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CONGRESS

Middle East and Muslim Worlds  
Studies

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## Panel 19

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### Times, Trajectories and Politics of Intimacy

Usually associated with the notions of effects, secrets, sexuality, care or individualism, intimacy has become central in a large number of anthropological studies. Intimacy discloses dynamics of closeness and proximity, of distancing and separation, which allows us to interrogate the spatial and temporal dimensions of social and interpersonal relations. Thus, intimacy interlaces with the political, economic and cultural dynamics of a given society.

This panel presents some researches focusing on intimacy in the Arab world and among migrant subjects. During the last decades, peoples' conditions of mobility (migration, displacements, etc.) and experiences of political breakdowns (revolutions, conflicts, economic crises, etc.) have affected and reconfigured intimacy. These reconfigurations concern the fields of family, conjugality, friendship, but also the job market. Often associated with contractual relations, the latter can also be thought through interpersonal intimacies.

To enrich current research, which mainly focuses on the spatial dimension of intimacy, we will focus more particularly on the relationships between intimacy and temporalities. This aspect will enable us to question individual practices and trajectories, especially those concerned by mobility, and thus to grab the transformations of intimacy over longer periods.

**People in charge : De Giacometti Michela (EHESS, Iris) et Breteau Marion (CEFAS Koweït, Aix-Marseille Université, American University of Kuwait)**

**Discussant : Odasso Laura (Collège de France, Chaire Migrations et Sociétés - Institut Convergence Migration & Aix-Marseille univ, LAMES)**

#### Program

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##### **Acuña Mariela Elizabeth (EHESS, Iris)**

##### *The trajectory of a Malagasy domestic worker in Lebanon*

Studies on migrant domestic workers in Lebanon have mainly focused on the kafala system and used the concepts of «agency» and «daily resistance» to understand how these women escape, negotiate and transform the structures of power and subordination in which they are involved. Today, Lebanon counts 250,000 domestic workers who are mainly originated from East Africa and Southeast Asia. In this context, research has mostly focused on Ethiopian and Filipino domestic workers, as they constitute the most representative groups. On the contrary, my work focuses on Malagasy women, who represent a minority in the country and have rarely been the subject of in-depth study.

Based on fieldwork carried out in Lebanon within a Malagasy community of domestic workers and complementary fieldwork in Madagascar, my communication will focus on the trajectory of a woman who has become a real community leader. Arrived in Lebanon as a housekeeper, this woman has pursued what she calls her «religious calling», by becoming a pastor in a church of the central district of Beirut,

where several migrant women meet regularly. During masses and collective gatherings, while claiming her role of a spiritual guide, but also her activism for the abolition of the kafala system, this woman advises domestic workers on intimate topics (for instance to avoid romantic relationships) and behavioral standards at the intersection of contestation, resistance and reproduction of power hierarchies. The analysis of her trajectory and actions will shed light on the political strategies of visibility and protest put in place by Malagasy migrant domestic workers and will interrogate the analytical relevance of the concepts of «agency» and «resistance».

### **Breteau Marion (CEFAS Koweït, Aix-Marseille Université, American University of Kuwait)**

#### *Transmission, Circulation and Resistance of Intimate Know-how: Migrant Domestic Work in the Sultanate of Oman*

In comparison with previous generations, almost all Omani families today recruit one or more domestic workers, the shaghghalāt. Coming from India, Southeast Asia or East Africa, these women are of various ages and mostly precarious backgrounds. They take care of multiple tasks, such as housekeeping, cooking or childcare. These tasks refer symbolically to the trivial, the repetitive, even the dirty and the unclean, which explains why housewives sometimes prefer to delegate them, neglect that contributes to the loss of certain skills among the new generation of Omani households. This also leads to the circulation and «internationalization» of other competencies, as the employees maintain the houses in a way that is not considered «Omani», while having to comply with ways of doing that are inculcated by their employers. The housewives (the madam) are those who manage the work of their employees, with whom age differences, hence experience exist. Strongly shaped by hierarchical and contractual relations, that are applied to the intimate sphere, this phenomenon helps to examine gender roles at play, since domestic work – and the private sphere – is reserved for women. In this context, the process of recruitment can sometimes induce tensions of legitimacy as housekeeping is in the hands of the employees, who can deprive employers of power, hence reinforcing their authority on them. Such tensions lead to resisting attitudes in the circulation of knowledge and the carrying out of tasks, which will be the object of this communication.

### **De Giacometti Michela (EHESS, Iris)**

#### *Intimacy-making throughout otherness: civil marriages of Lebanese in Cyprus*

This communication will treat of a particular phenomenon of peoples' mobility: the travel of hundreds of Lebanese nationals to Cyprus to get a civil marriage. Over the last few years, this phenomenon has gone mainstream. While media have mainly focused on the wedding industry, they have rarely paid attention to ritual practices and representations of civil marriage among future husbands and wives in Cyprus and even less among local civil servants.

Civil marriage in Cyprus is of great interest for non-nationals or nationals of non-Cypriote origins and its institutionalization has come with colonial history in the island.

Associated with the imaginary of the interethnic alliances between Greek and Turkish Cypriotes, civil marriage is thus subjected to double standard treatment. On the one hand, it conveys civil servants' suspicions about marriages of convenience between nationals and non-nationals (especially since the Republic of Cyprus joined the EU in 2004). On the other hand, it enhances unions which are described as "impossible loves", in particular when it concerns nationals from neighboring countries such as Lebanon and Israel, where civil marriage does not exist.

How then do the establishment of a civil marriage industry and the ritual practices which I observed in Cyprus contribute to the production of a discourse on intimacy through otherness and to its circulation between the concerned countries? How did this discourse evolve? I will answer these questions by mobilizing some interviews with Lebanese couples and Greek-Cypriote civil servants, as well as observations of civil marriage rituals in the Republic of Cyprus.

*Physical Intimacy, Intimate Life and the Control of Sexual and Reproductive Behavior in Tunisian Family Planning Centers*

Based on 10-month fieldwork conducted in several family planning centers in the region of Tunis (2013-2014), this communication focuses on the intimate relationships between health professionals and female patients. During sexual and reproductive health consultations, health professionals are compelled to establish physical intimacy with the patients who need to be examined. Such situations can be difficult for both clinic staff and users in a society where female modesty is socially valued and cultivated. Medical consultations also involve a different kind of intimacy: to understand the origin of a disease or to counsel a contraceptive method, practitioners need to consider their patients' intimate behaviors to treat or advise them.

Sexual and reproductive health clinics are also places where, through health professionals, institutions monitor and control families' sexual and reproductive behaviors. In particular, practitioners convey reproductive norms that affect couples' choices about the desirable number of children, the birth spacing time, the partake of family responsibilities between spouses, etc. In short, in the planning centers, social and family norms are instilled which are intended to influence the future of patients and their families, leading them to forms of programming oriented by neoliberal rationality. In order to explore these three aspects, I will interrogate the ethnographic material collected, highlighting the conflicts, negotiations and compromises that sexual and reproductive health consultations generate.