FROBENIUS INSTITUTE
FOR RESEARCH IN
CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY

The
British
Academy

# Conceptualising Religious Infrastructures
## International Workshop
## September 24th, 2020



**Organisers:**

**Yanti Hoelzchen (Frobenius Institute Frankfurt) &**
**Benjamin Kirby (University of Leeds)**

# Workshop Outline

Infrastructure is conventionally defined as the background "scaffolding" that makes social and economic activity—*even life itself*—possible. Recent anthropological studies have foregrounded the social work that infrastructural networks do by constituting and reconfiguring everyday forms of sociality and lived experience. These insights generate new opportunities to "think infrastructurally" (Chu 2014) about religion.

Bringing together international scholars with empirically-grounded contributions from sub-Saharan African, Russian and Central Asian settings, this workshop aims to consolidate a theoretical framework of "religious infrastructures" which extends the concept's analytical potential. In thinking infrastructurally about religion, we explore how religiously-devised infrastructures intersect with broader infrastructural landscapes, and how—no less than mass transit systems and water supply networks—they sustain shared ecologies and enable socio-material conditions of life support and survival (e.g. Böhme 2017; Farías/Blok 2016; Larkin 2016). We focus on the agency of religious infrastructures *themselves* rather than their constituent parts, i.e. specific objects or technologies mediating (religious) experiences (cf. De Vries 2008; Meyer 2015). This multi-scalar and multi-sited notion of infrastructure presents new ways of thinking about the distribution and operations of religious agency, generating alternative units of analysis for the study of religion. It also contributes to wider efforts to dislodge received assumptions about "religions", or indeed "religion" as a bounded domain which can be understood in isolation from "secular" dynamics (Larkin 2016; Spies 2019).

The Workshop will be held online via Zoom. To participate and receive the login information, please sign up via email to:
**b.j.kirby@leeds.ac.uk**

# Programme

## Session I

| | |
|---|---|
| 3.00 – 3.25 p.m. | Yanti Hoelzchen (Frankfurt)<br>Benjamin Kirby (Leeds)<br>**Welcome and introductory presentation**<br>Discussant: Nelly Babere |
| 3.25 – 3.50 p.m. | Matteo Benussi (Berkeley)<br>**Ethical infrastructure in Muslim Russia: the spatiality of halal living**<br>Discussant: Murtala Ibrahim |
| 3.50 – 4.10 p.m. | Open discussion on session I |
| 4.10 – 4.30 p.m. | Break |

## Session II

| | |
|---|---|
| 4.30 – 4.55 p.m. | Murtala Ibrahim (Utrecht)<br>**Islam in the digital third space: the rise of cyber Islamic practices in northern Nigeria**<br>Discussant: Yanti Hoelzchen |
| 4.55 – 5.20 p.m. | Nelly Babere (Dar es Salaam)<br>**Religious infrastructure, public health, and the politics of urban development: the case of Sinza ward in Dar es Salaam city**<br>Discussant: Peter Lambertz |
| 5.20 – 5.40 p.m. | Open discussion on session II |
| 5.40 – 6.00 p.m. | Break |

## Session III

| | |
|---|---|
| 6.00 – 6.25 p.m. | Peter Lambertz (Leuven)<br>**Enchanted infrastructures: risks, belonging and salvation on Congo's inland waterways**<br>Discussant: Benjamin Kirby |
| 6.25 – 7.00 p.m. | Open discussion on session III and concluding discussion |

# Ethical infrastructure in Muslim Russia
## The spatiality of halal living

Matteo Benussi

Department of Anthropology, University of California, Berkeley /
Ca' Foscari University of Venice

This paper explores the spatial, material dimensions of halal living in Russia's Idel-Ural region through the lens of what I call "ethical infrastructure": the array of places, pieces of equipment, consumables, and material features upon which the very possibility of Idel-Ural Muslims' ethical striving is premised. After the dissolution of the Soviet order in Russia, a galaxy of Islamic piety trends coalesced among the Idel-Ural region's Tatars. The ethos of these piety milieus promotes theological awareness and "inner-worldly" asceticism as well as the pursuit of middle-class aspirations, with ethical consumption emerging as a crucial site of self-formation for Russia's "new Muslims". As a result of this development, concerns about halal and haram have become ubiquitous and halal infrastructure – encompassing cafes, shops, health/fitness facilities, beauty salons, etc. – has increased dramatically in importance and size. Furthermore, Muslims' ethical deliberations and strivings take place in a broader yet set of locales, which may be considered "ethical infrastructure" even without being explicitly marked as "halal". It will be argued that Durkheimian assumptions ingrained in most approaches to "religious" geographies have led scholars to focus almost exclusively on spaces that can be described as "special", "set-apart", "prayed-upon", or "enchanted" – such as mosques, shrines, or pilgrimage sites. This paper puts forth an alternative conceptual framework, by attempting to shift attention to the quotidian, unassuming, even "profane" places where ethical self-formation takes place. It will be argued that these places and their "ethical infrastructure" constitute a crucial if understudied component of Idel-Ural Muslims' engagement with the material world.

# Islam in the digital third space
## The rise of cyber Islamic practices in northern Nigeria

Murtala Ibrahim

Department of Anthropology, Utrecht University

This paper explores the emerging intersection between Islam and new media technology particularly among the Salafi group in northern Nigeria. The paper investigates how the new media precipitates unprecedented changes in how Islamic knowledge and ideas are produced and disseminated as well as the transformation of religious discourse and social relationships that generate a new form of sociality in the region. New media platforms such as Islamic Facebook forums and WhatsApp groups provide spaces for religious discourse, theological arguments, sharing news and information about Islam, circulating Islamic audiovisuals, as well as the evolution of Islamic digital media culture. The new media also facilitates the emergence of new cyber imams who acquired online followers and build their authority online, which results in shifting the nature of traditional religious authority and interpretive rights. Of particular interest is the appearance of alternative discursive entities in cyberspace such as the former Muslim atheists who now freely speak their minds, spread their ideas, and challenge the notions of orthodoxy and blasphemy. These dissenting voices could not have the freedom to express their views in the offline conservative society of northern Nigeria. Arguably, the new media is transformed into religious infrastructure that afforded the rise of a new online cyber Islamic public which in turn impacted the offline public. At the same time, new media generate an online counter-public that challenges the dominant religious order. The paper further examines how the new technology-mediated practices such as the use of digital Islamic audio files, texts, images, and various apps become part of the emergent paraphernalia of Islamic orthopraxy.

## Religious infrastructure, public health, and the politics of urban development
The case of Sinza Ward in Dar es Salaam City

Nelly John Babere

Ardhi University, Dar es Salaam

In many Southern cities, escalating population density is accompanied by a growing aspiration among religious groups to remodel urban landscapes, often manifesting as a religious 'construction boom'. In settings where planning regulations are unevenly implemented, the mushrooming of religious infrastructures can heighten the unliveability of urban neighborhoods. This paper explores the public health challenges posed by a proliferation of infrastructures developed by Christian and Muslim groups in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. It considers the case of Sinza, a residential area where religious developments often appear overnight.

I consider two ways that these 'pop-up' developments threaten the public health of the neighborhood and directly affect the quality of space that many residents wish to have. First, I address the issue of *noise pollution*. Spatial analysis indicates that the distance between individual religious developments is extremely small, amplifying the possibility of antagonistic encounters during hours of worship. Residents report that the noise that these religious sites produce on a daily basis tangibly impairs their wellbeing, often preventing them from engaging in activities after school or work. A second risk that religious infrastructures pose to the community relates to their *built quality*, most of which are constructed with weak materials and sometimes unfinished.

Speaking to these issues of noise pollution and structural integrity, I argue that religious infrastructures can subject neighborhoods to public health hazards which are typically overlooked by urban planners. If religious infrastructures are 'architectures of circulation' (Larkin 2013) which help to sustain mixed habitats, I propose that more attention be directed to how they may also operate as 'architectures of obstruction' or 'blockage' which generate uneven geographies of urban wellbeing.

## Enchanted infrastructures
Risk, belonging and salvation on Congo's inland waterways

Peter Lambertz

Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology /
Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies, KU Leuven

Congo's baleinières ("whaleboats") are vernacular infrastructural assemblages that "enable things [and people] to move across space" (Burchardt/Höhne 2015; Larkin 2013; Tonkiss 2015) par excellence. Ever since the 1990s, they assert a "return to the river" by offering a waterborne solution to the challenges of mobility and transportation to millions of Congolese. In socio-technical synergy with their Chinese Diesel engines, they have grown out of, and into, the specific infrastructural arrangements that have merged in recent decades out of the DR Congo's sole historical experience. The paper combines a semantic inquiry into baleinières' names and inscriptions with ethnographic insights gathered during participatory journeys aboard of these wooden watercraft in Congo's Tshopo province. With a view to illuminating the apparent (re-)enchantment of Congo's fluvial transport infrastructure, it explores the conceptual dialectic between religion and infrastructure in a threefold manner:
(1) The ritual coping with the risks of navigation is well-known to anthropologists of religion. Also aboard of Congo's baleinières the danger of accidents due to snugs, rocky riverbeds and sudden rainstorm incites passengers to charge their journey with religious song and prayer. Additionally, engine breakdowns caused by sinister economic competition need to be fended off spiritually. This lends the infrastructural everyday life of baleinières decidedly religious overtones. (2) Similar to the quest of visiblity, which various religious movements pursue in urban public space, baleinières are also infrastructures that display and thus foster feelings of religious belonging and affiliation. (3) Especially in parts of the country that inhabitants and traders experience as remote (often due to the breakdown of roads and bridges), mobility and the journey itself are lived as a form of salvation, offering exodus and economic resurrection, and making baleinières appear as a "chosen technology". Inspired by existing work on the anthropology of infrastructure, this string of argumentation inquires into the "enchantments of infrastructure" (Harvey/Knox 2012) that locate baleinières on a wider temporal horizon between technological progress and despondency.