

Mona Abaza

## My *pérégrinations allemandes*, my Thirteenth Year in Germany



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As it happens, the first time I came to Germany was 13 years ago. Being quite superstitious with numbers and other matters, I cannot overlook this fact. My 13th year in Germany turned out to be the most crucial for self-reflection.

Since then, I have spent more time outside of Germany than in Germany itself, due to the nature of my work and my interest in finding links between Islam in Southeast Asia and the Middle East. The nature of my research took me as far as the southern part of the hemisphere, where I could have happily settled.

This year at the Wissenschaftskolleg has been one of the most significant in my life concerning my *pérégrinations allemandes*. It has given me the opportunity to reflect anew my German experience. It has allowed me to have time for meditation. Being an Egyptian-German by marriage, trying to reconcile cultures is not an easy task because any encounter of the third kind entails fascination and esoteric misunderstandings. Indeed, it has given me the chance to mature and rethink about how to be "à cheval" between cultures and yet maintain a critical stand in all situations. This was enriched by my being in the "centre" of Berlin. And indeed Berlin is a fascinating cosmopolitan town. I

constantly had to resist the attraction of spending time with friends or being constantly reminded by the other Fellows of the cultural and social attractions.

I think I will miss the lively breakfasts with the Fellows of the Villa Walther where the most witty discussions about the joyful science intermingled with bursting laughter. Friendships and mirror images, tensions, affinities, non-affinities, collapses and self-reconstruction, the exchange of music, books, papers and travelling ideas, collectively watching Indian films, concerts at the Kolleg, intensive discussions after each lecture, swimming in the muddy and a bit smelly lake, meditation and reclusion for writing indeed filled all my time. I will miss the exchange of thoughts that I had with various members of the staff from whom I have extensively learnt different perspectives. The excellent library facilities that brought all the books we dreamt of to our desks made my other friends and colleagues in Germany very envious.

I was able to write an extensive part of my book. I am currently working on the discourse of the "Islamization of Knowledge" from a critical perspective. The "Islamization of Knowledge" debate was initiated at a conference in Mecca in 1977. Since then, this debate led to the creation of several International Universities in Pakistan and Malaysia, offices in Washington, Cairo, Jordan, and various other countries and numerous publications. My book will deal with the networks and biographies of the ideologues who nurtured such a debate. The major thrust of the book will deal with an analysis of one discourse in two different societies; namely Egypt and Malaysia. The language of Islamization will be located within the general sociological fields of these two different countries. I look at the context and internationalization of the debate. Although the discourse and language of the protagonists may seem indistinguishable, and while the debate undoubtedly entails a global dimension, the politics of Islamization nonetheless differ locally. The rejection by the protagonists of Islamization of "imported" values as well as of sociological tools which could be broadly classified under the rubric of "cultural invasion" are the direct consequence of the competitive interaction between East and West. In other words, such a discourse should be contextualized within a West/East dialectical relationship rather than an inherent "oriental" indigenous discourse. I plead here for an interactionist sociology on the cross-cultural level. The claim of "imported values" is already made in classificatory terms set by the interaction with the West. The discourse has been globalized. One can, for instance, purchase in Kuala Lumpur or Cairo the same writings of Egyptian, Arab, Pakistani, Malaysian and Arab-American intellectuals, or meet Algerian, Tunisian and Pakistani academics working at the

International Islamic University in Kuala Lumpur. It is also global in that it was originated by a Palestinian American in a Conference in Mecca. This does not contradict the fact that there is a diversification, in the local context, through the manoeuvres of the various governments to utilize the politics of Islamization. These variations can be observed either on the level of co-optation for state construction from "above" or suppression and the use of a reverse Islamic language to fight the underground religious opposition.

One of the major differences is that the discourse in Egypt reflects the secular/Islamist polarization and tensions, while in Malaysia it was adopted by the government to build up "new" Islamic institutions in order to enhance a form of official Islam.

The debate itself stirred vehement strong critiques and apprehensions among Arab intellectuals concerning "Islamizing everything". I will discuss in details the various counter-debates.

I also completed an essay on the correspondence between the Egyptian *al-Manar* magazine (1898-1936) and the World of Southeast Asia, which will be published in France.

I also participated in various conferences and seminars:

- Deutsche Arbeitsgemeinschaft Vorderer Orient für gegenwartsbezogene Forschung und Dokumentation (DAVO), Hamburg, November 28-30, 1996. Paper: "The Islamization of Sciences in Egypt: Debates and Critique".  
Freie Universität Berlin, Fachbereich Politische Wissenschaft. December 2, 1996. Seminar: "The Islamization of Knowledge: Divergences in the Debate in Egypt and Malaysia".
- Maison des Sciences de l'Homme, Paris. March 3-5, 1997. Colloquium "The Asian Mediterranean Sea in the `longue duree'"  
Paper: "Reading the Correspondence of the Cairo Magazine, *al-Manar*, with the Southeast Asian World".
- Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, Institut für Asien- und Afrikawissenschaften. May 23, 1997. Colloquium: "Asiatische Formen des Islam", Paper: "Three Biographies of the al-Attas Family in Southeast Asia".

Finally I would like to conclude my report with the prose of a French Orientalist whose works on Islam are monumental (with all the reservations one might today express against Orientalism). I am fully aware that Henry Corbin was reproached for his overemphasis on the spirituality of the Orient, but I still enjoy reading him. He wrote this piece called "Theologie au bord du lac", which I would like to quote:

Tout n'est que révélation; Il ne peut y avoir que ré-vélation. Or la révélation vient de l'esprit, et il n'y a point de connaissance de l'Esprit. C'est le crépuscule bientôt, mais maintenant les nuages sont encore clairs, les sapins ne sont pas encore sombres, car le lac les éclaire de transparence. Et tout est vert, d'un vert qui serait plus riche que tout un jeu d'orgue, au récit. Il faut l'entendre assis, très proche de la Terre, les bras bien clos, les yeux aussi, faire semblant de dormir.

Car il ne faut pas se promener comme un vainqueur, et vouloir donner un nom aux choses, à toutes les choses; c'est elles qui te diront qui elles sont, si tu écoutes soumis comme un amant; car soudain pour toi, dans la paix sans trouble de cette forêt du Nord, la Terre est venue à Toi, visible comme un Ange qui serait femme, peut-être, et dans cette apparition, cette solitude très verte et très peuplée, oui, l'Ange aussi est vêtu de vert, c'est-à-dire de crépuscule, de silence, de vérité. Alors il y a en toi toute la douceur qui est présente en l'abandon à une étreinte qui triomphe de toi.

Terre, Ange, Femme, tout cela en une seule chose, que j'adore et qui est dans cette forêt. Le crépuscule sur le lac, mon Annonciation. La montagne: une ligne. Ecoute! Il va se passer quelque chose, oui. L'attente est immense, l'air frissonne sous une bruine à peine visible; les maisons qui allongent au ras du sol leur bois rouge et rustique, leur toit de chaume, sont là, de l'autre côté du lac.

Henri Corbin

Leksand en Dalécarlie

au bord du lac de Siljan

24 août 1932, 18 heures.

Henry Corbin, L'Herne, Paris, 1981.

This piece transmits intuitively some of the moods I had on the shore of the lake of the Kolleg.