

“Die religiöse visuelle Kultur von Transgender im Islam: ein Überblick” / “The Religious Visual Culture of Transgender in Islam: An Overview.” Online Presentation at the Department of Art and Cultural Studies, Academy of Fine Arts Vienna together with Doris Guth and Violet al Raheb

For people who cannot be accommodated within a binary division between male and female, there have been at least three classifications in Islamic history that allow for gender that does not fit within the traditional polarity: 'Eunuchs' (*khāṣī* in Arabic), who in the Islamic world of the Middle Ages also guarded the tomb of the Prophet Muhammad and the holy mosque in Mecca; the ambiguous category *mukhannatūn* (Arabic term for female souls in male bodies), which has changed considerably throughout Islamic history; and the *hijra*, as transgender or intersexual persons are often called in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. Legal categories such as *khuntā*, or hermaphrodites, have also been added. The social identities created through these classifications do not have an exact counterpart in the modern Western understanding of gender identity and sexual orientation, and as such they pose a challenge to Western ideas.

My lecture will provide an overview of the religious visual culture of these phenomena in Islam from its beginnings up until the present day. It is also remarkable that numerous Sufi saints and dervishes refer to themselves as brides of Allah in their symbolic marriage with Allah, which has interesting implications for the conceptualization of gender. Their use of often paradoxical visual and textual forms of expression facilitates a particular fluidity, receptivity and openness of experience. Many Sufi sites on the Indian subcontinent, in particular the Ajmer Sharif Dargāh in Rajasthan, India, are known for welcoming all pilgrims without discrimination. Accordingly, many Hijras come to the annual *‘urs* celebrations of the Sufi saint Khwājā Mu‘īn al-Dīn Chishtī (d. 1238), who is especially revered by them. My ethnographic fieldwork during the 808th *‘urs* in February/March 2020 gives an insight into the formation of a trans-identity and possible

ways to accept gender-specific 'deviations' in this context. This is intended to provide an overview of the broad spectrum of Islamic thought and practice, which offers a dynamic model for the inclusion of gender transgression in the Muslim tradition.

“Die visuelle Welt von transgender Personen im Islam: Darstellungen und Einblicke in Vergangenheit und Gegenwart” / “The Visual World of Transgender Persons in Islam: Re-Presentations and Insights in Past and Present.” Guest lecture in the framework of ‘Religion, Gender, Sexuality’ - Gender Studies II, Department of Art and Cultural Studies, Academy of Fine Arts Vienna, 3 December 2019

The lecture looked at the diverse traditions of transgender people in Islam. Examples from the past and present illustrate how they experience their gender, sexual and religious identities. Insights into the visual world of transgender communities broach the issue of the interface of religion and gender and their interaction. Different perspectives and observations also question the presupposition of a seemingly monolithic Islamic attitude towards eroticism, sex and (trans)gender.

“Gender, Religion und visuelle Kultur im Islam” / “Gender, Religion and Visual Culture in Islam”. Workshop at the Department of Art and Cultural Studies, Academy of Fine Arts Vienna. 11 December 2018

A variety of sexual and gender roles can be linked to certain types of homosexuality, a phenomenon that is particularly evident in traditional Islamic societies where strict gender segregation has often been the norm. Concepts of same-sex relationships, pederasty or transvestism are addressed in the context of pre-modern Islamic societies,

where these ideas were understood in a more fluid way and did not necessarily carry the negative connotations they acquired over time and in relation to specific cultural milieus. Changing approaches to the presentation of powerful images/image content/motifs of erotic and sexual themes can be witnessed in contemporary Islamic visual and textual narratives which include examples of cross-gender roles, gender-specific 'homosexual' patterns, cross-dressing and gender ambiguity.