

Introduction "seeds of Diaspora, fruits of multiple tongues"

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INTRODUCTION

“SEEDS OF DIASPORA, FRUITS OF MULTIPLE TONGUES”

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The conveners of the workshop “Entangled by Multiple Tongues”,¹ of which the present issue of *Asiatische Studien* is a result, have asked me to make some introductory remarks. I would like to thank Mareile Flitsch and Andreas Kaplony for their confidence. The task is not an easy one—in fact, a multiplicity of scholarly tongues had been spoken during the workshop. What follows, are associative reflections centered around Oriental diasporas in twentieth century Switzerland.

In history, the term *diaspora* is first of all linked to the Jewish diaspora in the thousand years that followed the capture of Jerusalem in the 580s BCE, i.e. the beginning of the Babylonian Exile. Those exiled were removed from their homeland and their spiritual centre, and began to understand their dispersion “among the nations” as a period that made sense despite all deficits and home sickness, and even implied the mission to transfer one’s own experiences and beliefs to other peoples and tongues. The first Christians used the term for their small churches scattered in Roman Asia Minor; they experienced *diaspora* as their existential human condition. The Greek *diaspora* “dispersion” is linked to *sporos* “seed”. The Jewish diaspora “became a major place of intercultural mediation and transcultural negotiation”, Jörg LANCKAU states with regard to a seminal cultural translation of monotheism in the Hellenistic period. The late twentieth century use of *diaspora*, not least in new diaspora studies, is based on the historical Jewish case and on Christian vocabulary, but the term is now also applied to other groups removed from their homeland or home region, as long as they continue to be practically or mentally attached to their place of origin.

1 *Entangled By Multiple Tongues: The Role of Diaspora in the Transfer of Culture*, International Workshop, 3–4 June 2010, organized by Mareile Flitsch, University of Zurich, and Andreas Kaplony, formerly University of Zurich, now Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München. Conference venue was the Ethnographic Museum (*Völkerkundemuseum*) of the University of Zurich.

Armenians and Greeks are classic examples. They contrast to settler and other migrant communities that ceased to maintain such a relationship.

This issue of *Asiatische Studien / Etudes Asiatiques* does not focus on diasporas per se, but on the transfer of culture by diasporas “entangled by multiple tongues”. In both its large and literal sense, we may even call the Qidan personnel, dealt with by Erling VON MENDE, “diasporic”: individuals in the service of alien dynasties in China, they proved to be seminal for perpetuating previous Chinese legislation and culture. Diasporas were often innovative hotbeds of visions, utopias and political radicalization with regard to home countries or the world in general.² Twentieth century Switzerland hosted a variety of diasporas by, in and between whom influential visions and concepts were negotiated. This process was framed by liberal Swiss practices and institutions, in particular universities. Best known is the tsarist Russian diaspora from the mid-19th century to the 1910s that included revolutionary socialists and Zionists. Another diaspora of the time, the Ottoman diaspora in French-speaking Switzerland, though less well known, excelled in trying to mediate between reference frames. A legacy of this is the transfer of Swiss Civil Law to the early Republic of Turkey by a diaspora member and student of law who later became minister of Justice. Leyla VON MENDE breaks new ground in a field hitherto dominated by studies on politicized lawyers, engineers and medical doctors by showing the important role of pedagogics. Activists in the Ottoman diaspora believed in their mission to transform the Ottoman world; they believed the pedagogics they learnt in Geneva to be universal though in need of being translated and adapted to “the East”, together with new institutions of learning. Druv RAINA puts into question earlier ideas of the transmission of scientific knowledge from the West to the East. His rich piece emphasizes the role of new institutions for drawing new “maps of knowledge” in colonial India and suggests instructive comparisons.

In today’s Switzerland, diasporas from the Near and the Far East are no longer mostly composed of members of elites; and now, they are much more numerous. Fifty years ago, untrained and materially poor people began to migrate from Turkey to Switzerland, a by-product, as it were, of the organized

2 My paper on this topic, “Transfer of Revolutionary Language in the Diaspora? The Case of the Russian Socialist Helphand Parvus in Switzerland, Germany and Istanbul (1867–1924)”, was read at the workshop, but published in *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 12, 2011: 289–413.

labor migration to Germany. Most of them gave up their initial idea of returning soon. Nevertheless they maintained strong ties to their home country, with a number of them, in particular retired people and a few professionals, now living in both countries. In this way they simultaneously form diasporic and transnational communities. Even if not in this same specific way, and allowing for different class backgrounds, this is also true for the second generation Indians in Switzerland studied in Rohit JAIN's article.

Diasporas from Turkey, India and other countries have successfully introduced elements of their cuisine and at the same time reframed them. They succeeded to do so both for low budgets and high standards. Can "hesitant hands" thus become gripping hands of people on both sides of multifaceted tables? In her paper on dining patterns in diaspora food culture transfer, Mareile FLITSCH pays particular attention to the "hesitant hand and body", reluctant to change eating habits, and with this to the possible loss of autonomy over food and identity. Innovation as well as alienation are part of the diasporic existence. A way to deal with this condition is humor and the parody of what alienates, as does the videoartist described in Natalie BOEHLER's article. We leave it up to you, dear reader, to discover the multiple—seminal, hesitant or humorous—diasporic tongues addressed in this issue.

Let me finally, in the name of the organizers and participants of the workshop, express our gratitude to those who generously supported this project. They all enabled us to enjoy a pleasant meeting in the beautiful environment of the Old Botanic Garden in the centre of Zurich, to benefit from productive discussions, and to publish the results in due time, in a true collaboration of Zurich and Munich. Our thanks go to the Swiss Academy of Humanities and Social Sciences, to the Ethnographic Museum of the University of Zurich, to the University of Zurich Research Priority Program on *Asia and Europe*, to the Swiss-Asia Society, the editors of which agreed to include these contributions in the *Asiatische Studien / Etudes Asiatiques*, to Eric Alms who polished the English of this issue, and to several helpers whose names do not appear in it.

