

Sectarian Materialities

- International Research Seminar at Aarhus University / Moesgaard

Time: 30 May 10-16 // 31 May 10-13

Venue: Aarhus University, Campus Moesgaard, Room 4206-125

This international research seminar is an investigation of sectarianism through a focus on material artefacts. In the wake of the Arab revolts in 2011, the Arab world has experienced growing sectarianism and conflict between Shia and Sunni Muslims in particular, also causing concern outside the Middle East. A focus on dimensions of materiality of this conflict may provide new insights into how identities and imaginations of sectarianism in the Arab world develop and shed light on the interpretations and negotiations of what is Sunni and what is Shia – and not least question when and how this distinction is clear and not clear. Materialities, therefore, may both reify and reopen sectarian relations. Among such materialities could be religious and symbolic objects and sites representing sameness and differences, street graffiti and propaganda, community boundary markers (such as walls and fences) or other tokens of sectarian identity.

The seminar forms part of the current research project Sectarianism in the Wake of the Arab Revolts (SWAR). The research project is an interdisciplinary investigation of the increasing importance of sectarianism after the revolts in many Arab countries since 2011, and this seminar aims to further a focus on the everyday experiences, evaluations and negotiations of sectarianism with a focus on material culture.

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PROGRAM

Tuesday, 30 May

10-10.15 Welcome

10.15-11.15 **Christa Salamandra: Intersecting Sectarianisms in Syria**

11.15-11.45 Coffee

11.45-12.45 **Fanar Haddad: De-mystifying 'sectarianism': definitions and materialities**

13-14 Lunch break

14-15.30 Interdisciplinary and theoretical approaches – within and beyond Islam

Thomas Fibiger: When is some thing sectarian?

Laura MacAtackney: Peace maintenance or past materialities? The enduring role of walls in 'post-conflict' Northern Ireland.

Marie Vejrup: Useful sects – from practical skills to cultural heritage

Wednesday, 31 may

10-11.15 Sunni and Shia Materialities

Joachim Meyer: Signs of Shiism in miniature painting

Martin Riexinger: Materiality as a sectarian issue

11.15-11.30 Coffee

11.30-13.00 Roundtable with **Morten Valbjørn, Elvire Corboz, Maria Louw** Political Science, Study of Religion and Anthropology discussing the gains and questions raised at this conference

ABSTRACTS

Christa Salamandra, City University of New York

Intersecting Sectarianisms in Syria

As the Syrian conflict evolved into an ongoing civil war, sectarian distinctions increasingly inflect activist, rebel and pro-regime discourses alike. Yet social and religious contestation long predates the outbreak of violence. Drawn from twenty-five years of intermittent fieldwork in Damascus, this paper argues that despite—or indeed because of—the Ba’thist state’s efforts to suppress them, religious distinctions intensified, alloyed with those of class and region. The al-Asad kleptocracy, built over four decades under a cloak of socialist secularism, fed perceptions of sectarian privilege. Intersectional sectarian idioms express dissatisfactions and disappointments, as group affiliations are believed to determine access to positions of power and influence. They surface, for example, in response to state-sanctioned popular culture forms like television dramas, where attempts to evoke a sense of nationhood frequently backfire. Ethnographic explorations reveal how Syrians perceive, experience and reconfigure religious-based difference.

Fanar Haddad, University of Singapore:

De-mystifying ‘sectarianism’: definitions and materialities

Few subjects are more commonly discussed yet as woefully under-studied as ‘sectarianism’. Politicians, journalists, analysts and academics speak of ‘sectarianism’ and critique the term’s usage by others without first attempting to formulate a coherent definition of the term. Unsurprisingly this definitional incoherence has often led to analytic incoherence. In this presentation, I will try to offer a critical examination of the vocabulary associated with the study of sectarian dynamics in the Middle East. Surveying over two hundred Arabic and English language works on ‘sectarianism’ / *‘ta’ifiyya*’ I will try to illustrate how the terms’ lack of definition has seen them used in a variety of contradictory ways that have essentially rendered them meaningless. In addition to hindering our understanding of sectarian relations, the word ‘sectarianism’ with its inescapably negative connotations has often been used as a tool with which to neutralize political dissent. Its elasticity – a product of its lack of definition – has also seen sectarian identity and otherwise legitimate sect-specific expressions and mobilization criminalized by their presumed association with an undefined but assumedly nefarious ‘sectarianism’. Clarity is more urgently required than ever given that ‘sectarianism’ is a concept that pervades policy discussions of a Middle East that is more polarised than ever by sectarian identities. I will also try to demonstrate how definitional coherence will help us in understanding the shifting nature of sectarian materialities in their various gradations, meanings and functions.

Thomas Fibiger, Anthropology, Aarhus University

When is some thing sectarian?

This presentation asks how a focus on materiality may address questions of what counts as sectarian and sectarianism. The presentation discusses material manifestations in what would be described as religious and/or political domains and their conflated relationships, using examples from contemporary sectarian imaginaries in the Arab Gulf states Bahrain and Kuwait. The examples range from the *turba* prayer stone used exclusively by Shia Muslims at the daily prayer, via the distribution of 'Shia' and 'Sunni' mosques' to the political securitization of Shia communities, and in Bahrain in particular political protests over this. The main aim of the presentation is to address issues of sectarianism from a material angle and to highlight how this may show how sectarianism is a physical, material experience in the everyday life of many inhabitants of Bahrain and Kuwait.

Laura McAtackney

Peace maintenance or past materialities? The enduring role of walls in 'post-conflict' Northern Ireland.

Studies of sectarianism in Northern Ireland are not unusual but focusing on the everyday, insidious and materialized aspects of sectarianism are still atypical due to the domination of high-level political and historical narratives of conflict. In this context an archaeological standpoint focusing on so-called 'peace walls' (barriers placed in urban environments with the specific aim of separating different ethnic communities) can add unexpected or overlooked aspects to our studies of a still transitioning 'post-'conflict society. This is especially important as materialized segregation, which underlies and maintains enduring sectarianism, is still largely ignored. This paper will discuss a long-term archaeological project that has explicitly engaged with the evolving forms, and repercussions, of materialized segregation in Belfast. It will present some findings on the enduring and evolving nature of materialized segregation and the impact on the meaning of place and various forms of 'dealing with the past' in a contemporary post-conflict context.

Marie Vejrup, Study of Religion, Aarhus University

Useful sects – from practical skills to cultural heritage

This presentation looks into the case of the Hernnhut settlement in Christiansfeld in Denmark – a religious (Moravian) settlement, which was from its outset controversial due to its radical Christian beliefs and practice. The king allowed the establishment of the Hernnhut town in 1773 partly due to its usefulness and what was viewed as a contribution of productive value to Danish society. Today, Christiansfeld is yet again included in a paradigm of value and usefulness, through its new status as Unesco Cultural Heritage Site. The presentation will focus on central materialities from the life and practice of the congregation and on this

background examine the perspective of “useful sects” both historically and in relation the contemporary new developments of the life of the congregation in Christiansfeld. This will lead to a discussion of how this case can provide perspectives to the overall study of sectarianism.

Joachim Meyer, The David Collection, Copenhagen

Signs of Shiism in miniature painting

The David Collection has a rich collection of miniature paintings from the Islamic world. They belong to different schools such as the Indian, the Ottoman-Turkish, the Persian and the Arabic. In some cases these paintings display motives or signs that relate them to a Shiite context. This is of course particularly evident with miniatures produced in areas where Shiism was the dominant sect, but not only. This paper will give a brief introduction to the historical differences between miniature paintings produced in a Sunni and a Shia environment, and go on to present some of the paintings in the David Collection that bear markers of sectarianism and try to relate this to their particular historical context.

Martin Riexinger, Arab and Islamic Studies, Aarhus University

Materiality as a sectarian issue

While commonly conceived of as a conflict between ‘Sunnis’ and ‘Shiites’ the recent sectarian strife throughout the Islamic world (and in the diaspora) reflects also shifts and realignments within the camps commonly labelled Sunnis and Shiites. Among Sunnis, puritan trends which have long been marginal and considered heretic, have become rehabilitated and in many contexts developed into a dominant form of Islam. In the political field this shift is of particular importance as it made the acceptance of Saudi Arabia as leading Sunni power possible.

The aspect of materiality is of particular importance in this context as it is one of them where puritan Sunnism opposes both Sufism and Shiism. In the writings of Ibn Taymiyya and Muhammad b. ‘Abd al-Wahhāb the “veneration of places and times” and the associated objects, are presented as the gateway to paganism. This applies to Muḥarrām no less than to the sufi *‘urs* and the *mawlid*. The laces and related objects are furthermore denounced as expression of the misinterpretation of Islam as thaumaturgical tool instead of a set of obligations.