

Review

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Barbara Riedel

Orient und Okzident in Calicut. Muslimische Studenten und Studentinnen in Kerala, Südindien, im Spannungsfeld zwischen lokaler Verwurzelung und globalen Verflechtungen.

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That country with the third largest population of Muslims (160 millions) is seldom seen as a Muslim country because of its Hindu majority. Therefore, the German publication of an in depth study of a certain Muslim group has to be considered kind of an event. Barbara Riedel's dissertation (in Anthropology at the University of Freiburg) on the Mappila Muslims of Kerala deals with a subgroup that is remarkable in many ways:

1) In Kerala conversions to Islam occurred quite early because of peaceful trading contacts instead of later militant invasions (and the same was true for conversions to Christianity - Nestorian or Syrian). 2) Trade across the Indian Ocean and Arabian Sea not only fostered cultural exchange but also led to a kind of cosmopolitan orientation and life style. 3) Mappila Muslims even after conversion stuck to the locally established custom of matriliney that stands in blatant contrast to Islamic patriarchy. 4) After the Mappila Muslims lost power and influence to Hindu rulers and because their economic basis had been destroyed with British colonialism, they led a violent rebellion 1921 in association with the Khilafat movement that fought for a re-establishment of the Islamic Caliphate (that just had ended with the Ottoman empire). After their defeat they took decades to recover.

All this is meticulously outlined by Barbara Riedel in the four opening chapters, because it forms the background of present developments and changes. The past entanglements with other regions and the cosmopolitan outlook resulting from three religions living together and having contacts with other cultures and world views can be revived under new conditions in a globalised world.

Focus of the research is on a batch of Muslim students at a Christian college in Calicut/Kozhikode. The ethnographic material given deals with the challenges the students are confronted with and aims to contextualise cosmopolitanism in everyday life. To find out how the students look at life and to explain their openness to a cosmopolitan orientation, the concept of frames of reference is used. Those frames provide criteria of evaluation and orientation in many situations. They are mainly implicit, although they can be made explicit, and often are limited in their explanatory capacity or related to local circumstances, though some of them are more general or almost global. Any person somehow has her individual set of a multiplicity of frames available. They are given

by and learned in their families, religious communities and school. Making a more reflexive use of those frames of reference might lead to a more cosmopolitan outlook.

In chapters 5 until 7 the three most important contexts for the establishment of the frames are inspected to single out the most challenging aspects of (student) life today. Concerning family life the extended family still forms kind of an ideal although the nuclear family is increasingly spreading. Most important topic is the arrangement of marriage that is widely accepted though sometimes circumvented. Considering Islam we find the two strictly opposed possibilities of either obedience to tradition and its upholders or autonomous interpretation of text and tradition. A good education is highly valued by most families and the time spent at the institutions offers some (limited) space for experimentation with relations of friendship and love. The more open minded or cosmopolitan the students are here, the more they force their parents and relatives to be.

A considerable number of young people/couples leave their home region to look for a brighter future elsewhere. That is reason why up to 30% of the GDP of Kerala consists of remittances - mostly from the Gulf region. This fact shows that the historical experience of the Mappila Muslims still works as an orienting frame and at least in part explains a "cosmopolitanism at work".

The book offers lots of interesting material that, nevertheless, remains mainly descriptive. The central concept of the frames of reference surely is very useful to explain how orientations come about and how they change. But in a next step also this concept has to be explained in more detail: How exactly are these frames acquired and how flexible are they really? This points back to detailed descriptions of socialisation processes or asks for theoretical concepts to explain them. Of course, here Pierre Bourdieu's concept of the habitus comes to mind.

There is nothing better to be said about a piece of research than that it answers some intriguing questions, but on the other hand points out to the next ones.