. All the poems are recorded for use in class.

Having observed 36 classes and danced in some of them, the

33. <https://www.graceandpoise.co.uk/about>. Visited 25th June 2024.

34. <https://www.graceandpoise.co.uk/post/poetry-and-cognitive-development>. Visited 11th June 2024.

35. Many scholars have examined why music may be considered a problem; for my main contribution, see Otterbeck 2021.’

36. <https://www.graceandpoise.co.uk/ballet-to-poetry-syllabus-exams>. Visited 11th June 2024.

research assistant attested that the words and pauses of the poems skilfully created rhythms that were simple to find and follow. As poems are specific to certain exercises and repeated during training, the rhythm of a specific poem affords certain movement: a drawn-out syllable may invite an arabesque, a row of quickly pronounced consonants forming a rhythm may invite a *pirouette*, *plié* or *petit jeté*. In fact, the research assistant found the poetry surprisingly like music as it was both tonal and rhythmical; however, she also stressed it was different from music in that it seemed easier for beginners to follow since the rhythm was carried only by the voice instead of by tonally rich compositions. However, it was harder to give instructions when a poem was read as words had to compete with words, not tones.

Another aspect of the poetry is its storytelling. Both poetry and storytelling are celebrated art forms in many Muslim contexts and are also specifically embraced by Islamic thinking, something Miss Maisie is quick to point out, underscoring that these art forms are central to ballet too. The stories of the poems help form the choreography. For the smallest dancers, storytelling will be concrete and might be about animals or nature, often with a subtle moral message about good character or good behaviour, but these poems do not have explicit Islamic messages, so they may be accessible to everyone, Muslims and non-Muslims. As the students grow older, there is more room for abstract ideas. Miss Maisie considers that poetry increases independent, intellectual reflection and builds confidence in her students; this is an effect of the curriculum that many might fail to notice, but that Miss Maisie particularly emphasises. To prepare the students, the class first listens to the poems together to get the message but also the flow.

When Grace & Poise conducts thematic workshops, narratives from the Quran, for example, are introduced and dramatised for the stage without depicting the characters themselves. A salient example of this is a workshop based on a yet-to-be-published book by Miss Maisie called *Grace & the Story of Yunus (alayhu salam)* (peace be upon him) (Figure 3). In it, a little girl called Grace defies her mother's instructions and goes to play in the woods. She then gets trapped when having a pretend tea party with her imaginary friends. To comfort them – and herself – she tells them of Yunus who was trapped inside a whale but was released when he had found his way and prayed a *du'a*,³⁷ which Grace does too. Soon after, her mother finds her and res-

37. First interview.

cues her. Grace apologises fully, in line with the story in which Yunus accepts he has made mistakes and asks for God's forgiveness. The moral, in a nutshell, is, 'It is ok to make mistakes, but you own your mistakes, you say sorry.'³⁸ The story is also about the act of forgiveness. Indeed, workshop participants collaborated in writing a poem about forgiveness, later posted on the Academy's Instagram, as a reminder of the tradition to forgive those who you think have wronged you before Ramadan starts.³⁹ Currently, Grace & Poise has not had many opportunities to hold workshops, not least due to the harsh economic conditions affecting many in 'the community', but in future, Miss Maisie has the ambition to offer full packages like classical ballet shows: the show, the book, the gadgets and memorabilia.



38. There is a well-known and beloved prayer in the Islamic tradition called Yunus's du'a.

39. First interview.

40. Graceandpoiseacademy, Instagram 29th March 2022, https://www.instagram.com/p/CbrwOMPIgNd/?img_index=1. Visited 11th June 2024.

41. <https://www.instagram.com/p/CixZhAyo-Zu/>. Visited 11th June 2024.

Figure 3: From graceandpoiseacademy Instagram 21st September 2022.⁴⁰

Modesty and religious practices

Segregation along the lines of assumed sex lies at the academy's core. Up to about the age of six, when classes are based on 'play and establishing fundamental movement and expressive skills',⁴¹

boys may participate. When formal ballet teaching commences and as the students grow older, to guard the *‘awra* (the parts of the body that one needs to cover to maintain modesty) of the students, teachers and assistants, neither boys nor men are accepted as students, teachers, assistants or visitors. Men accompanying children to the academy meet the class assistant and sign in the children but are not present in the room during the class. Then again, women bringing children to the ballet will not be in the classroom either, apart from with the youngest children when adult women are allowed. As many of the classes are held at art centres, there are usually integrated cafés parents may frequent for some social time. When Grace & Poise offers its creative movement syllabus at primary schools, classes are mixed. This is in line with how Muslim schools envisage PE classes.⁴² Thus, the reason for the early age of segregation at the ballet training at Grace & Poise is curriculum based rather than seen as a necessity for maintaining modesty.

The academy’s recommended uniform is regular ballet school garb but, instead of nylon tutus, the younger girls wear blue skirts that cover most of their thighs⁴³ and the older wear burgundy, calf-length skirts to cover their *‘awra*.⁴⁴ In class during the observation sessions, some of the girls did not wear ‘the uniform’, which was accepted as the academy was in the process of changing it and did not want to pressure anyone into buying something merely for the short term. As the Grace & Poise classroom is an all-female space, teachers and assistants generally do not wear hijab, but if they have to leave the classroom regularly, the hijab may stay on. The students who wear them take them off in class. Miss Maisie claims to look ‘exactly the same as a ballet teacher as before I became Muslim’,⁴⁵ also the case for the other teachers and assistants if they wear a hijab at all.

The ideal of Grace & Poise is that ‘our work is a means to drawing closer to Allah (swt⁴⁶) and fulfilling our purpose to worship The One who created us’.⁴⁷ Ballet may be a passion, but as Allah comes first ‘even amidst our favourite pastimes, hobbies and passions’,⁴⁸ those who pray take time to do so at prayer time, even during lectures. Teachers and assistants take turns so lectures are not paused. As working-day classes are held in the evenings, and weekend classes around noon, this happens in at least one class out of the three to four they generally hold at each location. During Ramadan 2024, teachers and assistants broke for a very quick *iftar* with the fasting students, eating dates and

42. Second interview.

43. Second interview.

44. See the main image on the homepage of <https://www.graceandpoise.co.uk/>. Visited 11th June 2024.

45. As the older girls are undergoing puberty, some of them experience growth spurts, and ballet equipment is an expense, so the length of the skirt varies as students grow.

46. First interview.

47. Swt is a common abbreviation of *subhanahu wa ta’ala* in “Islamic English” texts, meaning ‘may he be praised and exalted’, as pointed out before.

48. <https://www.graceandpoise.co.uk/post/islamic-identity>. Visited 11th June 2024.

snacks, rounding off with a prayer before continuing the lecture.

In our first interview, Miss Maisie underline that the academy does not impose values on the children; it caters for those who prefer a ballet school based on Muslim values, but does not demand them of teachers, assistants or students. The research assistant confirms the inclusive atmosphere but also emphasises that there is an Islamic normality in the classroom that finds outlet in language, rituals and character preferences (see below). For example, lectures are introduced by saying *bismillah* (in the name of Allah) and often end with a *mashaallah* (Allah has willed it, i.e. the task is completed by the mercy of Allah). An interesting example of a non-religious ritual which has become Islamic is that the students, especially the younger ones, do a kind of *révérence*, a curtsy directed at the teachers and a universal tradition in ballet at the end of lectures. However, at Grace & Poise there is a twist. Generally, a *révérence* includes a bow, but this is not included at Grace & Poise as students are taught not to bow to anyone but Allah. Instead, they line up, hold their hand over their hearts and then open their arms saying, ‘Thank you, Miss ...’

Ballet studios are rented in art centres, so both inside and outside the classroom, other agendas are clearly visible – a condition of not owning a place of your own. Miss Maisie stresses that the staff of Grace & Poise ‘respect those around us even if the values may be different to our own.’⁴⁹ The research assistant confirmed the live-and-let-live atmosphere at the art centres. A more central difficulty, one crucial in the choice of space, is whether the dance studio can guarantee the privacy of the class. Doors with a window will be covered up and a note on the door will declare that there is a Grace & Poise ballet class in progress, ‘Please knock for assistance’. Some spaces are equipped with curtains that can be drawn. Without these possibilities for privacy, spaces will not be considered.

Yet, occasionally, the academy opens its doors or has its students perform in public. For example, several media channels have covered (filmed and photographed) the dance school (e.g. the BBC, British Muslim TV, *The Times*, *Daily Mail*) and the academy’s students have performed on stage: at the Eid in the Square festival at Trafalgar Square, London, in 2022 and 2023, for example. Miss Maisie stresses that at any public display modesty and health and safety are carefully considered. For example,

49. <https://www.graceandpoise.co.uk/post/islamic-identity>. Visited 11th June 2024.

the many images of the students on Instagram, or taken by visiting journalists, are arranged outside of regular classes. Only children who volunteer, with the permission of their parents, feature in these photoshoots, which is primarily a safeguarding issue. There is however a cut-off date for public photos and performances, which occurs when girls hit puberty, something that is clearly a question of modesty. In images meant to be made public, most teachers and assistants wear the hijab, even some of the students. Thus, the images from photoshoots are imbued with more Islamic semiotics than a general class. Apart from stressing modesty, this also serves the purpose of signalling to potential customers that the ballet school offers an Islamic safe space.

Thus, Islamic religious practices and moral agendas are clearly accentuated in the academy and form the backdrop for how it makes space. The gendered Muslim body and *‘awra*, the ritualised phrases, the ritual prayer, the private and public space associated with the gendered gaze, all index Islam and the Islamic profile of the academy. Yet, the research assistant also noted that students, assistants or teachers who did not want to pray or fast were not pushed to do so. After all, the emphasis was on the ballet training.

Islamic ballet aesthetics

I asked Miss Maisie about the use of Islamic aesthetics versus the established aesthetics of European ballet, which led to a discussion on culture and art. Miss Maisie prefers a less obvious Islamic branding. She appreciates Islamic schools that choose the name of a flower or plant rather than using one more associated with Islam, which partly explains the Grace & Poise name, but this also provides a clue to the general lack of Islamic semiotics on Grace & Poise’s Instagram account.⁵⁰ The exception is the veil, which is common, and the posts celebrating Eid which occasionally have, for example, a crescent. I was particularly surprised that the medal received by the students after an exam was devoid of Islamic aesthetics, something I pointed out at our first interview. The next time I met Miss Maisie, she told me with a big smile she had now ordered a new type of medal with some added Islamic design on it, as she thought it a good idea. But her

50. Second interview.

overall reasoning is still that she does not want to present a particular, culturally defined Islamic aesthetics. On the contrary, she wants the ballet aesthetics to dominate, and she claims the students want that too. Thus, much of the art work is cute and pink. Many of the elaborate illustrations are by Zonrana Zivic (zoki.art⁵¹) or Noemi Manalang (noomiedoodles⁵²), two illustrators who are often engaged. Yet there is a modesty to the cute. In our interviews, Miss Maisie recurrently expressed the idea of ‘living Islam, not fitting it in’ in different versions; that includes appropriating aesthetics from ballet and living it as Islam. At the performances I have seen, and in the classes observed by the research assistant, the dominant aesthetic is drawn from ballet. Instead of a range of visual, decipherable semiotics, character building is the clearest example of the Islamic ethos at Grace & Poise. Miss Maisie captures the complexity:

I never want them [the students] to say, ‘I don’t do that [ballet]’, because something got in the way, I want them to feel confident in their Islamic identity, in and of itself, and feel happy and satisfied with everything because we’ve just adapted anything that may not be aligning. Not that *you* have to adapt to fit in; we can actually change the world around us to put our values at the forefront for ourselves.⁵³

Character building

The Grace & Poise understanding of character is well summarised in the following Instagram post: ‘We raise children in line with an Islamic Ethos and encourage them to be kind, considerate, supportive and respectful towards others.’⁵⁴ Islamic character preferences are not to be understood as separate from values like friendship and team spirit but rather as the same or possibly to a large part overlapping. That is, being kind, friendly and cooperative are values upheld in ballet classrooms all over the world; the difference is that there is religious motivation in the stance of Grace & Poise mentioned by adults and students alike. This can take the form of the reminder, ‘Allah is always watching us’, or simply that it is an Islamic virtue to be kind-hearted and cooperative.

The younger students frequently do teambuilding exercises.

51. I have browsed the 583 posts of Graceandpoiseacademy, Instagram 2019–24 to make this point.

52. <https://www.instagram.com/zoki.art/>. Visited 11th June 2024.

53. <https://www.instagram.com/noomiedoodles/>. Visited 11th June 2024.

54. First interview.

One is ‘the ballet train’, a recurrent image on the Grace & Poise Instagram account. Miss Maisie explains that the ballet train aims to build friendship and nurture the feeling of security and belonging. She likes to begin to build awareness of morals using an exercise based in pedagogical tricks. For example, students sit and open an imaginary ballet book, but it is slammed shut. This builds expectations. When it shuts, all pretend to be shocked. ‘What happened to the ballet book?’ The teacher tells it off, calling it naughty. But, with the words ‘please’ and ‘*bismillah*’ (in the name of Allah), it opens, making clear that one should be polite but also initiate things by saying *bismillah*. It stresses the importance of intention in Islam: that one should prepare and start a task consciously.

The idea that all the dancers are a team is also nurtured with the older students in ways recognisable to the research assistant. Phrases like, ‘Don’t do a solo’, and encouragement to wait until all are ready but also not to make others wait, are recurrent. Naturally, as in any educational environment, interests, skills and the ability to work hard vary more as students get older, creating friction in small groups that teachers and assistants work hard to control. In this, sisterhood and friendship become important reference points, seen as virtues according to Islam.⁵⁵

As mentioned above, many of the poems and plays – like the one about Grace – centre on character building. A poem for the younger students, posted on the Grace & Poise Instagram account 16th July 2021, reads:

These little steps,
 These little feet,
 Do you know what it takes,
 To be prepared to meet
 A goal, a dream,
 To face a challenge so great
 To climb that mountain
 To explore and create
 To never give up
 To not say we can’t
 To trust in Allah
 No matter how far
 So lift your eyes,
 Reach as high as you can...
 With every moment you trust in his plan

55. Graceandpoiseacademy, Instagram, 13th January 2022. <https://www.instagram.com/p/CYr6sz2IP-Vu/>. Visited 11th June 2024.

So lift your eyes....
 Because Allah can raise you
 To the skies.
 © Maisie A. Byers⁵⁶

All the poems for younger students that I have read or heard are straightforward and easy to interpret. A key passage here is 'to never give up, to not say we can't, to trust in Allah'. Ballet techniques are demanding. They require precision and discipline, and at times students simply do not get a technique even if they are skilled and have tried. Teachers encourage students by pointing out that they are in a learning process and that they should not say that they cannot, rather that they are learning how to do it. Sometimes, ballet words are introduced into the poems. The research assistant noted that the word 'snatch' was part of poem that included a snatch, a movement of the feet used in a *relevé* when quickly raising the body by letting the heels leave the floor. This allowed the students to time the snatch, anticipating the passage of the poem.

The following poem is for the older students. On the surface it is about an orchid, but metaphorically it is about patient striving and growing.

- 1)⁵⁷ Orchid you endure all inconstancy
- 2) Baring all with quiet assurity
- 3) Lips sweetly pursed delicately refined,
- 4) A blush upon cheeks so modestly inclined
- 5) Will this beauty last, or fall and fade away
- 6) Sabr and trust you reply to say,
- 7) As dullness overtakes
- 8) A ropy capturing embrace
- 9) The vibrance of your flower
- 10) A drooping headdress towers
- 11) So fall and shed and weep
- 12) A collapsed pillowed heap
- 13) At the bed in which you sleep
- 14) From where hope may creep
- 15) A lush new journey peeps to begin
- 16) And bursts forth beyond what is lost
- 17) A hope like the coming of a new spring
- 18) That follows the harshest of frost
- 19) Orchid you endure all inconstancy

56. Graceandpoiseacademy
 Instagram 4th October 2022
 September <https://www.instagram.com/p/CjTDVqxIau2/>. Visited 11th
 June 2024.

57. This poem and the next are
 both reproduced with the explicit
 permission of Maisie Byrnes.

- 20) Baring all with quiet assurity
 21) A glimpse of perfection that is only truly known
 22) When travellers find their ever lasting home
 © Maisie A. Byers

A religious framework is evident in the poem. *Sabr*, or patience (line 6), is a keyword in Islamic ethics but also in training and in rituals. With *sabr* one may endure hardship; eventually, patient travellers will find their home (line 22). The poem also evokes associations with nature as Allah's wonders are glimpsed through the perfection of the orchid as part of creation (line 21). Thus, the dancer becomes both orchid and patient traveller: created, rootlessly wandering, yet rooted through the soul in an everlasting original home.

Character building has been a central educational value all through the Sunni revival in the UK, finding its shape in the 1970s and 1980s and simultaneously in the global discussion of Islamic pedagogics (Roald 1994; Janson 2003). It taps into the genres called *adab* (etiquette) and *'ilm al-akhlaq* (deontological ethics, or morals, based in religious advice about right and faulty behaviour). Grace & Poise approaches character building in another way, finding inspiration in European alternative pedagogics and so-called holistic pedagogics, and in various European ballet training programmes like RAD, Vagonova (a Russian school)⁵⁸ and Cecchetti, which has long been influential in the UK, not least within ISTD (Imperial Society of Teachers of Dancing).⁵⁹ However, this unique blend is framed by Islamic *adab* and *akhlaq*, foregrounding the ethical principles of friendship, hard work and politeness. Yet some gendered ideas about *'awra* remain important. The curriculum is further approached through discussions about Islamic pedagogy. Although not Montessori trained, Miss Maisie had encountered its tradition before conversion and knows enough about it to be baffled by the parallels between Islamic and Montessori pedagogies.⁶⁰ Miss Maisie has developed Grace & Poise as a continuation rather than a break with her past; thus, my argument is not that *adab* and *akhlaq* are plastered onto something per definition alien to Islam, but rather that the Grace & Poise curriculum has meticulously created something new out of existing material that is considered to align with Islam. Evidently, how this is received is another question.

58. The numbers were included in this poem when I received it from Miss Maisie. They are not read as part of the poem.

59. <https://vaganovaacademy.ru/index/eng.html>. Visited 11th June 2024.

60. <https://www.istd.org/dance/dance-genres/cecchetti-classical-ballet/>. Visited 11th June 2024.

Reception and recognition

As already mentioned, Grace & Poise has received several prizes and managed to reach out through reportage and interviews in a wide variety of media channels. The academy has already rearranged its business model twice to meet the demands of the market and donors, as well as legal requirements. Grace & Poise frequently uses Instagram to highlight the support it gets: the positive response from parents and students and the favourable media coverage.

I asked Miss Maisie if she also receives negative feedback. She immediately told me about Islamophobic messages they have received as comments on social media. Most comments seem to be accusations that Grace & Poise excludes non-Muslims, which Miss Maisie is adamant that it does not. I was, however, thinking about negative reactions from Muslim communities, so I rephrased my question. Miss Maisie shared that one of the few recurring issues was a concern about where ballet lessons would lead the girls, especially the fear that the girls will eventually not be able to practice their Islamic values due to being encouraged or coerced to join ‘Western ballet companies’ which is assumed to operate with other modesty ideals around the female body. Miss Maisie then explained Grace & Poise’s position and elaborated on the trajectory of becoming a ballet teacher. She also shared her plans for a future ballet company that also takes into account Muslim sensitivities on performance, which has reassured parents for now, according to Miss Maisie. Further, the research assistant witnessed one of the teachers being questioned by a Muslim man that I interpret as a revivalist Salafi preparing another Islamic activity in one of the art centres. He wondered whether doing ballet was not challenging the purity of Islam by introducing *bida*‘ or innovation.⁶¹ The teacher invited him to have a discussion via email with Miss Maisie about Grace & Poise’s approach to ballet and its Islamic basis.

61. Grace & Poise is not alone in drawing parallels between Montessori and Islamic notions of pedagogy. In the UK and the US, Islamic Montessori Education is a growing trend, see for example the webpages of The American Islamic Montessori Association which is among the more ambitious: <https://theaima.org/>. Visited 11th June 2024.

Generally, if parents raise an Islamic issue that Grace & Poise has not encountered before, Miss Maisie replies that she will explore this further instead of just sharing her personal thoughts. She seeks well-grounded answers and advice through online lectures and attending study circles, meanwhile stressing that she does not want to tell others what Islam is. London has a lot to offer when it comes to publicly expressed Islamic thinking, be-

lievers need to pick and choose. Miss Maisie is part of some discussion networks that offers lectures and debates that she trusts more than others. However, most discussions with parents are about health and safety and data protection; those things are more common parental concerns, according to Miss Maisie.

In flux

As Grace & Poise Academy is rather unknown to most, I have provided a thick description of it before discussing what it represents. In many respects, it is like other small, niche, ‘ethnic’ businesses, albeit in this case religious, started by an enthusiast with a vision, surviving the first hard years, expanding and having to ‘professionalise’ in accordance with the rules of the market economy to survive. It is tempting to use terms like ‘acculturation’ to imply that Grace & Poise is a result of cultural adaptation, but acculturation is too blunt an instrument, although the demand for leisure time activities for Muslim girls – which frames the economic conditions of Miss Maisie’s initiative – is probably a result of social acculturation. But as Grace & Poise is driven by a unique creative combination of ideas about ballet which forms its distinctive vision, it is clearly more than just another ‘ethnic’ business or fallout from an acculturation process. Ballet is highly international, both as a profession and as a leisure time activity or exercise; moreover, London is one of the world’s centres for ballet – both in terms of education and professional opportunities. Ballet has a long history; it was professionalised at the French court when Louis XIV was a youth (mid-17th century) by teacher-choreographers initiating very specific, demanding techniques making it a special artform (Sennett 2024). It has since developed into many overlapping traditions and morphed these into new forms in conversation with aesthetic ideals in other dance genres. In a way, Grace & Poise is yet another development in a strong London ballet scene that is open to different parallel ballet traditions.

The empowerment of the child lies at the heart of Miss Maisie’s communication and teaching practices at Grace & Poise where it is thought to be reached by a) respecting the child, b) trusting in the child’s abilities and c) nurturing the religious ethics (*akhlaq*) and etiquette (*adab*) of the child. Miss Maisie considers Montessori pedagogy and Islamic pedagogy align in

62. In Islamic legal discussions there are two kinds of innovations, allowed and disallowed; further, these two types of innovation can relate either to worldly or religious matters. Innovations in religious matters are seen as the more problematic. Contemporary Salafi inspired people generally only use *bidaʿ* as the equivalent of heresy.

terms of a) and b); she is not alone in this. Besides being among Italy's first female physicians, Maria Montessori was a devout Catholic who theorised about the spiritual completion of the children she observed. The holistic and cosmic education promoted served to encourage children's inner teacher (Montessori 1989). As Islamic pedagogy has carved out its own specific language over the last forty years, Montessori pedagogy has become a close ally and a way for UK Muslims to communicate their pedagogical convictions to each other and to the rest of society. Practically, this means that Grace & Poise consciously tries to help students to develop through training and achieving goals. The pedagogy informs the choice of words as 'I can't' is not encouraged, but 'let me try again' is, thereby stressing the competent child. The elements of c) are manifested in the manners that are inculcated, attitudes to *ʿawra* and the role models set by teachers and assistants. Thus, Grace & Poise aims to emphasise an Islamic ethical empowerment that will enable the students to participate in and contribute to the society in which they live with grace and dignity. In both Montessori and Islamic pedagogies this aspiration is motivated by the goal of attaining one's inner potential and becoming part of the natural state of being human, or *fitra* in Islamic terms. The starting point for both is the evaluation of all human life as equally important and worthy of growth, given that it is divinely initiated.

Art and popular culture are created, produced and experienced through forms in flux. As forms, they can be filled with new ideas or new combinations of ideas, which are crucial for the continuity of the change of the forms. Grace & Poise complements, or perhaps expands, the ballet form, both through an ethical Islamic reframing and by reimagining ballet pedagogies. The resignification of general ballet virtues – such as grace, poise, hard work, discipline, kindness and sisterhood – as Islamic ballet virtues is a creative act built on established traditions combined to produce something new (cf. Negus & Pickering 2004).

While the above obviously makes sense to Miss Maisie, it also seems to resonate with many in the Muslim communities. As far as I can tell, there are no protests when Grace & Poise students perform in public. On the contrary, the girls are supported and appreciated. Obviously, those who disagree with the direction taken will not send their children to the academy, but neither do they seek the academy out and try to close it down;

then again, it is, to date, a phenomenon restricted to two large metropolises in the UK and does not pose a broad major challenge. Yet it should be noted that Islamic-inspired pop music, for example, has spawned global discussions on the legality and appropriateness of this kind of music (Otterbeck 2021) and, if anything, dance, especially female dance, seems to be even more sensitive within a number of Muslim communities, albeit not in all Muslim contexts (e.g. Stellar 2011; Silverstein 2016). By carefully controlling the moral issues raised by dance, Grace & Poise has succeeded in developing a form of ballet that has generally met with approval and positive curiosity.

Meanwhile, Grace & Poise is an example of a broader trend among Muslim creatives who are expressing themselves confidently in forms that have not previously been connected with Islam. Miss Maisie and her team are immersed in contemporary ballet culture and the general cultural climate around professional dance. They live and breathe the same reference frames as the dance-trained, non-Muslim research assistant of the same age. This is a precondition for the creativity as the academy moulds the dominant ballet culture and Islamic ideas into something culturally new (cf. Lewis 2015: 49). One could possibly frame this with a reference to Stuart Z. Charmé's (2000) discussion about existential authenticity in contrast to essentialist authenticity. While the latter seeks to express a prescriptive, normative authenticity valid for all times but quite often simply romanticising one of many time-bound contexts as the authentic one, the former accepts a fluid and contextual authenticity. This authenticity is brought forth by genuine and honest reactions to contemporary issues in relation to a living tradition and is in flux, like all identities, yet in one form or another maintains continuity. In such a logic, being authentically Muslim today may include engaging with ballet and trying to creatively understand its potential as an Islamic expression. Seen as an existentialist authenticity project, Grace & Poise is both perfectly straightforward and quite revolutionary, both traditionalist and profoundly progressive in its approach to ballet, and to Islam.

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Ingvild Flaskerud

Visual Culture, Religion, and Politics in the Modern Iranian Public Sphere:

The resemiotization of Twelver Shiite Culture in the Mobilization of Protest

Key words: Green Movement, Shia material culture, resemiotization, counter public

Abstract To contest the results of the Iranian presidential election in 2009, mobilize street protest, and document the regime's responses protesters disseminated posters, photographs, and films on social media platforms. In this article I discuss how their use of signs associated with Twelver Shiite visual, material and performative culture were used to mobilize opposition against authorities who claim to be acting as guardians of a society based on the creed. By giving attention to signs' coexisting discursive contexts and modality, the study seeks to advance the conceptualization of 'recontextualization' and 'resemiotization' in the semiotic study of cultural codes, and to connect the study of Twelver Shiite visual, material and performative culture to the sphere of public discourse in modern Iran.

When Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was declared the winner of the Iranian presidential election on 12th June 2009 and reappointed as president for a second term, widespread protests were mobilized across the country. Accusing the authorities of electoral fraud, thousands of people gathered spontaneously in the streets to demand the removal of Ahmadinejad from the office he had held since 2005. Suggesting their vote had been stolen, the protesters' main slogan was 'Where is my vote?' (*ra'y-e-man kojāst*). The popular mobilization became known as the Green Movement (*junbesh-e sabz*), with activities that would continue until

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spring 2010. The movement can be described as a 'counter public', incorporating forms of protest which, according to Robert Asen and Daniel Brouwer, experience 'varying degrees of exclusion from prominent channels of political discourse and a corresponding lack of political power' (Asen and Brouwer 2001, 2). To contest the electoral results, mobilize street protests, and document the regime's harsh responses, the activists disseminated posters, photographs, and films on various social media platforms. By adding their voices and perspectives to the dominant discourse in the Iranian public, they challenged official ideological and political perspectives channelled through state-controlled media outlets, which ignored reportage on, and discussion of the protests. Despite their efforts, the Green Movement protesters did not succeed in altering the authorities' decision regarding the electoral outcome and Ahmadinejad embarked on a second term as the President of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Nevertheless, the posters' designs offer an opportunity to explore how references to signs conventionally associated with Twelver Shiite visual, material and performative culture are used to mobilize opposition against political authorities who claim to be acting as guardians of a society based on the creed.

The politicization of religious symbols is not unique to the Green Movement. As pointed out by Gustav Thaïs when discussing the protests against the Iranian Shah in the early 1960s, 'under conditions of social change, the meanings and interpretations of myths and rituals are modified as each generation reinterprets the past in terms of its own current premises and values' (Thaïs 1972, 347). Meanwhile, Chelkowski and Dabashi have talked about the 'renarrating potentials' that are constitutive elements of the various performing arts associated with the Karbala event (Chelkowski and Dabashi 1999, 46). Similarly, Gruber notes, the displays in martyr museums make ideological claims and shape the collective memory about the recent past (Gruber 2012, 69). The Green Movement posters thus participate in a visual political discourse which has shifted from presenting regime critique in the past to expressing support for the authorities in the present, to again presenting anti-authority critique in the present. The research question addressed here focuses on two issues: the semiotic and the social, and how they influence each other in the process of mobilizing protest. To discuss the question, I examine four posters designed and circulated by the Green Movement activists, selected because they re-

fer to commonly shared Twelver Shiite cultural codes otherwise appearing in religiously connected contexts, such as rituals and the securing of a saint's protection. The posters are available at the digital poster archive created by Elham Mahootchi and presented in her MA thesis (2014).¹ The appearance of religiously coded signs in the context of a political protest movement represents a discursive recontextualization and possibly also a resemiotization of the signs' signification and here I am interested in two aspects. How do coexisting discursive contexts and semiotic grounds combine, compete, or support each other in mobilizing the public and criticizing the authorities? What is the bearing of the signs' modality on the process of resemiotization? By giving attention to signs' coexisting discursive contexts and modality, the study seeks to advance the conceptualization of 'recontextualization' and 'resemiotization' in the semiotic study of cultural codes, and to connect the study of Twelver Shiite visual, material and performative culture to the sphere of public discourse in modern Iran.

Analytical Approach

Throughout analysis of the four Green Movement posters selected for this study, I have moved back and forth between examining the posters' visual and verbal language and conferring with available theoretical perspectives that could move the analysis forward. As a result, I have developed an overarching analytical approach which I have used as the framework for a systematic examination of the posters. The analysis proceeds from the assumption that the activists, to communicate their viewpoints to the wider public, expressed themselves through signs that were comprehensible to their audience. Influential theorists of semiotics have pointed to the collective nature of meaning-making processes. Signification, according to Roland Barthes, is developed by a given society and by history (Barthes 1977, 28). A similar idea is presented by Stuart Hall who perceives texts, images, objects, and practices to be cultural representations in which meaning is shaped by conventions and collective consensus (Hall 2002, 1–11). In this respect, we can conceive of the Iranian public as an 'interpretive community', an expression introduced by Stanley Fish to conceptualize how readers may share cultural assumptions or interpretive strategies when it comes to

1. <http://www.irangreenposters.org>

reading and understanding a text (Fish 1980). For the present study it is also useful to keep in mind Hall's suggestion that cultural representations should be understood, not only as concepts and ideas, but also as attachments and emotions (Hall 2002, 2). To discuss how the posters could mobilize the Iranian public, we can, therefore, think about the public as an 'emotive community'. Given that visual representations in Iran are used for political, liturgical, dogmatic, devotional, and ethical purposes (Flakerud 2010), I also propose perceiving the public as a 'pragmatic community' that shares common practices. Thus, to discuss the posters' potential for mobilizing this target audience, I consider how religiously anchored signs may engage the public as an interpretive, emotive, and pragmatic community.

A protest movement, however, challenges established paradigms to produce alternative viewpoints and responses. A unilateral focus on collective interpretive, emotive, and pragmatic significations may give the impression that signs are monosemic and stable, that there is a tight correlation between encoding—how a message is formulated—and decoding, that is, how a message is understood. Instead, Charles S. Peirce has emphasized that a sign is 'something that stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity, not in all respects, but in reference to a sort of idea, which he calls the 'ground' (Peirce 1985, 5). Indeed, Peter Chelkowski and Hamid Dabashi's study of the role of visual media in the pre- and post-revolutionary 'art of persuasion' in Iran has demonstrated that a redefinition of religiously anchored signs was essential to their systematization into a new ideological statement (Chelkowski and Dabashi 1999, 51). The shift is comparable to Per Linell's conceptualization of 'recontextualization', understood as the 'transfer-and-transformation of something from one discourse/text in context ... to another' (1998, 154). The premise for his reasoning is that all discourse is constructed within a context. When pieces of a discourse are taken out of their original context and used in a new one, the transfer causes a change in the setting in which meaning is created and some kind of transformation of the meaning. Recontextualization is, therefore, accompanied by 'resemiotization', a process described by Rick Iedema as the shifting of meaning 'from context to context, from practice to practice, or from one stage of a practice to the next' (Iedema 2003, 41). The question I address is how the signification of signs referring to Twelver Shiite objects, practices, and stories are transformed

when transferred into the context of the post-electoral protest movement.

Here, I find it useful to work with John Connolly's distinction between the 'source' context and the 'destination' context. In the present study, the source context is the religious culture, understood here as a 'mediated heritage subjected to ongoing creative modifications' (Connolly 2014, 278), while the destination context is the post-electoral mobilization into which the signs are transferred. A broader look at image politics in modern Iran demonstrates, however, that religiously anchored signs have been moved through multiple destination contexts, including the revolution and the establishment of the Islamic Republic in 1978–'79, the war between Iran and Iraq from 1980 to 1988, and the post-war era. As these social settings preceded, as well as co-exist with the post-electoral context, the Green Movement's use of religiously anchored signs involves the recontextualization and resemiotization of both earlier and coexisting signs and significations. The situation adds new dimensions to the conceptualization of 'recontextualization' and 'resemiotization' in that signs can be recontextualized several times and that multiple interpretive grounds can coexist. Resemiotization, therefore, does not simply cause a change in a sign's signification. It creates multiple and multilayered meanings which make the sign's signification ambiguous. How may coexisting semiotic grounds combine, compete, or support each other in mobilizing the public and criticizing the authorities?

Above I have presented a situation in which signs are transferred from one source context into multiple sequential or coexisting destinations contexts, to cause transformations in the signs' significations. The opposite development is, however, also possible. In one of the posters circulated by the Green Movement, the visual programme has two possible sources, namely the visual programmes developed to narrate the story about the battle at Karbala and illustrations to the Persian epic drama 'Book of Kings', *Shah-Nameh*. How can the presence of multiple source contexts impact the signification of signs presented in a destination context like the Green Movement posters?

Another issue to consider when discussing recontextualization and resemiotization is the bearing of modality, that is, the particular mode in which a sign exists. Several protest posters depict objects that are carried or worn by people in religious rituals and devotional observances. The signification of these signs

when recontextualized in the post-electoral setting may become entangled with viewers' embodied experiences and emotional attachments connected with ritual and devotional practices, which then serve as a source context. Modality is thus another factor, in addition to context, that can create multilayered and polysemic significations of culturally shared signs. I explore this aspect by following the posters' visual signs into settings in which they are used as ritual devotional objects.

The Post-Electoral Destination Context

To comprehend how Green Movement campaigners used religiously anchored signs to mobilize protest and critique the regime it is necessary to get an understanding of the destination context. What was at stake? The Green Movement posters were created and distributed during a politically tense situation. The presidential election had drawn a high voter turnout, mobilizing 85% of the voting population (40 million). One explanation behind the high turnout was the perceived possibility for political changes. Four main candidates competed for the office: the serving president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and Mohsen Rezai, both regarded as conservatives, and Mehdi Karroubi and Mir-Hussein Mousavi, who ran on reformist platforms (Ranjbar 2017, 612–613). People's ability to exercise democratic rights is, however, limited.

Since the establishment of the Islamic Republic in 1978–'79, Iran has been a theocracy governed by a Supreme Leader who must be a high-ranking religious scholar, *marja'-e taqlid*. The position is by appointment and the leader serves for life. The Supreme Leader's power is shared with a president elected by the public, but candidates running for presidency must be approved by the Supreme Leader and the appointed Council of Experts (*Majlis-e Khobregan*). Moreover, the electoral process is supervised and controlled by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (*Pastaran-e enqelab-e islami*) under the leadership of Ayatollah Khamenei, who has served as the Supreme Leader since 1989. This structure of power sharing is founded on the ideology and institution introduced by Ayatollah Khomeini (d. 1989) called *velayat al-faqih*, which refers to the guardianship or vicegerency of the jurist consult. When the electoral results suggested Ahmadinejad had won 62.6% of the votes while the widely antici-

pated frontrunner, Mousavi, received a mere 33.7%, Mousavi as well as many Iranians suspected foul play and held the Guards responsible for undermining the electoral process (Ranjbar 2017, 609). In the days following the election in June, thousands of people began walking the streets and gathering in squares as a form of non-violent protest. Demonstrations declined in frequency and intensity in July, but on Quds Day (*Ruz Jahani Quds*), 18th September, a protest was organized at the same time as the annual staging (since 1979) of rallies to express support for the Palestinians and opposition to Israel and Zionism. Protests flared up again in December after the death and memorial service of Ayatollah Montazeri who, shortly before he died, had criticized the brutal way the regime dealt with the popular opposition, calling it un-Islamic (Sadri and Sadri 2010: 171–182). Additional protests were organized in parallel with the annual religious celebrations on 27th December, or the 10th day of Muharram, when the battle at Karbala is commemorated. Again, on 14th February 2010—the 25th day of Bahman—a protest was organized a few days after the official annual celebration of the approval in 1979 of the constitution of the new Islamic Republic of Iran (22nd day of Bahman) (Golkar 2011, 55). The last recorded protest was during the Persian New Year celebration, *nowruz*, on 28th March 2010 (Cross 2010, 174).

The Green Movement was a popular one in that it operated as a decentralized network sustained mainly by ordinary people, particularly young adults, but aimed to address the population at large. It can also be characterized as ‘ideologically elastic’, as it attracted support from people adhering to various ideologies, including Islamist reformists, liberals, socialists, and secular dissidents (Mozaffari 2010, 4). Initially, the unifying agenda was to protest against what was held to be a fraudulent presidential election, but when the protests, both off-line and on-line, received hardline reactions from the Revolutionary Guards and their policing instrument, the Basiji battalions (*Basij Mustazafin*, ‘Mobilization of the Oppressed’), additional demands were raised. These included the release of prisoners arrested in connection with the protests, and the application of the constitutional provisions related to free demonstrations and elections (ibid.). As such, the movement addressed a much deeper frustration with the authorities and their institutions and representatives.

To announce future street rallies and document street events, the activists used social media and were thus able to break the

government's monopoly on the production and broadcasting of news on televised channels, radio networks, and newspapers. Operating as an alternative news channel, the internet enabled people to report consecutively on events and confrontations with state authorities. In this situation, ordinary people acted as 'citizen journalists' (Allan and Thorsen 2009), posting information, reports, photos, and videos related to the protests on social media. Platforms like Twitter and Facebook could serve as accessible and flexible spaces for citizen journalism since, by 2009, over 70% of the population owned mobile phones (Monshipouri and Assareh 2009, 39). Like the street protests, however, the internet activism did not escape retaliations from the state authorities. In fact, Saeid Golkar has described the internet in Iran as a 'battlefield' (Golkar 2011, 57). Since 2009, the Iranian authorities have operated a cyber regime which blocks internet websites perceived as 'anti-government' and 'anti-Islamic'. Accordingly, before the elections in 2009, the control of cyber space was upgraded to curb the flow of digital information while, after the election, the regime stepped up its response to the protesters' posting of news reports by lowering bandwidth and internet connection speeds, and filtering weblog. It also began arresting cyber dissidents and people suspected of planning protest activities (Cross 2010, 175–176). The Green Movement posters were thus created and circulated in a socio-political context administered according to a governmental system whose representatives claimed to represent Islam. The system and its representatives, however, lacked the trust and support of large segments of the population due to limited political influence, lack of freedom of expression, and extensive state surveillance.

Mobilizing Political Opposition through Internet Posters

It may seem paradoxical that posters designed to engender opposition to a theocratic governance system would use religiously anchored visual language and cultural codes to unite people against the authorities. In this section I analyze the four internet posters selected for this study to discuss how signs conventionally associated with Twelver Shiite visual, material and performative culture were used to mobilize opposition and criticize the authorities.

The Colour Green and the Formation of a Counter Discourse

Not surprisingly, the colour green was the Green Movement's most consistent symbolic reference. Originally, the colour was chosen by the presidential candidate Mir Hussein Mousavi to represent his campaign, but it was soon adopted by members of the public to signal their support. At street rallies, Mousavi's supporters waved green flags and donned green shawls. The photograph in Figure 1, taken in Teheran in June 2009 and later circulated online, depicts a group of young men standing in the street (Mahootchi 2014, 18–19). In preparation for campaigning for Mousavi, one of the men is handing out pieces of green fabric which the others are placing around their necks.



Figure 1. Mousavi's supporters would wave green flags or don green shawls. Source: www.3xphoto.aminus3.com.



Figure 2. A poster depicting Imam Ali, presented in a perfume store. Photo: Ingvild Flakerud, Shiraz 2002.

In the pre-electoral context, a situation which opened a window for political change, green became a political symbol standing for social transformation and serving to identify people supporting change; perhaps this is why the colour was picked up to signify opposition in the post-electoral context. In the Iranian Twelver Shiite culture, however, green is also an established sign identified with the Prophet Muhammad and his family, the *ahl al-bayt*. Mass-produced posters depicting the Prophet and members of the *ahl al-bayt* wearing green headgear are today widespread. They can be purchased in shops and at markets and decorate private and public spaces as diverse as home settings, religious ceremonial spaces, shops, taxis and lorries, see Figure 2.

In visual narrative painting, like the story about the battle at Karbala in 680 A.D., the green headgear is also employed to identify the holy protagonists and martyrs in the battle. In the battle, the Prophet Muhammad's grandson, Husayn ibn Ali, fought against and was killed by the army of the Umayyad Caliph, Yazid ibn Muawiya ibn Abi Sufyan, and in the visual storytelling genre, green is applied to identify heroes from villains, the good from the bad, and the just from the unjust. This representative quality of the colour green has become a recognized cultural code in Twelver Shiite popular visual culture which spans more than hundred years. To give but two examples: Imam Husayn and his family members are easily recognizable from the green headgear in the wall painting from around 1905 decorating the interiors of the shrine of Imamzadeh Shah Zayd ibn Imam Ali ibn Husayn in Isfahan, see Figure 3; and the mass-pro-

duced paper poster printed in 1997 and purchased from a bazar vendor in Shiraz in 2002, see Figure 4.



Figure 3. Wall paintings from around 1905 depicting scenes from the story of the battle at Karbala in the shrine of Imamzadeh Shah Zayd ibn Ali ibn al-Husayn. Photo: Ingvild Flaskerud, Esfahan 2012.



Figure 4. A poster depicting the battle at Karbala. Photo: Ingvild Flaskerud.

It cannot be established with certainty whether traditional Twelver Shiite visual codes and practices serve as a source context for the Green Movement's use of the colour, but the co-existence of the two signifying contexts—the protest movement and the mediated sacred history—makes green a multilayered and polyvalent sign, and therefore discursively ambiguous. Socially, it takes on a polysemic quality in that it points to various categories of people, that is, contemporary protesters and historical sacred heroes. In both cases, however, green identifies people who stand up for what they hold to be right. Thus, conceptually, green operates as a monosemic sign, signifying morally righteous opposition. If we perceive the electoral protest context to function as an interpretive 'primary ground', and the religious culturally coded system to operate as a 'secondary ground' against which the post-electoral context is evaluated and interpreted, the Green Movement activists can be identified with the heroes at Karbala and other members of the *ahl al-bayt*.

In addition to colour, the practice of wearing green shawls can operate as a cultural code. In wearing green shawls, the activists, deliberately or not, imitate practices associated with Karbala commemorative rituals. Sometimes participants in ritual parades put on green shawls, see Figure 5, and it is common to decorate ritual experts, like eulogists and storytellers, in green shawls to honour them for their eloquence and service to the community, see Figure 6.



Figure 5. Boys wearing green shawls in parades during Muharram.
Photo: Ingvild Flaskerud, Shiraz 2002.



Figure 6. A ritual leader wearing a green shawl at a ceremony commemorating the battle at Karbala. Photo: Ingvild Flakerud, Shiraz 2002.

Regardless of the protesters' intentions, when structured into this order of signification, the possible alignment of the three coexisting signifying grounds makes the colour green a potent sign in the formation of a counter discourse. The identification between post-electoral protests and historical holy figures who stood up for 'what is right' and contemporary people who keep this memory alive is important to the formation of a counter discourse under a theocratic governance system as it gives legitimacy to the protest movement. The colour green as a cultural code is employed to position the protesters and the movement and question the system of governance.

In the next section, I discuss how the aspect of identification is also an important feature in the posters' mobilizing potential, one related to the posters' capacity for connecting with viewers lived experiences and practices.

The Mobilizing Potential of Cultural Objects and Embodied Practices

The poster in Figure 7 depicts a Muharram ritual standard, *alam*, which is drawn like a black silhouette in the shape of a crest with finials in the form of hands against a green background (Mahootchi 2014, 38). The text notes that on 26th and 27th December (2009) in the streets of Iran, the Green Movement will organize the event 'Ya Hussein, Mir Hussein'.

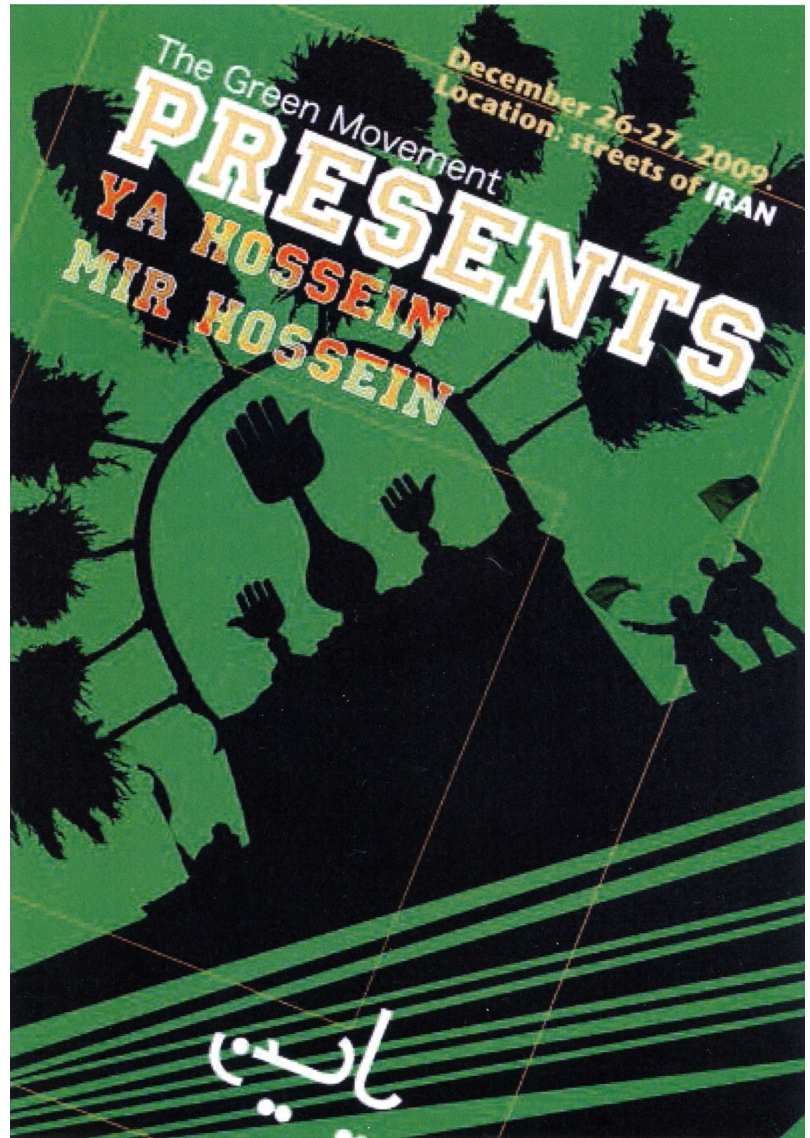


Figure 7. Alam poster.
Source: <http://www.design4democracy.worldpress.com>.



Figure 8. Alam paraded in a Muharram procession.
Photo: Ingvild Flaskerud, Shiraz, 2002.

Ritual standards made of a metalwork crest displayed on a supporting pole are well known to the Iran public as they form part of the historical and contemporary ritual paraphernalia used in Muharram processions, see Figure 8.

The annual rituals commemorating the battle at Karbala run from the first day of Muharram and reach a peak on the tenth, *ashura*, which is a national holiday in Iran. Processions of mourners parade the streets to lament the killing of Husayn, his family members, and his supporters. Elegies are performed by multiple male chanters and broadcast through wheeled loud-speakers, while the marching mourners carry flags and standards, and some perform moderate forms of self-flagellation, *sineh-zani* and *zanjir zani*. Along the routes, the streets are packed with onlookers. As public spaces become steeped in sensations blending feelings of grief and festivity, of nationalistic pride and spiritual sentiments, Muharram is a nation-wide event nobody can escape noticing. A major Karbala symbol, processional standards are decorated with calligraphy, portraits of the *ahl al-bayt*, feathers, and ex-votos (*nazr, dakhil*) in the shape of colourful fabrics. The standards represent Imam Husayn and his party of followers, in particular Husayn's half-brother Abu al-Fazl al-Abbas, who was his standard-bearer, *alamdar-e Husayn*. It is held that the young men carrying the processional standards follow in his footsteps and express the carriers' readiness to react to injustice. This idea may serve as a source context for the poster's message. The text, however, explicitly establishes a connection between Imam Husayn and Mir-Hussein Mousavi. The drawing of the standard could therefore also be intended to indicate that Mir-Hussein Mousavi and his supporters act as Husayn's standard bearers.

The significance of the standard in the poster is thus entangled with the viewers' embodied and emotive experiences, including those of the weight of its heaviness and the sensation of proximity to holy characters like Imam Husayn and Abu al-Fazl. Because of the standards' weight, several men alternate in carrying them and the toil they suffer is perceived to be rewarded with divine blessing, *barakat*. The standard itself, moreover, is held to transmit blessings which is mediated by the ex-votos embellishing it. From time to time, standard bearers swing the standard around to let people pass under it to be touched by the ex-votive fabrics decorating it and receive the blessings and protection they transfer. Many viewers, therefore, have intimate

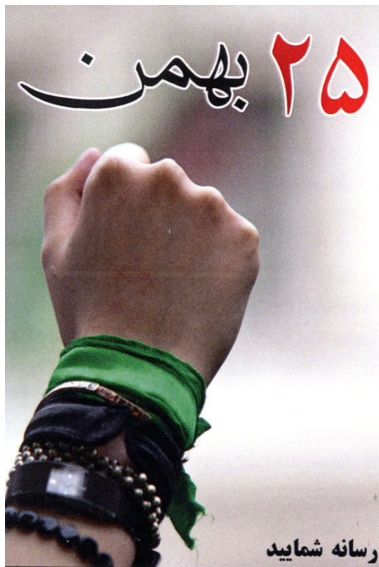


Figure 9. A poster showing a photograph of a raised clenched fist wrapped in green and black wrist ribbons. Source: Iman Navabi official website, <http://imannabavi.com>

knowledge of, and experience with the standards' material modality. This may impact their perception of the message in the protest poster. The abstraction of the illustrated standard, leading to its becoming an incitement for mobilization may thus be related to the public's corporal and spiritual experiences with ritual standards paraded in the streets. Here, the ritual object's modality as well as the shared emotive and pragmatic aspects of the Iranian public come into play in the signs' mobilizing capacity.

Another example of how the mobilizing potential of Green Movement posters relies on making viewers identify with practices and sentiments in their own life can be found in a poster depicting a raised clenched fist wrapped in green and black ribbons, see Figure 9. The text in the poster announces that a protest will take place on 25th Bahman (i.e., 14th February 2010) and declares, "You are the Medium". In my reading, the linguistic message seeks to mobilize people to take to the streets on a given date. But what is the mobilizing potential of the raised fist wrapped in green and black ribbons?

The raised clenched fist is a sign of opposition known from protest movements all over the world. More specifically, anyone with a living memory of the Iranian revolution in 1978–'79 will remember how, to express discontent with the Shah and his regime, people took to the streets and protested by raising their fists. Photographs depicting the scenes were circulated to mobilize the anti-Shah movement (Chelkowski and Dabashi 1999, 71, 102, 103). During the early years of the Islamic Republic, the fist continued to appear in posters propagating the new ideologized interpretation of Islam, encouraging citizens to support the building of a new society and to denounce Western values (Abrahamian 1993; Chelkowski and Dabashi 1999). To large segments of the Iranian population the fist is thus associated with anti-regime mobilization as well as with support of a new social order.

The green and black wrist bands, on the other hand, are conventional expressions of 'popular' devotion, by which I mean non-prescribed practices which somehow connect to some form of belief. It is not uncommon to observe Twelver Shiites, in Iran and elsewhere, carrying green or black bands around the wrist, see Figure 10.

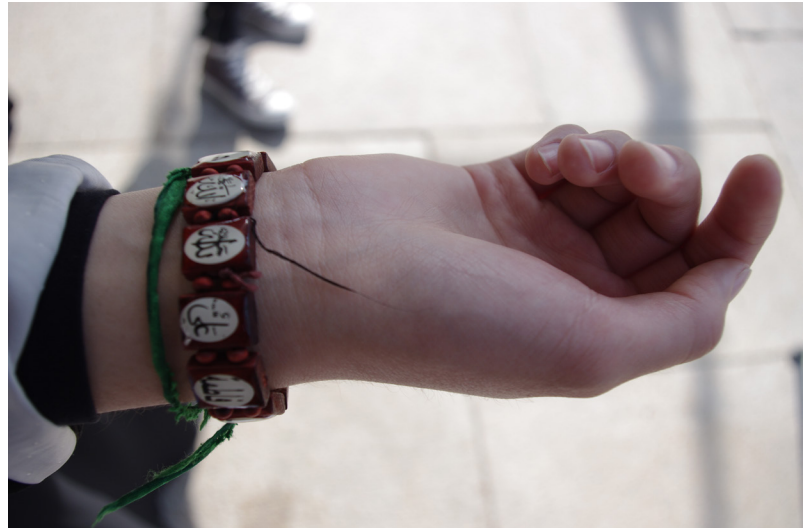


Figure 10. A photograph of a woman wearing green or black bands around the wrist. Photo: Ingvild Flaskerud, Oslo 2012.

The green wrist ribbons are cut from pieces of fabrics which have been rubbed on sarcophaguses belonging to the Imams and their descendants, the Imamzadehs. Upon returning home, the fabrics, now held to carry divine blessing and protection, are divided and shared among people (Flaskerud 2018, 48). When tied around the wrist, the ribbon serves to make one safe from bad events, a practice called *bala-gardan* (Persian: warding off or averting evil). The ribbon can also be an expression of the carrier's spiritual attachment to, and affection for the holy martyr from whom protection supposedly radiates. The black band refers to the culturally established way of expressing mourning. People wear black to express grief after the loss of dear ones, while black fabrics are central paraphernalia during the annual rituals in Muharram (Flaskerud 2010). Black is thus associated with loss, mourning, and commemoration. In fact, this was not the first time the protesters combined green and black colours to oppose the authorities. In the days following the election on 12th June, the authorities responded to university students' non-violent demonstrations with dormitory raids and detentions. In a march labelled the 'Green Wave in Black Silence', staged on 18th June, participants donned green and black clothing to protest and commemorate the lives lost since the election.

The protest poster depicting a fist thus combines signs circulating in various social contexts and addresses the public as an interpretive, pragmatic, and emotive community. In recontextualizing and rearranging signs and practices, the poster con-

nects a global visual rhetoric of political opposition and support for change (the fist), with the Green Movement's own signature of protest (the colour green), which is linked to culturally developed notions and personal practices of seeking divine protection (the green wrist band), and cultural expressions of commemoration (the black wrist band). These multiple and coexisting grounds of signification connect the fist wrapped in green and black ribbons to viewers' personal lives, including their values, sentiments, practices, and experiences. Thus, the poster's mobilizing potential profits from its appeal to shared cultural codes as well as its ability to make viewers identify with the objects and practices referred to in the poster.

From the Streets of Teheran to the Plains of Karbala

The protest event announced in the poster depicting a standard (Figure 9) was one of the last public protests organized against the electoral results. The event resulted in severe clashes in Teheran between protesters and the Basiji militia. The day was later labelled 'Bloody Ashura', referring to the tenth day of Muharram when Imam Husayn was killed. Soon after, activists published a poster showing a central panel presenting five photographs documenting clashes between protesters and the Basij battalions, see Figure 11. The photographs are vertically organized to look like a film scroll and originate from an amateur video captured by someone's mobile phone camera (Mahootchi 2014, 34). The four upper photographs depict the turmoil of clashes between protesters and paramilitary groups, giving panned views from urban streets with pick-up trucks, smoke, and people running. The bottom image is a close-up, showing a young protester lying in the street. It is unclear whether it is a man or a woman because the face is smeared with blood. Next to the wounded youth sits a woman bending her head over the protester. Her face is not visible, but the viewer can recognize her headcover, *maqna*, which is worn like a hood to effectively conceal a woman's hair. The garment has been part of girls' school uniforms and women's work uniforms since 1979 and is upheld by the authorities as one of the Islamic state's most powerful symbols.

The scene in the close-up image reflects pictorial models developed in Karbala commemorative visual culture and resonates with an iconic cultural representation of the unjust killing of a

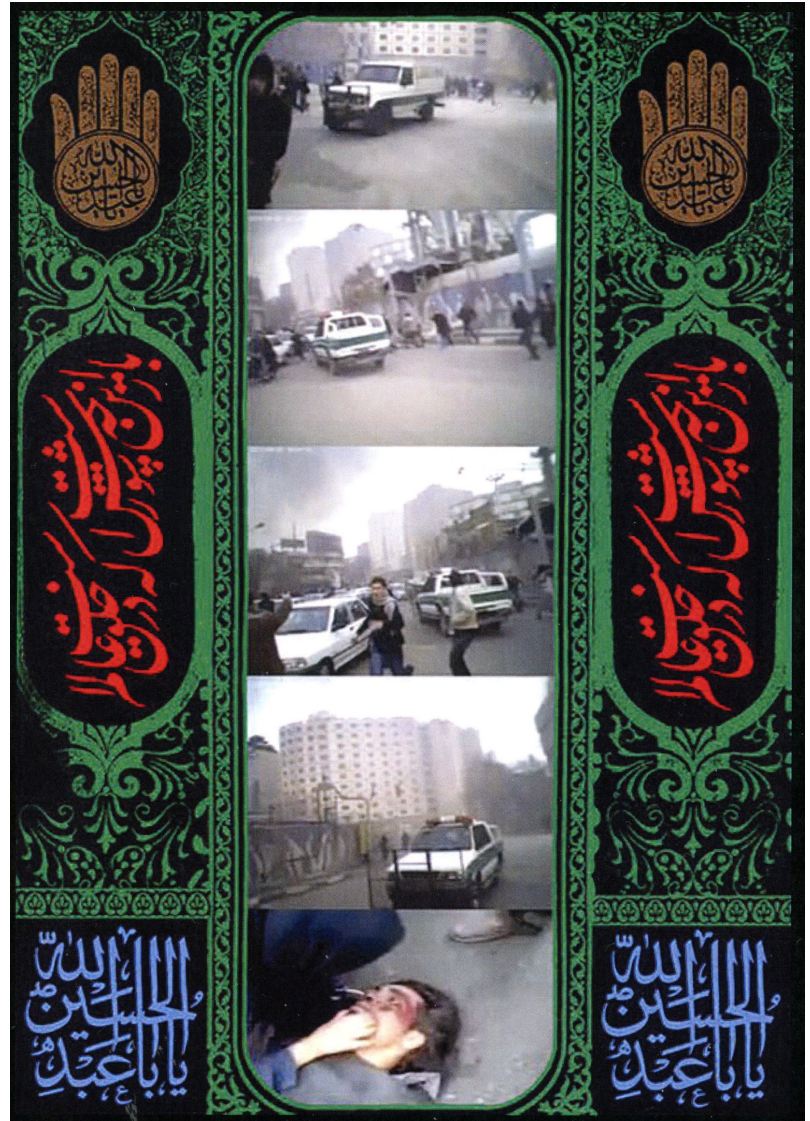


Figure 11. Designed by Osiaan Art Group. Source: Osiaan Art Group, Facebook page October 2011.

youth whose death is associated with martyrdom. An example can be seen in the poster in Figure 4, which depicts Imam Husayn's son Ali Akbar lying wounded on the ground with his back supported by Husayn, who is kneeling behind his son. Husayn is holding his right hand to his own forehead, an indication of grief. Scattered behind them lie fallen horses, shields, swords, and spears, paying witness to the turmoil of the battle. To the right stand countless numbers of soldiers merging into an infinite crowd representing the army of the antagonist Caliph Yazid.⁶² The scene is well-known to the Iranian public as posters depicting episodes from the battle are commonly on display during Muharram and used as didactical tools, mnemonic

devices, and emotive stimuli to engender grief in viewers during the rituals of mourning (Flakerud 2010). If we assume conventional Karbala pictorial models serve as a source context for the poster's design, the battle at Karbala is presented as a framework for interpreting the clashes in the streets of Teheran. In fact, as Elizabeth Rauh has demonstrated, in a drawing posted during the protests, a scene depicting a protester being beaten by the police is inserted in a visual Karbala narrative model known since the nineteenth century (Rauh 2013, 1337).

The poster in Figure 11, by referring to a culturally established template which commemorates the battle as a great tragedy, addresses the Iranian public as an emotive and pragmatic community. The photographs are framed by two identical black calligraphic bands presenting texts and signs from the Twelver Shia visual and verbal elegiac repertoire. At the top of each band is inserted a sign known as the 'Hand of Abu al-Fazl', *dast-e Abu al-Fazl*, and on the inside of the palm is written a greeting: *Allah, ya Ibn Abd al-Husayn*. The greeting is repeated at the bottom of the band. A text in red below the hand reads: 'Again, what is this revolt among the creatures of the world? Again, what is?' (*Baz in che shuresh ast keh dar khalq-e alam ast. Baz in che.*) The incomplete passage can be recognised as part of the first line from the twelve-stanza elegy, *tarkib-band*, composed by the famous Safavid court poet, Muhtasham Kashani (d. 1587), to mourn and honour the martyrdom of Imam Husayn. The elegy remains one of the masterpieces of Persian literature and, in its oral form, the poem has become standard fare in Muharram ceremonies. Today, the first one or two lines of the poem often appear on wall hangings decorating ritual locations and home set-

2. A text explains: 'Effigy of his Honourable Ali Akbar, Peace be upon him. At the time when he became a martyr on ashura, in the lap of his great father, his Honourable Aba Abd Allah al-Husayn. Peace be upon him.' (Timthal hezrat Ali Akbar, alayhu al-salam, hengam shahadat ruz Ashura der daman pedar buzurgvar Khoda, hezrat Aba Abd Allah al-Husayn, alayhu al-salam).



Figure 12. A wall hanging (*parcham*) referring to the first lines of Kashani's elegy. Photo: Ingvild Flakerud, Shiraz, 2000.



Figure 13. A wall hanging presenting parts of Kashani's elegy decorating the shrine Imamzadeh Zayd in Muharram. Photo: Ingvild Flakerud, Teheran, 1999.

tings during mourning assemblies, see Figure 11. Sometimes wall hangings present longer passages from the poem, see Figure 12.

The brief reference to Kashani's poem in the poster indicates that the designer expects the viewers to know the poem and fill in the rest, or at least to identify the text as introducing a Karbala elegy and recognize its emotive ambience. As the citizen journalistic documentation of clashes in the streets between protesters and paramilitary groups refer to the martyrs of the battle at Karbala, framed by conventional Karbala articulations of grief, the poster provides narrative content as well as emotive modality for people to reflect on the situation and shape their conceptualization of it.

Comparing how the fate and body of modern martyrs are represented in murals appearing in Teheran between 1997 to 2009, Ulrich Marzolph detects a development in the visual language that is relevant to the present discussion about recontextualization and resemiotization. Around 2008, the realistic and often gruesome martyr portraits are gradually replaced by an abstract, symbolic language in which a rose indicates martyrdom, and a white dove and butterflies symbolize the martyr's soul in heaven (Marzolph 2013, 166). This is an old symbolic language commonly used to commemorate past events and heroes—like the battle at Karbala and its martyrs—which often appears in ritual commemorative practices. Nevertheless, when transferred to a new context, Marzolph suggests, this older abstract language is capable of retaining the graphic murals' propagated concepts of martyrdom. However, the abstract character also seems to contribute to expanding the new murals' horizon of signification in that its depersonalized character makes the signs very 'suitable for promoting the past as the foundation of identity' and 'perpetuating the martyrs' lives and ideals into the future' (Marzolph 2013, 172–173). There is thus a recontextualization of older, abstract signs into modern martyr murals in which the old signs still refer to significations associated with the source context and relate to martyrdom and redemptive award. In the destination context, however, the reference, the martyr, shifts from the holy heroes of Karbala to contemporary citizens supporting the Islamic Republic. The Bloody Ashura poster presents a similar method, but by changing the destination context, the martyr is associated with the Green Movement.

The visual and verbal descriptions of modern martyrs are, Marzolph suggests, evidence of the 'popularisation of martyr-

dom as a constitutive element of the Shiite creed in today's Iranian interpretation' (Marzolph 2003, 96). In its combination of signs referring to established cultural codes and current events, the Bloody Ashura poster, I suggest, operates in discursive and non-discursive ways to challenge the co-existing politicized conceptualization of martyrdom in modern Iran, and the authorities' appropriation of the Karbala event in its ideological project. Two important tropes in the official ideological project are the 'battle at Karbala' and the 'martyr'. One of Imam Husayn's epithets is *Sayyid al-Shuhada*, often translated as The Prince of Martyrs. Today Husayn's death is interpreted as an 'active' martyrdom, that is, as fighting and dying while trying to reestablish a just society, following in the footsteps of his father Imam Ali and grandfather, the Prophet Muhammad. In the build-up to the revolution in 1978–'79, the expression 'Every place is Karbala, every month is Muharram, and every day is Ashura' was turned into a popular slogan and Muharram processions transformed into powerful modes of public mobilization. Accordingly, in parallel with the martyrs at Karbala, demonstrators killed by the Shah's troops were designated 'martyrs' (Chelkowski and Dabashi 1999). After the establishment of the Islamic Republic, martyrdom continued to be glorified, now connected to the protection of Islam and, by association, the Islamic Republic. The conceptualization of martyrdom was again modified during the Iran-Iraq war to incorporate sacrifices endured to secure the survival of the nation. Now facing an external enemy, the war was conceived of as a cosmic battle between good and evil, resonating with the battle at Karbala, while martyrdom was developed as a dominant theme to recruit soldiers, to honour fallen combatants, and to console their mourners. In this context, martyrs were defined as those who had given their lives to defend the country and, by extension, its ideological and political system, while their self-sacrifices were connected to the eschatological promise of redemption. In the post-war era, the martyrdom theme has been developed to serve as an important supplement to the Karbala theme in promoting the authorities' ideological position and the state's identity. In this context, the conceptualization of martyrdom is given a wider interpretation, in that any person whose violent death can be linked to the service of the Islamic Republic, no matter the task, is regarded as a martyr.

A central institution in defining the modern conceptualization of martyrdom as a religio-ideological-national protective

sacrifice is the Foundation of Martyrs, *Bunyard-i Shahid*, established in 1980. In the multimodal visual propagation supervised by the Foundation of Martyrs, fallen soldiers are described with references to Islam, specifically emphasizing their heroic sacrifices and the promise of a rewarding afterlife. Assigned with the authority to issue martyr certificates on behalf of the state, the foundation decides who qualifies as a martyr. It also supervises the public visual representation of martyrdom and has been instrumental in the shaping of a 'culture of martyrdom', *farhang-i shahadat* (Gruber 2012, 71–72), promoted through educational institutions, art festivals, and book exhibitions (Saeidi 2004), martyr museums and graveyards (Gruber 2012, Shirazi 2012), books and magazines, films and documentaries. The presence of modern martyrs in public spaces is inescapable as major streets, schools, and hospitals are named after post-revolutionary martyrs, and memorials appear as billboards, mural paintings, graffiti, banners, and posters (Marzolph 2003, 2013; Gruber 2008, 2009; Bombardier 2012; Fromanger 2012, Talebi 2012), see Figures 14 and 15. Martyrs are also made physically present as



Figure 14. A major street in Shiraz lined with posters of fallen soldier martyrs from the Iran-Iraq war. Photo: Ingvild Flaskerud, Shiraz 2014.



Figure 15. A billboard in the city centre presenting portraits of fallen soldier martyrs from the Iran-Iraq war. Photo: Ingvild Flaskerud, Shiraz 2014.

coffins, allegedly containing the remains of unrecognizable martyrs, *shahidane-gomnam*, of the Iran-Iraq war (Talebi 2012, 121), are paraded through urban streets in military motorcades before being buried at designated sites around the country.

However, as Fromanger has argued, it would be reductionist to perceive the martyrdom culture as merely staged by the authorities (Fromanger 2012, 52). The effects of the revolution and the war with Iraq were deeply felt by the population, with many families losing one or more members. In fact, the first representations of martyr memorials were the result of private initiatives and the many martyrs' cemeteries and museums, carefully designed from media-specific ideological perspectives, are also important spaces for personal grieving and solace (Fromanger 2012; Shirazi 2012; Talebi 2012). Martyrdom in modern Iran is thus highly politicized as well as deeply personal. The Bloody Ashura poster speaks to both and herein lies the potential for challenging the officially politicized understanding of martyrdom.

The Revolutionary Guards and the Basiji, in particular, have embraced the modern conceptualization of martyrdom. Basijis often call themselves 'martyrdom-lovers' (*ashiqan-e shahadat*) (Moin 1999, 249–250), and in the early 1990s, the Revolutionary Guards established a sub-organization of the Basiji which specialized in anti-riot tactics to combat domestic unrest called 'Ashura Brigades' (Menashri 2001, 122). The Bloody Ashura poster depicting a youth injured after clashes with paramilitary forces contests such self-perceptions of the Basiji and Revolution-

ary Guards, whose retaliations were encountered by the post-electoral protesters both in the streets and on the internet. In fact, the movement's contestation of the authorities' hegemonic understanding of who qualifies as a martyr was made explicit from the very beginning when a young woman named Neda Aghasoltan was shot and died during demonstrations on the day of the presidential elections. The movement, headed by Mir-Hussein Mousavi, announced her to be the first martyr of the resistance movement. Referring to Neda as a martyr, Shirazi concludes, spread a 'divinely ordained, religious mantle over the entirely political uprising' (Shirazi 2012, 114).

In depicting a civilian wounded by the regime's paramilitary supporters in a style that imitates a Karbala narrative, the Bloody Ashura poster can also be seen as directed at the re-elected president, Ahmadinejad. For his 2005 presidential election campaign he adopted as his key slogan 'Islam without justice is not Islam' (*Islam bedun-e 'adalat Islam nist*) (Monshipouri and Dorraj 2021, 207). The allusion to 'justice' may have a dual reference. The slogan could refer to Ahmadinejad's vision for his social politics and his appeal to the economically underprivileged and unemployed with promises of financial improvements. Implied in the slogan is a critique of the reformists, whom he portrayed as corrupt and responsible for growing economic inequality. Embedded in the slogan is thus the casting of Ahmadinejad as 'just' and, as such, representing Islam. The slogan, moreover, connects with the ethos of the Revolution.

In his critique of the Shah's politics, Khomeini developed a rhetoric based on notions of the 'underclass' and 'disinherited' and frequently addressed the people as 'the oppressed of Iran', *mazlum-e Iran* (Sreberny-Mohammadi and Mohammadi 1994, 106). A *mazlum* is someone who has been ill-treated and the concept has been central to the development of the Twelver Shi'ite identity. Following the Twelver Shi'ite understanding of history, Imam Ali, deprived of his right to succeed the Prophet Muhammad as the leader of the Muslim community, and Imam Husayn, killed at the battle of Karbala, archetypically epitomize the *mazlum* as wronged individuals. *Mazlum*, however, also refers to someone who is humble and considerate of others (Dabashi 2008, 302). In the Twelver Shi'ite collective memory, Imam Ali is remembered as identifying with the poor and needy in society and, thus, as a considerate and just ruler, a dualism exploited by Khomeini. In the pre-revolutionary build-up, he cast him-

self as a defender of the oppressed, while after the revolution he argued that the candidates best suited to secure the protection of the *mazlum* under a just governance would be Islamic jurisprudence experts operating under the rule of the *velayat-e faqih*. About thirty years after the revolution, Ahmadinejad, although a lay person, inscribes himself in the modern version of the archetypical narrative of the ‘just ruler’. The photographs presented in the Bloody Ashura poster depicting the authorities’ violent responses to non-violent opposition can be interpreted as questioning both the official and Ahmadinejad’s understanding of ‘justice’. The poster thus connects visually, conceptually, and emotionally to co-existing religious and political discourses in modern Iran.

The photograph of the wounded youth in the Bloody Ashura poster has, however, a second possible source context, namely the illustrations to the Persian epic drama ‘Book of Kings’, *Shah-Nameh*, composed by Abu al-Qasem Ferdowsi (d. ca.1020). Chelkowski has drawn attention to the iconographic resemblance between paintings representing Imam Husayn mourning his dying son Ali Akbar and those illustrating Ferdowsi’s story of the famous hero Rostam comforting his dying son Sohrab (Chelkowski 1989, 109). The resemblance is not surprising since both visual programmes were developed by coffeehouse painters, *naqqashi qahveh-khaneh*, in the nineteenth century, when coffeehouses often served as ateliers for the Karbala *pardeh* painters (painting on canvas) (Bulookbashi 1996, 104). For two modern visual renderings of the scenes, compare Figures 4 and 16.



Figure 16. *Qahveh-khaneh* painting depicting Rostam sitting by his son Sohrab, whom he has fatally wounded. Tehran 2012. Photo: Ingvild Flaskerud.

Shah-Nameh is counted among the works referred to as *adab* literature which invites people to improve their character and engage in ethical reflection on how to act in order to be wise and do what is just (Mahallati 2015). This body of literature includes various literary genes like the Qur'an, Sufi poetry, parables, and secular and religious stories (Ormsby 2010, 53–78; Sajoo 2010, 1–30; Alshaa 2017). The three best known stories in *Shah-Nameh* involve the death of sons as the result of their fathers' actions, thus casting the offsprings as the innocent parties. The most famous character is Rostam, the Persian king's most renowned champion, who meets his son Sohrab on the battlefield. Never having met before, Rostam fails to recognize his son, and Sohrab is fatally wounded by his father (Ferdowsi 2007, 186–214). Rostam then recognizes his son due to the clasp the young man wears on his upper arm. Ferdowsi's literary rendering of Rostam's grief when he sits by his dying son states, 'Violently he wept and tore his hair and heaped dust on his head' (Ferdowsi 2007, 210). The son replied, 'I tried in every way to guide you, but no love of yours responded' (Ferdowsi 2007, 210).

The combination of signs from two source contexts into one destination context enlarges the culturally available interpretive frame for understanding the image depicting the clashes in the streets of Teheran. The similarities in the visual renderings of the wounded youth in the streets of Teheran, the fatally wounded son of Imam Husayn in the historical battle at Karbala, and the young combatant in the national epic drama, may invite comparisons to be made between the destiny of the three. Perhaps all three can be conceptualized as *mazlum*, wronged individuals. However, if we perceive the stories about Ali Akbar and Sohrab as source contexts for the interpretation of the Bloody Ashura poster, there is also an important difference to consider. Ali Akbar was killed when standing up to what was perceived to be an illegitimate regime while Sohrab was killed by his father, a figure who is supposed to offer protection. In thus turning the attention towards the offender, one could argue that Iranian youths, like Ali Akbar, are killed by illegitimate authorities, and like Sohrab, are forsaken by those who should offer protection. There are, most likely, many other possible interpretations to be drawn. What is important is that the photograph's discursive field is expanded to not simply function as documentation of one event, but to invite comparison and evaluation between events. As such, the Bloody Ashura poster also addresses

the Iranian public as a pragmatic community experienced in the ethical examination and interpretation of the *adab* literature.

The resemiotization of Twelver Shiite Visual, Material, and Performative Culture in Mobilizing Protest

The central question that has been examined in this article is how references to signs conventionally associated with Twelver Shiite visual, material and performative culture can mobilize political opposition against authorities who claim to act as guardians of a society based on the Twelver Shiite creed. The question addresses two issues, the semiotic and the social, and how they influence each other in the process of mobilizing protest. The Green Movement activists' reference to well-established signs and practices seems to confirm Hall's suggestion that 'members of the same culture share sets of concepts, images and ideas which enable them to think and feel about the world' (Hall 2002, 4). However, the movement's use of shared signs to mobilize protest against the authorities contradicts the concluding part of his argument, 'and thus to interpret the world in roughly similar ways' (ibid.). This raises some questions regarding the polysemic, semantically versatile, and even contrastive potential of otherwise shared cultural signs.

The posters' potential for mobilizing protests and presenting critique, I suggest, lies in the polysemic and ambiguous signification of the signs, which has accumulated through multiple instances of discursive recontextualization and resemiotization to create multiple and multilayered meanings. The recontextualization of signs referring to Twelver Shiite objects, practices, and stories in the post-electoral context of protest, places already established and shared significations on new interpretive ground that shapes the signs' resemiotization. But for the signs to function as mobilizing tools and expressions of critique, the viewers must be able to connect the signs' source and destination contexts. Here, the electoral protest destination context functions as an interpretive 'primary ground', and the religious and culturally coded systems operate as coexisting 'secondary ground' against which the post-electoral context is evaluated and interpreted. The mobilizing power of this interpretive structure is that the Green Movement activists can be identified with the he-

roes and/or victims at Karbala who stood up for ‘what is right’, the young heroes and/or victims of *Shah Nameh* killed by their guardians, and contemporary people, thereby challenging the coexisting official interpretation of the battle at Karbala, martyrdom, and legitimate governance.

The resemiotization of the objects and practices presented in the posters is also reliant on the viewers’ pragmatic and emotional experiences. Ever since Twelver Shiism was made the official religious creed in Iran in 1501 A.D., the public has been exposed to and participated in religious visual storytelling conveyed through theatre (*tazieh*) (Rahimi 2012), painting on canvas (*pardeh*) (Chelkowski 1979, 1989; Peterson 1981; Bulookbashi 1996), tile paintings (*kashi-kari*) (Mousavi 2018), lithographed books (Marzolph 2001), wall hangings (*parcham*), posters (Flakerud 2010), and films (Aghaie 2004). Important to this tradition of visual communication is the creation of signs assigned specific and stable denotational meanings which are then recontextualized into multiple social and political settings. While images, flags, banners (*parcham*), and standards (*alam*) are paraded in government-supervised public processions and public halls (Chelkowski 1986), they also decorate ritual venues in peoples’ homes where they are used to afford the individual and the community powerful settings for worship and devotion (Flakerud 2005, 2010). Here the objects function to stimulate deeply personal emotions and experiences of the sacred, to produce collective ritualized expressions of mourning, and create favourable liturgical moods for people calling on holy intercessors to ask for divine help and protection. Today, collectively shared, religiously anchored signs, objects, and practices thus coexist in ideologized, authority-controlled social contexts, in ritualized devotional settings, and in personal, spiritualized situations. Each of these pragmatic contexts creates certain emotional and interpretive frames which can operate in isolation from each other or in combination to produce multilayered meanings.

The Green Movement posters profited from the culturally developed practice of transferring religiously anchored signs through multiple destination contexts, the coexistence of several interpretive grounds, and the multiple and multilayered semiotic potential attributed to each sign. The green and black wrist bands and the standards, for example, not only connect with politized and dogmatic frames of signification but refer to collectively shared and private devotional practices and emo-

tional experiences. When the signs connect with viewers' own actions and subjective experiences, sometimes of the sacred, this creates an interpretive ground which may compete with hegemonic patterns of signification. Pragmatic and emotional aspects of the religiously anchored signs may, therefore, be just as important as discursive aspects in mobilizing protest and expressing critique. Thus, resemiotization depends not merely on the signs' recontextualization but also on their multimodality and the intersemiotic translations between the various modalities, such as visual rhetorical signs like posters and material objects like standards. The situation permits what O'Halloran et al. describe as 'semantic expansions that extend beyond those possible with one resource alone' (O'Halloran et al. 2016, 205).

Similarly, the Bloody Ashura poster is an example of resemiotization based on the signs' multimodality, presenting photographic images from street protest as a form of citizen journalism which is organized to connect with Karbala visual narratives as a form of liturgical object, framed by visual and verbal elegiac expressions from ritual culture. At the same time, this poster offers a semantic expansions that extend beyond one source context, the battle at Karbala, to include a second source context, namely stories from *Shah-Nameh*, the national epic drama. In challenging the authorities' hegemonic interpretation and their legitimacy, the protest posters function as abstractions, a suggestion inspired by Sussane Langer, who has conceptualized symbols as 'any device whereby we are able to make an abstraction' (Langer 1953, x). With the Karbala event and the story about Sohrab lingering in the background as secondary interpretive frames, the Bloody Ashura poster can be interpreted as posing questions frequently addressed in the *adab* literature: 'What is justice?' 'Who represents justice?' As such, the Green Movement posters shape a counter public in the sense of creating parallel discursive arenas wherein activists can formulate and circulate interpretations of collectively shared signs which challenge the authorities' interpretations.

The Green Movement posters thus participate in a visual political discourse where signs associated with Twelver Shiite visual, material and performative culture have been used in the past to generate support for the Safavid Shahs' Shiification of Iran and to critique the Pahlavi Shahs' regime, and in the present to express support for the Islamic Republic of Iran as well as to critique the Republic's authorities. The posters were able to present

a critique of the electoral results and the authorities by continuing to inspire a resemiotization of the signs. The resemiotization was based on the identification between the protesters and members of the Prophet's family and with famous characters from the national epic drama, the appeal to the public as an interpretive, emotive, and pragmatic community, and to the viewers' experiences, values, emotions, and practices.

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Thomas Brandt Fibiger

Religion på museer i de arabiske Golf-stater – islam og universalisme¹

Keywords: Museer – de arabiske Golf-stater – religion - globalisering – universalisme

Abstract This article focuses on how religion is exhibited in new museums in the Arab Gulf states. The article focuses in particular on the Louvre Abu Dhabi, a branch of the Louvre Paris, which opened in 2017 with the ambition of being a ‘universal’ museum that, among other things, makes religion central to the history of civilizations and innovatively, both in the Gulf but also in general, exhibits different religions side by side. In recent years, a number of new, large museums have been built in the Arab Gulf states – and more are on the way. The Louvre is part of Abu Dhabi’s launch of several different museums on Saadiyat Island, and Qatar is known for its Museum of Islamic Art (MIA) and a spectacular National Museum. The article also shows how these new museums further develop a museum tradition which was founded in the first years of the Gulf states as independent states, among other things with great involvement from archeology and anthropology in Aarhus.

En række nye, imponante museer er de seneste år blevet bygget i de arabiske Golf-stater. I særdeleshed er den nyanlagte “kultur-ø” Jazirat Saadiyat (ar.: Lykke-øen) i Abu Dhabi et centrum for disse initiativer, hvor Louvre Abu Dhabi åbnede i 2017, Guggenheim Abu Dhabi er undervejs samt også et nyt nationalmuseum for Emiraterne, et naturhistorisk museum med mere (herunder

1. Jeg takker Det Danske Institut i Damaskus for en rejsebevilling, der muliggjorde besøg på museer i Emiraterne og Qatar, præsentation af projektet på MESA-konferencen i Montreal 2023 samt en workshop i Aarhus med Sarina Wakefield, Aisha al-Muftah, Zeinab Abdelhamed og Katrine Hedegaard Mandrup. Jeg takker disse involverede samt andre samtalepartnere i Golfen og i Danmark for gode pointer og kritik undervejs.

Thomas Brandt Fibiger er lektor i Arabisk- og islamstudier på Aarhus Universitet. Han har beskæftiget sig med de arabiske Golf-lande siden 2003 og blev PhD i antropologi på en afhandling om historieopfattelser, religion og politik i Bahrain (2010). Tidligere arbejdede han sammen med Bahrains Nationalmuseum for Moesgaard Museum, ligesom han senere har været tilknyttet Moesgaard Museums etnografiske afdeling. Aktuelt er han del af et større kollektivt forskningsprojekt om Dawoodi Bohra (ismaili) muslimer rundt om det Indiske Ocean, og har samtidig afviklet et mindre projekt om nye museer i de arabiske Golf-stater (støttet af Det Danske Institut i Damaskus), som denne artikel er et resultat af.

i øvrigt New York University Abu Dhabi). Hvor Abu Dhabi på denne måde knytter an til etablerede, internationale kulturinstitutioner, har naboemiratet Dubai på vanlig selvsikker vis præsenteret sit eget, mere alternative museum – Museum of the Future (åbnet 2022) – som i en ganske unik bygning dekoreret med arabisk poesi skrevet af Dubais emir Shaykh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum forsøger at skabe forestillinger om, hvordan fremtidens samfund, i Golfen såvel som globalt, vil se ud. I Qatar åbnede allerede i 2007 et islamisk kunstmuseum (MIA, Museum of Islamic Art), som både i sin samling, udstilling og nyindkøb kan sammenlignes med store vestlige museer som the Metropolitan Museum of Art i New York eller, i en mere lokal nordisk kontekst, Davids Samling i København – om end MIA nok har endnu større muskler end disse ældre museer. Qatar har også Mathaf (ar.: museum, 2010), et museum for moderne arabisk kunst, og i 2019 åbnede et nyt nationalmuseum i en særdeles bemærkelsesværdig og original bygning tegnet som en ørkenrose af den franske stjerne-arkitekt Jean Nouvel. Han har også tegnet Louvre i Abu Dhabi, og de øvrige nævnte museumsbyggerier er ligeledes tegnet af sådanne internationale stjernearkitekter (Guggenheim af Frank Gehry, MIA af I.M Pei).

Med udgangspunkt i et overblik over disse forskellige museer og deres betydning for det arabiske kulturlandskab vil jeg i denne artikel fokusere på den måde, religion udstilles på museerne og særligt på Louvre Abu Dhabi, som jeg i denne forbindelse finder mest nyskabende og interessant. Selvfølgelig er også islamiske museer som MIA i Qatar interessante og relevante i denne sammenhæng, men om end de udstillede genstande på MIA ligesom museumsbygningen er spektakulære og enestående, er selve udstillingsformen velkendt, nemlig en gennemgang af islamisk historie og kulturspredning gennem kunst (sådan som man fx også ser det på Davids Samling i København). Louvre præsenterer derimod en ambition om at være et 'universelt museum' og inkluderer forskellige religiøse traditioner side om side – helt konkret med religiøse genstande fra fx islam, kristendom, jødedom, hinduisme og buddhisme ved siden af hinanden. Louvres filial i Abu Dhabi er udtænkt af modernuseet i Paris, og der er særlige grunde og motivationer bag denne udstillingsform, som også er blevet kritisk behandlet i international museums litteratur (især Wakefield 2021; Grincheva 2020; Graebner 2014).

Jeg vil derfor i denne artikel, som er baseret på besøg på de forskellige nye museer i Emiraterne og Qatar samt en længere forskningsmæssig interesse i museer og kulturarv i Golf-landene, præsentere og analysere de udstillingsgreb, som Louvre Abu Dhabi har foretaget, særligt i forhold til religion. Disse vil jeg diskutere i relation til den allerede eksisterende litteratur om baggrunden for dette museum. Jeg vil dog begynde artiklen med en kort diskussion om religion og museer, som også er et forskningsfelt i udvikling, inklusive en kort præsentation af MIA samt Museum of Islamic Civilisation i Sharjah. Herefter vil jeg give baggrund til de nye museer ved at behandle museumshistorien i Golf-landene over de sidste 50-60 år, med fokus på hvordan islam er blevet præsenteret og undersøgt. Dette er i øvrigt en historie med klar forbindelse til Danmark, idet de omfattende arkæologiske kampagner og undersøgelser, som Moesgaard Museum (oprindeligt som Aarhus Museum) har foretaget i de arabiske Golf-stater siden 1950'erne, har været et væsentligt grundlag for etableringen af disse første museer i Golfen. Jeg ønsker med denne artikel at vise, hvordan denne tidlige museumshistorie har udviklet sig til, at Golfen i dag har etableret nogle af de mest toneangivende, internationale museer, som fortjener yderligere undersøgelse og diskussion, også med hensyn til den måde, islam og religion generelt bliver behandlet på museerne. Derfor slutter artiklen med sit hovedfokus på Louvre Abu Dhabi.



Figure 1. Museum of Islamic Art, Doha. Foto: Isabell Schulz/Wikimedia Commons)



Figure 2. Museum of Islamic Art, Doha. Udstillingsrum Foto: Thomas Brandt Fibiger.



Figure 3. Museum of the Future, Dubai. Foto: Thomas Brandt Fibiger.

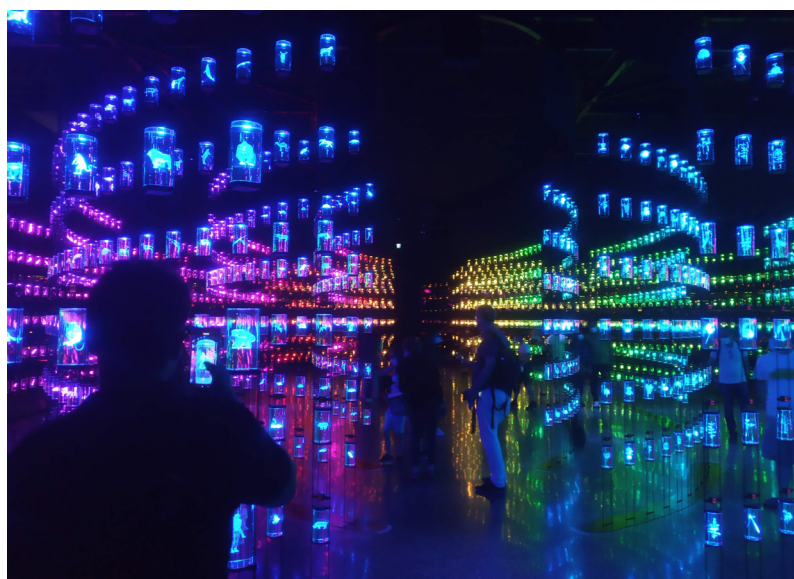


Figure 4. Museum of the Future, Dubai. Udstillingselementet "Arternes bibliotek". Foto: Thomas Brandt Fibiger

Museer og religion – i Golfen og international forskning

Religiøse genstande har altid været del af museers samlinger og udstillinger, men i de senere år har der været fornyet akademisk interesse for forholdet mellem museer og religion og for den rolle, religion spiller for og på museer (Buggeln, Paine og Plate 2017). De svenske museumsforskere Magnus Berg og Klas Grinell udgav i 2018 bogen *Musealt islam*, som fokuserede på, hvordan islam fremstilles på museer i Tyskland og England – fordi emnet har været stort set fraværende i Sverige og også i Tyskland og England ofte handler om at introducere til en 'fremmed' religion (Berg og Grinell 2018). Ligeledes har et nyligt dansk forskningsprojekt (Vejrup Nielsen og Schütze 2022), inspireret af bogen *Religion in Museums* (Buggeln et al. (2017), bl.a. påpeget, at mange museer og museumsfolk har vanskeligt ved at arbejde med religion, især hvor religion er nærværende og levende frem for fremmed og fjern i tid eller rum (Hansen 2022). Museet som universel, men måske som udgangspunkt vestlig, institution ser sig selv som sekulært forankret og kan måske nok portrættere 'andres' religion, mens det er mere udfordrende, når den religiøse tro og praksis gælder museets eget samfund og publikum. I den sammenhæng kan det være værd at overveje, hvad Talal Asad (2003) har kaldt sekularismens grundlæggende spørgsmål: "What is the proper place of religion?". For Asad handler sekularisering ikke så meget om et fravær af religion, men snarere om et politisk projekt, der tildeler religion en bestemt rolle og sfære i samfundet. For museer handler det derfor om, hvordan man vil tilgå og behandle religion. Dette gælder i vestlige såvel som i andre kontekster, herunder i islamiske kontekster som fx de arabiske Golf-stater.

I ovennævnte bog, *Religion in Museums* (Buggeln et al., 2017), fokuserer John Reeves i sit kapitel om (vestlige) museer og islam især på britiske museer som Victoria and Albert Museum og British Museum, som begge rummer faste udstillinger om islam. Men som Reeves skriver, virker det begrænset, hvilken forståelse for islam publikum får ud af disse udstillinger. For det første bruger publikum begrænset tid i sådanne udstillingsrum – på Victoria and Albert blev tiden i museets udstilling om islam i en publikumsundersøgelse målt til gennemsnitligt fire minutter (Reeves 2017: 173) – for det andet er formidlingen fokuseret på genstandenes æstetik og på en som regel fjern tid og geografi.

A modernist gallery like the British Museum's Islamic gallery is basically aesthetic, distancing, compressed, and assumes considerable knowledge to reap maximum benefit. Such galleries typically have very little overt religious content or context and are quite challenging for informal learners. (Ibid.: 174)²

Udstillinger om islam, såvel som anden religion, kommer således til at virke fjern og eksotisk – om end muligvis æstetisk og interessant – for et almindeligt publikum. Reeves, som selv har været involveret i British Museum såvel som andre museer, ser imidlertid muligheder i museernes uddannelsesprogrammer og en formidling, der bringer hverdagslige erfaringer i spil, både muslimers egne og et ikke-muslimsk publikum, som nok kender til muslimer i deres egne samfund men ikke meget til islamisk tro og historie. Som eksempel på en vellykket nyere udstilling fremhæver Reeves British Museums udstilling om Hajj (2012). Den viste den islamiske pilgrimsfærd både i et historisk og nutidigt perspektiv og med såvel fine kunstgenstande som fx *kiswa*-tæpper fra kaba'en og den yngre saudiske kunstner Ahmed Matars værk 'Magnetisme' (en magnetisk kube, der holder en masse små metalstykker (pilgrimme) både tiltrukket og på afstand) som med nutidige muslimers hverdagserfaringer i video, fortællinger og hajj-relaterede genstande (som *ihram* klædedragt). Udstillingen tiltrak et stort publikum, inklusive 47 % muslimer, som ellers generelt kun udgør 3 % i britiske museers besøgsstatistikker (ibid.: 176). Desuden inspirerede udstillingen lignende udstillinger på Institut du Monde Arabe i Paris, i Leiden i Holland samt ikke mindst på Museum of Islamic Art i Doha. De lånte alle værker fra udstillingen i London og den nyetablerede Khalili-samling, idet den britisk-iranske kunstsamler Nasser Khalilis indsamling lå til grund for denne udstilling (Porter 2012).

Hajj-udstillingen viser også, at der er gensidigt samarbejde og inspiration mellem vestlige museer og museer i den islamske verden. I den sammenhæng er det selvfølgelig interessant, hvordan museer i den islamiske verden (her mener jeg lande med muslimsk majoritet) forholder sig til islam i deres udstillinger. I Golfen er der for det første som nævnt MIA i Qatar, men også fx Museum of Islamic Civilisation i Sharjah (2008) samt flere forskellige museer og samlinger i Kuwait: Dar al-Athar al-Islamiyya, et kulturcenter, som udstiller værker fra Sheikh Nasser Al-Sabahs (1948-2020) samling af både islamisk og præ-islamisk kunsthåndværk; Tareq Rajabs private museum (1980),

2. Museets islam-udstilling blev nyopsat i 2018, efter Reeves' artikel. Han vurderer her på den tidligere udstilling.

som bl.a. har en større samling af islamiske manuskripter³ samt det nye Sheikh Abdallah Salem Cultural Centre (2018), som har et museum med fokus på islamisk videnskab i middelalderen blandt flere andre museer (se ascckw.com).

Jeg vil her fokusere på de to islamiske museer i Qatar og Sharjah (og så senere Louvre Abu Dhabi, der netop fremstiller sig selv ikke som et islamisk, men universelt museum).⁴ Hvor Museum of Islamic Art i Qatar som sagt på mange måder minder om store vestlige museers udstillinger og samlinger – om end selve værkerne lige så vel som bygningen er enestående og med en klar ambition om at sætte Qatar på det globale museumskort – er museet i Sharjah på mange måder mere lokalt. Det er indrettet i en historisk bygning, der tidligere fungerede som en stor indendørs *souq* (marked), lige ud til kysten i det centrale Sharjah, og giver en pædagogisk og historisk introduktion til islam. Det gælder fx de fem islamiske søjler med en model af ka'ba'en, men også originale og sjældne genstande som (også her) et *kiswa*-tæppe, sjældne koranmanuskripter m.m. Ligeledes er der udstillinger om arabisk kalligrafi, islam og videnskab (som i Kuwait) og musikinstrumenter fra den islamiske verden. Sharjah har i en årrække ønsket at præsentere sig som et mere konservativt, islamisk forankret og kulturelt orienteret emirat end sin nabo mod syd, Dubai, og museets lokale, islamiske forankring er et godt udtryk for det.

De to museer i Qatar og Sharjah åbnede næsten samtidig (2007 og 2008) og er begge store islamiske museer, men museet i Qatar må betegnes som ulige mere ambitiøst og som global aktør med sin nye prægnante bygning tegnet af den japanske stjernearkitekt I.M. Pei. Den kubistiske bygning, med klare referencer og elementer fra islamisk tradition, troner majestætisk på kysten ud for det centrale Doha, på inddæmmet land og omgivet af sin egen park. Men selvom bygningen er en attraktion i sig selv, er den absolut ikke museets eneste attraktion (i modsætning til det senere nationalmuseum i Doha kan man mene – se mere nedenfor). Museets islamiske samling og udstilling i 18 store sale er af høj international værdi. Museets udstillinger blev reetableret op til fodbold-VM i Qatar i 2022, og bl.a. blev der her arbejdet med at give publikum mere information om de enkelte genstandes kontekst. Der er dog stadig hovedvægt på den æstetiske fremtræden, med særlige genstande i hver sin montre eller installation i smuk og enkel belysning i mørke rum, som fremhæver de enkelte genstande.

3. Tareq Rajab (d. 2016) var bl.a. leder af Kuwaits uddannelsesministeriums afdeling for museer og antikviteter i 1960'erne og etablerede museet sammen med sin kone Jehan Rajab (d. 2015) (se <https://trmkt.org/>).

4. Et andet projekt, som fortjener opmærksomhed, er biennalen for islamisk kunst i Saudi-Arabien, som fandt sted første gang i 2023, og som er indrettet i den tidligere terminal for hajj-pilgrimme i Jiddah. Jeg har dog ikke selv haft mulighed for at besøge denne biennale, som tydeligvis har ambition om at gøre islamisk kunst til udgangspunkt for et moderne, globalt kulturtilbud, som kan sammenlignes med internationale kunst-biennaler andre steder, ikke mindst Venedig.

Museum of Islamic Art er med til at sætte Doha på det globale museums kort, som en museumsleder udtrykker det over for den amerikanske kultur- og museumsforsker Peggy Levitt i forbindelse med hendes komparative studie af museer i Singapore, Qatar, Sverige og Danmark (2015). Levitt fokuserer på Qatars Nationalmuseum, som jeg vil behandle yderligere nedenfor, sammen med de øvrige nationalmuseer i Golfen. Men MIA og nationalmuseet har den globale ambition til fælles – og deler den i øvrigt med de nye museer på Saadiyat-øen i Abu Dhabi – at disse nye museer skal være med til at fremhæve Golf-landenes rolle i en global kultur, og at de selv ikke er kulturløse men kan tilbyde væsentlige museer og kulturoplevelser for deres beboere – såvel lokale som *expats* (midlertidige) tilflyttere – samt tilrejsende turister. Det er samtidig et udtryk for 'soft diplomacy', hvor kultur (ikke mindst museer og sport) er vigtige redskaber til at få international indflydelse, også politisk og diplomatisk (ibid.: 115; se også Grincheva 2020). På den måde er MIA det første af disse 'globale' museer, som Qatars nationalmuseum og Saadiyat-museerne følger op på. De indvarsler en ny epoke i Golfens museumshistorie, som begyndte et halvt århundrede tidligere, ikke mindst med dansk mellemkomst, som jeg nu vil diskutere.

Nationalmuseer i de arabiske Golf-stater – og religion

Golf-landenes museumshistorie er, som landene selv, relativt ny. Fra 1950'erne opstår for alvor interesser i at etablere selvstændige nationer i Golfen, baseret på olierigdom (især fra sheikhernes side) og inspireret af postkoloniale bevægelser andre steder, ikke mindst i Egypten (især fra den bredere befolknings side). I denne sammenhæng kom en ny dansk arkæologisk interesse i Golfens oldtid på et meget passende tidspunkt, og de danske arkæologiske (og siden andre) undersøgelser, som begyndte i Bahrain i 1953, blev grundlæggende for forståelsen af en lang civilisationshistorie i Golfen og for etableringen af de første nationalmuseer. Et større hold af danske arkæologer gravede i Bahrain hvert år 1953-1965, og efterhånden blev undersøgelserne udvidet til Qatar, Kuwait, Abu Dhabi og Oman, ligesom flere etnografer, en maler og en musikolog også blev del af kampagnen (Glob 1968; Bibby 1969; Højlund 1999; Fibiger 2005; Hansen

1967; Ferdinand 1993; Olsen 2003). Moesgaard Museum i Aarhus har fortsat en stærk relation til nationalmuseerne i Golfen og foretager fortsat arkæologiske undersøgelser, især i Bahrain, men også i Kuwait, Qatar og Abu Dhabi.⁵

Det er bemærkelsesværdigt, at de arkæologiske undersøgelser har været næsten fuldt fokuseret på tiden før islam. Det skyldes uden tvivl en arkæologisk interesse i at finde de ældste spor af menneskelig aktivitet, og ret hurtigt blev det klart, at øen Bahrain har spillet en betydelig rolle i det, der blev identificeret som Dilmun-kulturen, der var forbundet med det antikke Mesopotamien for op mod 5000 år siden. Men arkæologerne har givetvis også været bevidste om, at de ville møde større udfordringer ved at beskæftige sig med den tidlige islamiske historie, som nutidens befolkninger i højere grad ville have forskellige holdninger til. Det gælder ikke mindst i Golfen, hvor befolkningen tæller både sunni- og shiamuslimer, og særligt i Bahrain spiller det en væsentlig politisk rolle, hvilket også var tilfældet i 1950'erne (om end ikke på samme modsætningsfyldte måde som senere, jf. Matthiesen 2013; Fibiger 2019). Blandt de mange publikationer, som har afrapporteret udgravningerne, er kun en enkelt fokuseret på islam, nemlig Karen Frifelts sene bog med den sigende titel *Islamic Remains in Bahrain* (2001). Titlen signalerer, at fokus er på noget fortidigt, måske endda at islam hører fortiden til. Bogen viser også, at det islamiske materiale, som blev fundet i forbindelse med udgravningerne, ikke var en del af systematiske undersøgelser, men snarere fund, som i første omgang blev gravet væk og lagt til side, så man kunne komme ned til de antikke oldtidslag, der var udgravningernes egentlige fokus.

De etnografiske undersøgelser, som fandt sted i Qatar i 1959 (Ferdinand 1993) og i Bahrain i 1960 (Hansen 1967), havde naturligvis et større fokus på islam. I Klaus Ferdinands tilfælde gjaldt det primært, hvordan islamiske moralkoder var del af beduinernes dagligdag (fx adskillelse mellem køn, kvinders tildekning m.m.). I Bahrain fokuserede Henny Harald Hansen mere direkte på, at hendes undersøgelser fandt sted i en shiamuslimsk landsby. *Investigations in a Shia village in Bahrain* hedder hendes faglige afrapportering, publiceret af Danmarks Nationalmuseum. Dette fokus har gjort, at bogen har fået en noget tvivlsom status i Bahrain og ikke er blevet så promoveret lokalt som fx Klaus Ferdinands *Bedouins of Qatar* i nabolandet.⁶

Som nævnt blev de omfattende danske undersøgelser et vigtigt grundlag for etableringen af nationalmuseer i de følgen-

5. For Moesgaard Museums aktuelle aktiviteter i de arabiske Golf-lande, se <https://www.moesgaardmuseum.dk/forskning-og-undersogelser/arkaeologi/arkaeologi-omkring-golfen/>

6. Henny Harald Hansen skrev desuden den populærvidenskabelige bog *I skyggen af Kerbelā* (1961) om sine oplevelser i Bahrain. I den havde hun, som titlen antyder, et mere kritisk blik på religionens betydning for sine shiamuslimske informanter.

de årtier. Man kan diskutere, hvad der udgør et egentligt nationalmuseum, og derfor hvornår de første museer blev grundlagt i hvilke lande. Abu Dhabi etablerede allerede i 1971 en mindre udstilling i oasebyen al-Ain, i det fort, hvor Emiraternes første præsident og landsfader Sheikh Zayed blev født, for at vise nationens og Al Nahyan-familiens rødder (og ikke mindst disses indbyrdes sammenhæng). I Qatar blev det første nationalmuseum ligeledes etableret i emirens tidligere fort i Doha i 1975, og det nye nationalmuseum fra 2019 er faktisk bygget rundt om dette fort og har bevaret den gamle bygning som base. Kuwait (1983) og Bahrain (1988) var de første lande, der byggede nye moderne museumsbygninger til nye nationalmuseer. Kuwaits museum blev, som meget andet i landet, ødelagt under krigen mod Irak i 1990-91 og er kun langsomt blevet genopbygget. Bahraains Nationalmuseum, derimod, har siden 1988 stået som et tidligt modernistisk ikon, både som arkitektur og museums-fagligt. På den måde kan dette museum siges at være et udgangspunkt for de nyere museumsprojekter, som dog fremstår mere markante og med større armbevægelser.⁷

Med udgangspunkt i den stærke forbindelse til Danmark blev Bahraains Nationalmuseum tegnet af den danske arkitekt Knud Holscher og indrettet ikke mindst af danske arkæologer og etnografer, sammen med bahraainske museumsfolk samt også forskere fra fx Frankrig og Jordan. Også her er den arkæologiske del primært fokuseret på oldtidscivilisationen Dilmun, men

7. En grundigere analyse af Golfens museumshistorie findes på fransk i bogen *Le Miroir Des Cheikhs* af Alexandre Kazerouni (2017). Den danske antropolog Christel Braae, der sammen med Klaus Ferdinand deltog i arbejdet med de etnografiske udstillinger på Bahraains Nationalmuseum i 1980'erne og sidenhen i mange år har været tilknyttet Danmarks Nationalmuseum i København, har desuden skrevet en ph.d.-afhandling om nationalmuseerne i Golfen (Braae 1997).



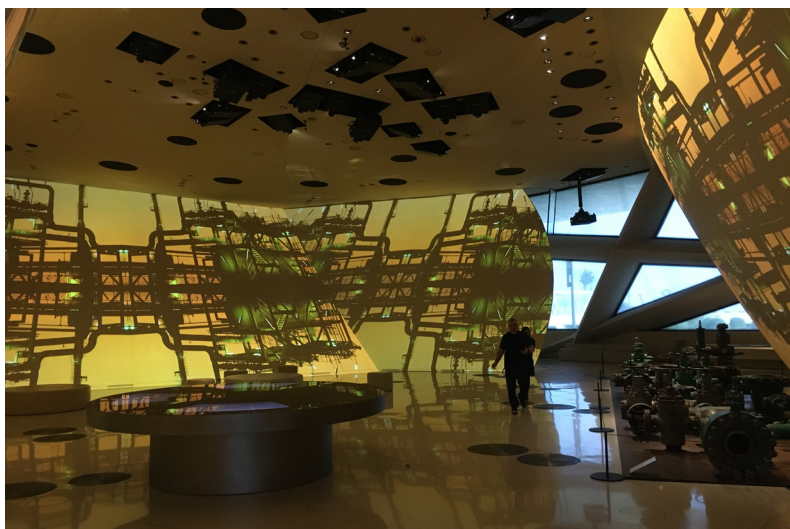
Figur 5. Bahrain Nationalmuseum. Foto: Thomas Brandt Fibiger.



Figur 6. Koranskole. Udstillingselement på Bahrain Nationalmuseum.
Foto: Thomas Brandt Fibiger.



Figur 7. Qatar Nationalmuseum. Foto: Thomas Brandt Fibiger.



Figur 8. Videoinstallation om olieindustri fra Qatar Nationalmuseum.
Foto: Thomas Brandt Fibiger.

et vigtigt element i den historiske del af udstillingen er også en kopi af et brev, der angiver, at Bahrain blev del af den islamiske verden allerede i år 7 Hijri, eller 629, altså i profeten Muhammads levetid. Denne 'dåbsattest' er vigtig for den islamiske selvforståelse i Bahrain (om end navnet Bahrain op igennem historien har dækket et større område i Østarabien og ikke kun de øer, der udgør staten Bahrain i dag). De etnografiske udstillinger handler om dagligliv med fokus på primære erhverv før olieøkonomiens indtog, dvs. perlefiskeri, landbrug samt en souq (markedsgade) med forskellige håndværk og erhverv. I denne sal er der intet om islam, mens det andet etnografiske udstillingsrum handler om et livsforløb i et traditionelt Bahrain, fra vuggen via koranskole til ægteskab og voksenliv. Her er der således et helt diorama med en koranskole og fokus på islamiske ritualer ved barnets fødsel, ved bryllup samt også det lokale *hiyya-biyya* i forbindelse med hajj, hvor børn kaster grønne planter i vandet som en symbolsk ofring. Der er dog meget lidt antydning af det, som særligt optager bahrainske muslimer, nemlig forskellige islamiske traditioner i Golfen, i særdeleshed kategoriseret som henholdsvis sunni og shia, og deres indbyrdes forskelle og ligheder. Fokus i museet er på ligheder, uden at nævne de forskellige grupper. Museet er et nationalmuseum, som skal samle hele nationen, og på den måde er dette greb meget forståeligt; men ved at forsøge at inkludere alle og kun det, der kan være fællesskab om, bliver museet mindre vedkommande for store dele af befolkningen i Bahrain. Inklusion bliver i den forstand det samme som eksklusion, og ligesom den ovennævnte generelle litteratur om museer og religion gjorde gældende, med fokus på vestlige museer, gælder det i fx Bahrain, at religion er et ømtåleligt emne, som et museum med ambition om at være samlende for en hel nation kan have vanskeligt ved at håndtere.

Qatars nye nationalmuseum fra 2019, der som nævnt ovenfor må ses som del af en ny epoke for museer i Golfen, er nok i sit design og også i udstillingernes æstetik i en helt anden skala end fx Bahrains Nationalmuseum, men udstillingernes indhold og genstandsmateriale er langt hen ad vejen det samme på tværs af disse forskellige museer. En del handler om den lokale arkæologi og en del om lokal historie – som i Qatar kan virke kortere, med hovedvægt på Al Thani-dynastiets grundlæggelse af det moderne Qatar, men som interessant nok også føres helt op til i dag, endda med perspektiver på Qatars strid med sine

nabolande 2017-2020, naturligvis fremstillet med Qatar i rollen som offer. Herimellem er en del om 'traditionelt liv' i Qatar, særligt som beduiner og med tydeligt afsæt i Klaus Ferdinands feltarbejde i slutningen af 1950'erne. Der er bemærkelsesværdigt lidt direkte fokus på islam og religiøst liv. Jeg bemærkede kun i en videoinstallation, at en ældre kvinde fortalte om beduin-livet i sin barndom og i en gennemgang af dagliglivets aktiviteter på et tidspunkt midt i fortællingen, nærmest en passant, bemærkede: "Og så bad de". Man må, også ud fra Ferdinands forskning, forestille sig, at islam har udgjort og fortsat udgør en stor del af dette dagligliv, men måske netop derfor står religion ikke i centrum for udstillingens fortælling. Det er både en naturlig del af før og nu og ikke noget, man kan fremhæve som særligt i en etnografisk eller historisk museumsudstilling. Museer fremhæver det særlige og det, der er anderledes i forhold til museets og publikums eget nutidige og moderne udgangspunkt, og også derfor kan dagligdags religion være fraværende i museumsudstillinger.

Qatars Nationalmuseums primære attraktion er som nævnt den spektakulære bygning, hvilket gælder både udefra og inde i selve udstillingerne. Rum og vægge tager også indenfor form efter den ørkenrose, som arkitekten har gjort til bærende symbol (og som en qatari fortalte mig ellers ikke har været et særligt velkendt symbol for landet). Sådanne irregulære rum kan være vanskelige at lave traditionelle udstillinger i, så man har i stedet lavet store filmprojektioner på de skæve vægge, hvilket skaber stærke visualiseringer. Blandt andet bliver olieindustrien på denne måde portrætteret i æstetisk og abstrakt form, som således både kunstnerisk og historisk inkluderer Golfens nyere historie og økonomiske grundlag på en original måde.⁸

I sin sammenligning af museer i den nordiske lande og i 'nye lande' som Singapore og Qatar fremhæver Peggy Levitt, i tråd med mange tidligere museumsanalyser, at museerne skal forankre den nationale historie og 'brande' nationen både indadtil og udadtil. For de små, globaliserede bystater Singapore og Qatar handler det ikke mindst om at få international anerkendelse og opmærksomhed og fremstille stederne som attraktive, kosmopolitiske og som en væsentlig del af globale kulturelle flows.

Both countries are using culture strategically to claim a more prominent, influential place in the world. Both are inventing or reinventing heritage to anchor themselves during a period of rapid social change. Both are riding

8. Et andet nyt museumsprojekt i Qatar, som endnu er under udvikling, er Lusail Museum, som tager udgangspunkt i en større samling af orientalsk kunst, indsamlet og etableret af Sheikh Hassan Al Thani (som også står bag kunstmuseet for arabisk kunst, Mathaf). Som det blev fremhævet i en midlertidig udstilling i forbindelse med fodbold-VM i Qatar 2022 er ambitionen med Lusail Museum at præsentere 'Tales of a Connected World', for ikke blot at reproducere en gammel orientalisme. Hvordan dette lader sig gøre på baggrund af en samling af orientalsk kunst bliver interessant at følge. Aisha al-Muftahs (se note 1) ph.d.-afhandling ved Leicester University, som i skrivende stund er under afslutning, omhandler særligt dette museumsprojekt.

the global art wave, drawing from and being driven by the proliferation of global art institutions, fairs, biennales, and museums that are taking shape throughout Asia and the Middle East. (Levitt 2015: 116)

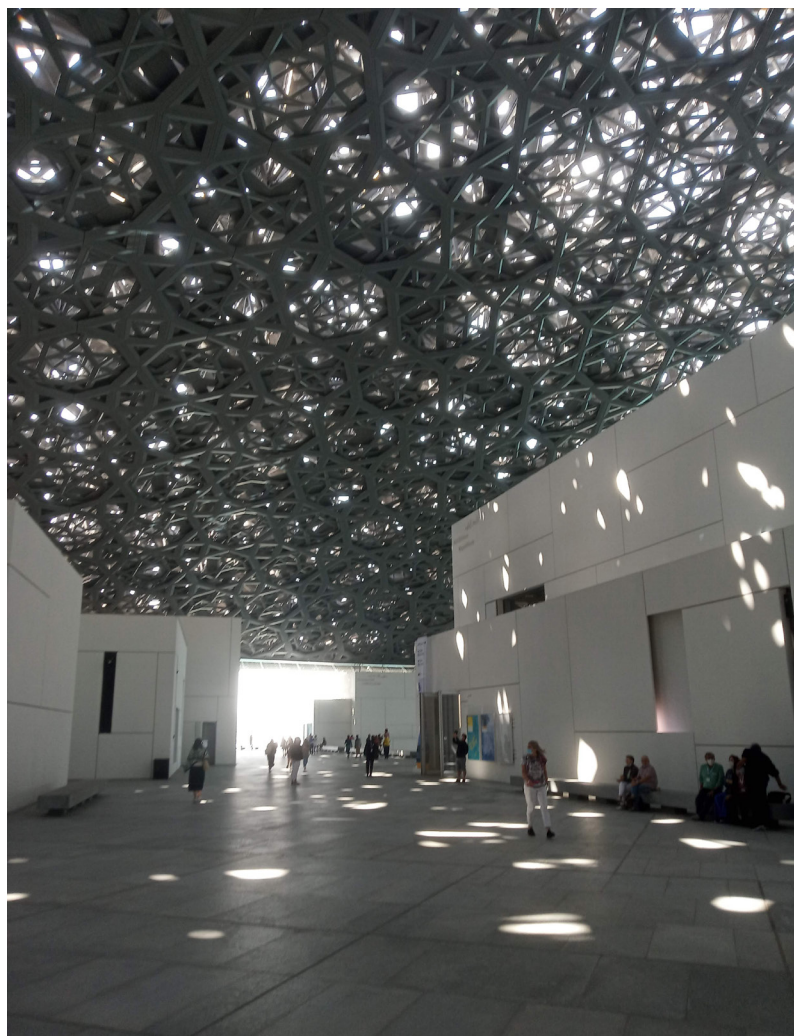
Museerne har dermed ikke kun en lokal, men også en global og universalistisk ambition, som ikke mindst Louvre Abu Dhabi og de nye museer i Abu Dhabi synes at videreudvikle. Som afslutning på denne artikel vil jeg derfor diskutere Louvre Abuhabiss særlige ide om universalisme.

Louvre Abu Dhabi som 'universelt museum'

I kataloget til Louvre Abu Dhabi indleder direktøren for Abuhabiss ministerium for kultur og turisme, Mohammed bin Khalifa Al Mubarak, sammen med Louvres ledende direktør i Frankrig, Jean-Luc Martinez, med følgende grandiose erklæring:

It is no exaggeration to say that we are bearing witness to a pivotal moment in the history of museums. The opening of Louvre Abu Dhabi not only marks the completion of a building of stunning architectural complexity and the amassing of a collection of global significance; it also represents the advent of the very concept of the museum, as invented in enlightenment Europe, in the Arab world for the first time. (Louvre Abu Dhabi Complete Guide: 4).

Baseret på denne artikels hidtidige redegørelse for museumshistorie i de arabiske Golf-lande er det i al fald en overdrivelse, at Louvre Abu Dhabi markerer museumsgenrens begyndelse i regionen, og det er bemærkelsesværdigt, hvordan museets oprindelse knyttes til 'oplysningstidens Europa', som Frankrig nu 'videregiver' til den arabiske verden. Det er ligeledes betegnende, at katalogets forord signeres af både franske og emiratiske museumsledere og i øvrigt henviser til de to landes regerings fælles aftale om dette museum. Men selvom museet måske ganske rigtigt primært er blevet bemærket for sin 'stunning' arkitektur, idet (også franske) Jean Nouvels bygning samles af en åben, islamisk inspireret kuppel, kan man godt mene, at Louvre Abu Dhabi udvikler museumsgenren på en interessant og nyskabende måde, både i den arabiske verden og i museumsverdenen globalt set. Det er det, jeg vil diskutere i dette afsnit.



Figur 9. Louvre Abu Dhabi. Atriumgården. Foto: Thomas Brandt Fibiger.



Figur 10. Louvre Abu Dhabi. Islamiske og jødisk gravsten samt buddha-figur i udstillingsrummet 'universelle religioner'. Foto: Thomas Brandt Fibiger.

Sarina Wakefield, som nok er den forsker, der har behandlet Louvre Abu Dhabi og de øvrige Golf-museer grundigst, kalder Louvre Abu Dhabi et 'franchise museum' i relation til Louvre Paris (Wakefield 2021; se også Exell og Wakefield 2016). Dermed mener hun, at Louvre Abu Dhabi har sine egne samlinger, selv laver udstillinger og har sin egen ledelse, men samtidig er del af det overordnede Louvre *brand* og er skabt i tæt samarbejde mellem franske og emiratiske museumsmyndigheder, og hvor den franske indflydelse og myndighed er afgørende. Som også andre har peget på (Graebner 2014; Grincheva 2020; Giusti og Lamonica 2023) er projektet en væsentlig del af fransk diplomati og involverer ikke kun museumsledere, men som ovenfor nævnt også det øverste politiske niveau i såvel Frankrig som Emiraterne.

Allerede i 2005 tog myndigheder i Abu Dhabi kontakt til Louvre med henblik på at låne genstande til nye udstillinger i Emiraterne. Man ønskede at følge i fodsporene på Dubais nye og succesfulde kosmopolitanisme, men med et stærkere udgangspunkt i højprofilerede institutioner i Vesten, herunder museer og universiteter (Graebner 2014). Oprindeligt var Louvre afvisende, men både den franske regering og Louvre blev lokket, ifølge Graebner, af de høje summer, som Abu Dhabi kunne tilbyde – 400 millioner euro for at bruge Louvres navn alene, og i alt 850 millioner for samarbejdet, over en 30-årig periode. Således skiftede indstillingen og narrativet i løbet af oo'erne og kom i stedet til at handle om, at Louvre her havde en mulighed for at skabe en ny fortælling om globale sammenhænge og udbrede sine samlinger og ekspertise, så en større del af verden kunne få glæde af den.

Museet udstiller en del af samlingen fra Louvre Paris foruden dele af sin egen samling. Samarbejdet mellem de to museer er derfor tæt. Ligeledes har Louvre Paris været afgørende for profileringen og opsætningen af Louvre Abu Dhabis grundudstilling. Men hvor en kritik, der ofte har været fremført i forskellige medier, ikke mindst franske (jf. Graebner), hævder, at Louvre Abu Dhabi er en kopi af Louvre Paris, eller at det rige Abu Dhabi blot har 'købt' og 'importeret' et europæisk museum (ligesom Golf-landene køber alle mulige andre varer og brands, herunder europæiske fodboldklubber og VM i Qatar), er det imidlertid netop en vigtig pointe med udstillingerne i Abu Dhabi, at de ikke skal være eurocentriske, ej heller arabocentriske (eller islamo-), men universalistiske. Som jeg vil komme ind på nedenfor, kritiserer Wakefield, Graebner og andre dette for at være en sær-

lig slags 'fransk universalisme', men først vil jeg prøve at illustrere, hvad denne universalistiske tilgang betyder for museumsop-sætningen og -oplevelsen. Jeg vil også argumentere for, at der er en værdi i dette, som gør, at Louvre Abu Dhabi har noget særligt at byde på, som ikke kun er relevant i en Golf-sammenhæng, men også kan være en måde for andre museer at arbejde på i en postkolonial virkelighed. For nok kan Louvre kritiseres for, som Wakefield og andre gør, at udlicitere en postkolonial refleksion til Abu Dhabi frem for at integrere den i sine udstillinger i modernuseet i Paris, men af samme grund er det måske i Abu Dhabi man kan lade sig inspirere af nye måder at lave museum og udstillinger om en global verden frem for i de gamle museer i den vestlige verden. Netop derfor er 'Louvre in the desert' ikke blot en kopi af Paris eller en eksportvare, men et nyt bud på at lave universalistiske museer.

Publikum møder denne tilgang allerede fra begyndelsen, idet åbningsrummets tekst bærer titlen 'Louvre Abu Dhabi – et universelt museum'. I gulvet er indgraveret stednavne fra hele verden, i forskellige alfabeter, langs en imaginær flod, der forbinder disse steder, både fortidige og nutidige civilisationer. I montrene rundt i det store åbne rum er enkelte særlige genstande fra forskellige steder verden over, fx en montre med miniaturefigurer i bøn, fra hhv. oldtidens Mesopotamien, fra Egypten kort før år 0 og fra Gabon ca. 1900. Således er tonen slået an, og nu fortælles civilisationernes historie fra oldtidens Mesopotamien til nutidig globalisering.

Man kan diskutere, om ikke det universalistiske perspektiv efterhånden bliver meget vestligt forankret, især i udstillingens afsluttende sektioner om modernitet, som både i tekster og kunstgenstande har fokus på vestlige eksempler og erfaringer. Der er kun få undtagelser, fx det osmanniske maleri 'ung emir studerer', malet af Osman Hamdi Bey, som ofte fremhæves som en særlig 'lokal' skat i museets samling, men som jo også er et eksempel på, hvordan en osmannisk maler overtager og fortolker en vestlig tradition for orientalsk kunst. For mig at se er der ikke en særlig ny måde at lave udstillinger på i disse dele af museet. Det, der gør Louvre Abu Dhabi interessant for denne analyse af religion og museer, er i stedet til dels, at religiøse traditioner er bærende for den fortælling om civilisationer, som museet bruger som drivkraft for det historiske forløb – hvilket ikke i sig selv er nyt. Dertil kommer ikke mindst, at særligt udstillingens 'sal 4', som har fokus på religiøse objekter, sammenstiller

objekter fra forskellige religioner. Som også Wakefield og andre – såvel som både Louvre selv og publikum – bemærker, er det især her den universalistiske og tværkulturelle tilgang kommer til udtryk.

Rummet hedder ‘Universelle religioner’, og her præsenteres fx to islamiske gravsten fra hhv. Mekka i den første islamiske tid og Tunesien i 1187 (AH 583) sammen med en jødisk gravsten fra Frankrig, dateret 1250, og ved siden af en Buddhafigur fra 600-tallets Kina. Dateringerne her nævner jeg fra udstillingens genstandstekster, hvor de gregorianske dateringer (eller ‘common era’) står først og kun hvis forbundet til genstanden også fx hijri-datering, som ved den tunesiske gravsten. På samme måde er en figur af Jesusbarnet og Jomfru Maria fra en kristen tradition sat sammen med en frise fra 1200-tallets Nordindien med Koraninskriptioner og ved siden af en hinduistisk Shiva-figur fra Tamil Nadu. I tilknytning til dette rum er et mindre, mørkt rum med helligskrifter, såvel Koranen som Toraen, Bibelen og buddhistiske Sutra-ruller. Udover selve genstandene er også en indføring i deres betydning, fx eksegetiske *tafsir*-kommentarer i margenen af en Koran, som forklares på en skærm med forskellige eksempler.

I et Golf-område, som ofte fremhæves som konservativt, er denne sammenstilling af forskellige religioner bemærkelsesværdig.⁹ Museet er ikke islamocentrisk (som fx MIA i Qatar eller Museum of Islamic Civilization i Sharjah), men præsenterer de forskellige religioner ligeværdigt og, i museets egen selvforståelse, universalistisk. Det kan meget vel være en ‘fransk universalisme’, en fransk kuratering, der har ønsket og insisteret på denne ligeværdighed, og som fortsætter en fransk og europæisk museumstradition, hvor museet og Vesten har magten til at samle og kategorisere verden. I særdeleshed i dette rum om religion, men også fx andre dele om kosmografi, verdensbilleder og opdagelsesrejsende, adskiller udstillingen sig dog også fra den eurocentriske måde, som en vestlig museumstradition, og ikke mindst Louvre selv, kan kritiseres for at have promoveret i århundreder, ved ikke at privilegere et bestemt geografisk perspektiv. Derfor er der noget nyt på spil i Louvre Abu Dhabi.

Selve udstillingsformen – særlige, æstetisk fine og betydningsfulde genstande ved siden af hinanden på rad og række, med en kort forklarende tekst om genstandens proveniens, altså hvor og hvornår den stammer fra – er ikke nyskabende. Museumsrummene inde i Louvre Abu Dhabi er dermed ikke så

9. Lige så bemærkelsesværdig er en ny institution beliggende lige over for Louvre på Saadiyat-øen, nemlig Bayt al-‘aila al-ibrahimiyya, Abraham Family House, som rummer en moske, en kirke og en synagoge, alle i ensartet design men med forskelligt indre, samt et musealt besøgscenter. Centret blev annonceret i forbindelse med Pave Frans’ besøg i Abu Dhabi i 2019 og åbnede i 2023. Det kan uden tvivl også forbindes til De Forenede Arabiske Emiraters normaliseringsaftale med Israel i 2020, men peger på samme måde som Louvre på en ambition om at præsentere forskellige religioner side om side. Det er næppe tilfældigt, at de to institutioner er naboer. En nærmere analyse af dette abrahamæiske center hører imidlertid til andetsteds.

overvældende eller utraditionelle som selve bygningens arkitektur, som primært mærkes i den store atriumgård, som er delvis åben ud til havet og til himlen og derfor giver en let og varm brise, samtidig med at man fortsat er inde i museet. Det bør også fremhæves, at 'universelle religioner' kun inkluderer de såkaldte verdensreligioner – islam, kristendom, jødedom, buddhisme og hinduisme – og ikke de mange andre religiøse traditioner rundt om i verden. Fx er der kun få eksempler i hele museet fra afrikansk religion og afrikanske civilisationer i det hele taget. Denne tilgang til religion er blevet kritiseret i religionsfaget (fx Asad 1993; Masusawa 2005), men selvom museet fremhæver sig selv som et postkolonialt museum er der ikke blevet levnet plads til nyere tilgange til, hvad (universel) religion er og kan være.

Museet er også blevet kritiseret for ikke at være lokalt forankret (Wakefield 2021: 184). Det gælder ikke kun i forhold til den arabiske kontekst – som jo netop ville være arabo- eller islamocentrisk – men lige så meget i forhold til den særlige demografiske sammensætning i Emiraterne, hvor befolkningsgrupper fra andre dele af verden udgør flertallet. Ifølge Encyclopedia Britannica var ca. 60 % af befolkningen i Emiraterne i 2016 fra Sydasien (Indien, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal og Sri Lanka), mens kun 10 % var fra Emiraterne (og havde statsborgerskab her), og 15 % var fra andre arabiske lande. De resterende grupper var fra alle andre dele af verden, herunder især Sydøstasien (særligt Filippinerne) og Vesten (Europa og Nordamerika). Mange af disse migranter er såkaldte 'blue collar'-arbejdere i industri, byggeri og serviceerhverv (fx tjenere og stuepiger), mens andre er del af en mere velstillet middelklasse. Der synes ikke at være nogen særlig ambition om at tiltrække eller adressere det store flertal af asiatiske befolkningsgrupper på Louvre Abu Dhabi. Der var i foråret 2023 en mindre særudstilling om Bollywood, men andre særudstillinger har været særdeles fransk orienterede, fx en i 2022 om Versailles og slottets samlinger fra hele verden. Museets postkoloniale ambition handler tilsyneladende ikke om at inddrage nye, marginaliserede og underrepræsenterede grupper på museet, men om den særlige form for 'fransk universalisme', hvor den universelle sammenstilling af 'store traditioner' og 'civilisationer' er det væsentligste fokus. Tydeligvis er størstedelen af publikum også fra en vestlig kulturkreds, nogle måske på krydstogt, andre i transit på vej mellem Atlanten og Asien og andre bosiddende i Emiraterne. Færre

publikummer er enten arabiske emiratier og endnu færre migrantarbejdere, hvor mange hverken har tid eller råd til gå på museum og givetvis ikke ville føle sig inkluderet, trods alle universelle hensigter.

Såvel Sarina Wakefield (2021) som Nathalia Grincheva (2020) og Seth Graebner (2014) peger på, at Louvres universalisme er en særlig form for fransk universalisme, som også kendetegner modernuseet i Paris. Louvre er, sammen med andre vestlige museer, grundlagt i det 19. og 20. århundrede, forankret i imperialisme og kolonialisme, hvor Europa og den vestlige verden var det universelle centrum, og hvor museerne skulle indsamle og repræsentere hele verden. Derfor blev Frankrig, i Louvres tilfælde, til selve centrum i fortællingen. Og selvom Louvre Abu Dhabi muliggør en forskydning og decentring af denne fortælling, mener observatører som de her nævnte, at projektet fortsat har et klart fransk udgangspunkt. Ifølge Graebners tidlige artikel var de værker, som museumsmyndighederne i Abu Dhabi var mest interesseret i at låne, da de i første omgang henvendte sig til Frankrig, franske og europæiske kunstarter som malerier af Monet, Cezanne, Mondrian og Struth; ud af 162 værker lånt i Frankrig pr. 2013 var 46 produceret i Frankrig og 58 andre i det øvrige Europa. Som Graebner (2014: 195) tydeligt bemærker: “‘Universal’ culture in the form of high-profile arts still favors French post-impressionists.” Wakefield kalder denne særlige form for universalisme ‘cosmo-universalisme’, hvor Louvre som institution forsøger at bryde med sin koloniale fortid, men kun med en særligt udvalgt partner i Abu Dhabi, som er i stand til at betale godt for det, og som kan tilbyde et narrativ om globale forbindelser og udfordre islamofobi og ideer om ‘civilisationernes sammenstød’ à la Huntington (Wakefield 2021: 83).

Nathalia Grincheva bemærker ligeledes, hvordan Frankrig og Abu Dhabi sammen skaber en fortælling om Abu Dhabi som handelsrute og ‘mødested’ for alverdens forskellige civilisationer. Hun citerer Abu Dhabis ministerium for kultur og turisme for at fremhæve:

... the city’s position at the crossroads of East and West, North and South, and its ancient and vital role in the days of the Silk Route, when the region linked Europe and the Indian Ocean, opening up exchanges between Asia and Africa. Louvre Abu Dhabi and the wider Saadi-

yat Cultural District will be a place where diverse parts of the world can meet to exchange ideas and culture. (Grincheva 2020: 94).

Grincheva interviewer museumspersonale i Abu Dhabi – både fransk og arabisk – som argumenterer for, at 'the Louvre in Paris is not universal anymore', men at museet i Abu Dhabi i stedet har denne mulighed, og at museet derfor ikke må ses som en replika af museet i Paris, men som et nyt museum i sin egen ret.

Selvom Abu Dhabi næppe kunne have spillet rollen som 'civilisationernes mødested', før olieøkonomien forandrede området for 50 år siden, og selvom det uden tvivl kun er på grund af emiratets finansielle ressourcer, at det har været muligt at indgå en aftale med Louvre i Paris, mener jeg, som ovenfor nævnt, at det er rigtigt, at museet i Abu Dhabi ikke kun skal ses som en replika eller en eksport af det oprindelige Louvre, men som et nyt museum – om end skabt af Louvres ledelse i Paris – med en ny fortælling, som har noget nyt at tilbyde. Netop sammenstillingen af religiøse objekter fra forskellige traditioner og sammenstillingen af 'universelle religioner og civilisationer' (hvad de så end indbefatter) er gode eksempler herpå.

Sarina Wakefield, hvis bog jeg har fremhævet, og som desuden har diskuteret dette på en workshop, som ligger til grund for denne artikel, er uenig. Hun påpeger, at netop sammenstillingen af religiøse objekter er et udtryk for denne særlige (franske) kosmo-universalisme, der for det første skal tjene som post-kolonial 'undskyldning' for at modernemuseet i Paris kan fortsætte som hidtil, og for det andet dekontekstualiserer genstandenes historie og proveniens (Wakefield 2021: 164). For eksempel er de ovennævnte genstande fra kristen og islamisk middelalder fra en tid præget af korstog og sammenstød mellem kristendom og islam og repræsenterer ikke kun kosmopolitiske og florumvundne 'forbindelser'. Museet forspilder dermed en mulighed for at problematisere historien og fortælle genstandenes egne flertydige historier, fordi fokus kun er på at vise universelle forbindelser. Det har hun ret i. Ikke desto mindre er det den samme tilgang, som tidligere 'universelle museer' (eller 'verdensmuseer' som gamle imperiale museer i Vesten nu er begyndt at kalde sig selv) har gjort gældende, og hvor fokus har været på at klassificere civilisationer og kulturer og underlægge andre civilisationer det vestlige centrum. Her tilbyder sammenstillingen og den nye universalisme trods alt et andet perspektiv, som udfordrer både eurocentrisme og arabo- eller islamocentrisme.

Konklusion

I museums- og kulturarvsvforskningen har begrebet 'Authorised Heritage Discourse' (AHD) været fremtrædende og omdiskuteret, siden det blev lanceret af Laurajane Smith i 2006. Begrebet peger på, at bestemte former for kulturarv og kulturarvsfortællinger legitimeres og autoriseres af fx fremtrædende, offentlige institutioner som museer, mens andre former for kulturarv og fortællinger marginaliseres eller helt udelades. 'Nationen' bliver ofte fremhævet som ramme for en sådan AHD, igennem en lang museums- og kulturarvshistorie og særligt med nationalmuseers rolle som 'authorised' kulturarvsformidler både i 'det gamle' Vesten og i nye nationer i andre dele af verden – ikke mindst i den arabiske verden og Golf-landene. Noget kunne imidlertid tyde på, at også 'det globale' og kosmopolitiske i dag udgør en AHD, hvor mange museer og kulturarvsprojekter fremhæver globale og transregionale forbindelser, som Louvre eller Lusails 'Tales of a Connected World' (se note 8). Globalisering er blevet en AHD, som ikke afløser, men supplerer en forankring i den nationale fortælling, idet det fremhæves, hvordan særlige nationer – Qatar, Emiraterne, Frankrig m.fl. – har en position og rolle i globale netværk og er formidlere af disse globale fortællinger. Alle vil gerne se sig selv som del af verden, sin egen nation som en vigtig aktør på en global scene. Det gælder ikke mindst i de arabiske Golf-lande i disse år.

Louvre Abu Dhabi er blandt mange bemærkelsesværdige nye museer i Golfen måske det, der stærkest forsøger at sætte en ny dagsorden. Man kan diskutere, hvorvidt Louvres insisteren på at være universalistisk blot er en fortsættelse af en særlig fransk universalisme og dermed en ny, institutionel kolonialisme eller faktisk er en ny non-centreret globalhistorie. Denne diskussion er fremtrædende i meget af ovennævnte litteratur, fra Peggy Levitts fokus på Qatar til Sarina Wakefields fokus på Abu Dhabi. Golf-landene ønsker helt klart at knytte bånd til og blive set i sammenhæng med vestlige lande og museer, lige som det også gælder omvendt. Her er museerne, sammen med andre kulturinstitutioner (som fx sport), en del af et gensidigt 'soft diplomacy'.

Jeg har med denne artikel ønsket at nuancere denne diskussion ved at påpege, at Louvre Abu Dhabi og lignende museer i Golfen også repræsenterer et nybrud i forhold til første og anden generation af nationalmuseer i Golfen (fra 'fort-udstillin-

ger' som i al-Ain og Qatar til de første moderne nationalmuseumsbygninger i Kuwait og Bahrain), og at et museum som Louvre Abu Dhabi fortjener at blive taget alvorligt for sit bidrag til nye museumsfortællinger, som i al fald har en ambition om hverken at være eurocentriske eller islamocentriske. Kritikken af disse ambitioner og deres baggrund og udtryk er selvfølgelig både berettiget og nødvendig, al den stund Louvre selv definerer og fremhæver denne særlige universalisme og uden blusel markerer en stærk selvforståelse (som man kan mene kendetegner både det franske og emiratiske ophav). Men som jeg har gjort gældende i denne artikel, betyder det ikke, at der ikke er noget nyt på spil i dette museum og de nye museer i Golfen generelt. Det gælder særligt den måde, religion kommer i centrum for den universalistiske fortælling om forbindelser og ligheder, samtidig med at den decentrerer, ved at én religion ikke privilegeres over andre, i al fald ikke blandt de såkaldte 'verdensreligioner'.

Artiklen er baseret på et mindre studie, og der er brug for at udvikle dette med grundigere studier af forskellige museer og kulturprojekter i Golfen, fx det kommende Lusail-museum i Qatar, det abrahamæiske center i Abu Dhabi eller den nye biennale for islamisk kunst i Jiddah. Jeg håber, at artiklen dels kan være til inspiration for sådanne videre studier og dels give indtryk af de mange projekter, som har været i gang de seneste år i de arabiske Golf-lande og fortsat er under udvikling. Men frem for alt håber jeg, at artiklen kan være med til at nuancere billedet af Golf-landenes museer som blot kopier og importvarer fra Vesten. De har deres egne udtryk og fortællinger, som kan bidrage til studiet af museer generelt og studiet af religion og museer i særdeleshed.

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Resume

Denne artikel fokuserer på, hvordan religion udstilles på nye museer i de arabiske Golf-stater. Artiklen fokuserer især på Louvre Abu Dhabi, en filial af Louvre Paris, der åbnede i 2017 med en ambition om at være et 'universelt' museum, der bl.a. gør religion central i civilisationernes historie og som noget nyt, både i Golfen og generelt, udstiller forskellige religioner side om side. I de senere år er en række nye, store museer blevet bygget i de arabiske Golf-stater – og flere er undervejs. Louvre er en del af Abu Dhabis lancering af flere forskellige museer på øen Saadiyat, og Qatar er kendt for sit museum for islamisk kunst (MIA) samt et spektakulært nationalmuseum. Artiklen viser også, hvordan disse nye museer videreudvikler en museumstradition, som blev grundlagt i Golf-staternes første år som selvstændige stater, bl.a. med stor involvering fra arkæologi og antropologi i Aarhus.

Douglas Mattsson

“Meet the Doctor” – Interview with Gustav Larsson

Congratulations, Gustav Larsson, on successfully defending your dissertation, “Positioned orthodoxies: Muslim diversity in contemporary Sweden” (2024) and on completing your doctorate in the field of Religious Studies.

Can you tell us a bit more about yourself? Who are you – both as a person and a researcher?

My research interests are quite broad, but I prefer to focus on that which is empirical, sensed, and “real”. Thus, while I see the obvious value of philosophical and theoretical elaboration, I have much more patience for practical investigations that yield tangible results. I guess this sums up many of my non-academic interests and overall personality as well. In short, I am more of a builder than an artist. I play no musical instruments but know how to construct a simple house and am endlessly fascinated by masonry.

What was your dissertation about?

I studied ways in which notions of Islamic orthodoxy are constructed within and used to maintain boundaries around certain Muslim congregations in contemporary Sweden. In this, I focused on intra-Islamic debates and dialectics – namely, on narratives used for the “othering” of Muslims whose faith and practice are considered incorrect or unorthodox. I examined these issues ethnographically, by engaging with and observing the activities of several different Muslim congregations operating within the same residential area.

What results did you find particularly interesting in your dissertation?

While I focused mostly on intra-Islamic debates, I encountered many interesting examples of how non-Muslim discourses on Islam and Muslim migration (including what Petersen and Ackfeldt call “non-Muslim Islam”) affect these Muslim debates on orthodoxy. All of the Muslim groups I studied were well aware

of how Islam is considered by and portrayed to non-Muslim Swedes and were accordingly positioning both themselves and other Muslims in relation to these contemporary and mainstream Swedish debates on Islam.

Did anything surprise you?

Beyond the above-mentioned impact of non-Muslim discourse, I was also surprised by the extent to which my findings and observations aligned with those of other researchers. For example, I found traces of historical and cultural processes that have been identified by scholars working on Islam in Lebanon among the Lebanese Swedish communities I studied. Overall, I identified much in terms of continuity across time and space. That continuity was not a surprise per se – but the degree to which I could draw parallels between phenomena observed in a Swedish residential area and various processes, debates, etc., that other researchers have described in relation to developments elsewhere, or at different time periods, did surprise me.

Was there something in the process that you found challenging? If so, what and why?

I gathered my data through ethnographic methods – and the greatest challenges I encountered came with the structuring and analysis of the materials. Before embarking on this project, I had no previous experience of doing ethnographic work. Partly for that reason, I seriously underestimated the amount of time needed to process the data, develop my findings into coherent narratives, etc.

In retrospect, is there anything you would have done differently?

The above-mentioned challenges were made worse by the Covid pandemic – which began at a critical moment in my project, just as I was beginning my fieldwork. Considering this, I probably should have redesigned parts of my project so as to de-emphasize ethnography and do more in terms of (for example) internet-based research. Instead, I ended up doing most of my ethnographic work in the year just after the lifting of Covid-related restrictions – and therefore did not have much time for the proper structuring of data, transforming it into academic writing, and so on. A redesign of the project would therefore have saved me many stress-related problems at the end – but all of these challenges nevertheless taught me important lessons about the ethnographic working method. In that sense, I think I have grown as a researcher.

Were there aspects of working on your dissertation that you found particularly fun or rewarding? If so, which ones and why?

The data-gathering and ethnographic process itself was immensely rewarding – mostly for social reasons, as I was warmly welcomed to all of the congregations I studied. It was also intellectually rewarding, granting me opportunities to study and discuss Islam in non-academic and more natural settings. I experienced this as quite freeing – in the sense of moving beyond the shells and confines of academia, its paradigms and detachments from reality, and so on. Experiencing the things we study as they really are, among the people for whom they truly matter, is so much more fun and inspiring than discussing them during seminars.

Now that your doctorate is completed, is there something special you would like to do afterwards? Any academic or non-academic interests that you would like to begin pursuing?

At the moment, I am focusing most of my attention on non-academic interests that I have neglected in the last two years of intense writing. In short, I'm using my hands a lot more than my brain these days. I am also rediscovering the joy of reading – now that I feel free to choose whatever piques my interest without considering its value to my dissertation project!

In terms of academic interests, at the moment, I feel most inspired by the prospect of teaching undergraduates. This, since it grants me opportunities for reading and talking about the things that got me into the study of Islam in the first place – namely, deep history and macro developments over centuries. I have always enjoyed teaching, and I see the current moment as an opportunity to devote myself to it in a more wholehearted manner than was possible while working on the dissertation.

Do you have any future research projects in mind? Or areas of research you would like to delve into?

I have several more-or-less developed ideas that may turn into proper research projects. First, I want to write a few articles where I can flesh out or introduce theoretical elaborations that did not really fit with the overall themes of my dissertation. These will deal primarily with issues of how the structuring of certain rituals may contribute to different forms of religious organization and mobilization. In the local context where I conducted my research, I noticed that most Sunni Muslim groups tended to orientate towards consensus and deculturalization,

whereas local Shiites were split into various nationality-based congregations. To make additional sense of these differences, I am working on an analysis that applies various forms of ritual theory to make sense of how differences between the main rituals emphasized in these various Muslim congregations contribute to variations in how they organize and imagine the boundaries of community.

Beyond that, besides Moreover, beyond revisiting and elaborating on my own ethnographic materials, I am also thinking about how to test and elaborate on the conclusions I have drawn by looking at Swedish Islam at a larger scale. So far, I have only conducted a qualitative study in a delimited locality – and what I would like to do next is therefore to complement my previous work with more quantitative research. These ideas are still at an early development stage, and I am currently experimenting with ways in which to do large-scale and AI-assisted analysis of materials available online (such as recorded Friday sermons uploaded onto YouTube by Swedish mosques).

If anyone would like to get in contact with you for future research projects or presentations, how can we reach you?

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