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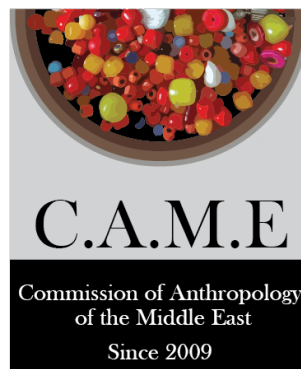
Anthropology Transforming, Middle East in Tension

September 10–12th, 2025, IFEA, Istanbul

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Panel Proposals:

1. Medicalisation

Convenor: Soraya Tremayne (soraya.tremayne@anthro.ox.ac.uk)

The notions of health and illness, which have been specific to the culture of the social group in which they occur, have been historically shared between different societies and through cross-cultural exchanges. However, the circulation of knowledge has taken a dramatic turn in the speed with which it is spreading across the world, through globalisation and the internet technologies, in the past few decades. One of the outcomes of these exchanges in the medical field has been the emergence of new perceptions of health, illness, and disease leading to the medicalisation of

non-medical conditions and problems, which are being defined and treated as health problems often requiring medical treatment. Social scientists view medicalisation as the act of excessively defining and medically treating conditions, behaviours, or attitudes that are not related to medical problems. Such approach often appears in the form of socially constructed issues turned into medical problems requiring increased medical intervention and control and the subsequent loss of autonomy by the patient. While medicalisation has many benefits, such as improved health outcomes and access to treatments, it also raises important questions about the limits of medical authority, the construction of disease and disorder, and the exercise of power over individuals' bodies and lives. Foucault's (1963) concept of "biopower" describes medicalisation as a mechanism of social control, and a process by which the biotechnology has enabled the exercise of power over individuals' bodies and lives, leading to a "medical gaze" that shapes our understanding of health and illness. Medicalisation's permeation into everyday life ranges, *inter alia*, from the transformations of the body through exercise, diet, or medical intervention (for example, cosmetic surgery, in a quest for re-shaping the body into a "healthy" or aesthetically "perfect one"); to the understanding of mental health and wellbeing where non-conforming behaviour is treated as a medical problem.

This panel invites contributions on topics related to medicalisation and to what extent it is adapted and accommodated into various cultural settings in the Middle East.

2. Games and Sports
Convenor: Christian Bromberger (brombergerchristian8@gmail.com)

Games are free, uncertain, fictitious activities, with rules that suspend ordinary laws; the unreality of games is underlined by the name given to them... Games can value competition, other chance, still others simulacrum (playing with dolls) or vertigo (speed in a car). Some combine these different characteristics. These games can be physical, verbal, use illusion (dressing up for example) and are either intended for children or adults (betting, for example). Sports are competitive games, based on bodily prowess, against an opponent, a distance, a time, an obstacle, an animal, or even oneself. Considered in their dual dimension of practice and spectacle, sports are privileged observatories of the classification of genders (according to the sexual distribution of practices), of local, regional, national antagonisms (through the militant fervor of supporters aroused by the spectacle of competitions), of the threshold of authorized violence (variable according to societies), of the canons of bodily beauty, forms of sociability between athletes and between spectators, of the evolution of measuring instruments, consubstantial with sport, and finally of the ritual dimensions of major sporting events.

3. Human-Animal Relations
Convenor: Jean-Pierre Digard (jpdigard@gmail.com)

The dominant image of human-animal relations today is that of Western pets. But it would be simplistic to limit ourselves to this particular case. On the contrary, it is important to explore other situations, by asking the following questions in particular:
- What domestic animals are raised in Islamic countries, from small ruminants (sheep, goats) to cats and dogs, not forgetting camelids?

- How are they reared: outdoors or in special buildings, extensively or intensively, in herds or individually?
- How are they used: for slaughter or for work, for economic purposes or for pleasure?
- Particular attention will be paid to the cat and the dog, which are the closest to man, but for different purposes: the cat was first admitted to human homes as a predator of rodents, before being admitted for its companionship; the dog, considered impure to varying degrees, was initially devoted to defending property and herds against animal and human predators, before becoming man's first animal companion. But these two species have had very different statuses and followed very different, even opposing, paths depending on the religion, such as Shiite Islam and Zoroastrianism in Iran.

4. Gender and Sexuality in Iran and the South Caucasus at the Turn of the 20th Century
Convenor: Janet Afary (jafary@ucsb.edu)

This panel will look at gender and sexuality issues among Shi'i Muslim populations of Iran and South Caucasus (modern-day Republic of Azerbaijan), focusing on the years 1870-WWI. Presenters are encouraged to use a variety of historical archives such as travelogues, letters, memoirs, telegrams, plays, newspapers, poems, and graphic arts. Our focus is on how these societies were resisting or responding, to modern gender norms and the particular role which residents of South Caucasus (many Shi'i-Azerbaijani speakers) played in disseminating these ideas in Iran and the region.

5. Memoirs, Life Histories, Stories, Narratives, Oral History and Memory:
Individuals of Middle Eastern Societies
Convenor: Mary Elaine Hegland (mhegland@scu.edu)

Social/cultural anthropology and ethnography have a long and illustrious history of considering individual lives, attitudes, and understandings, although sometimes the emphasis on commonly understood culture has overtaken individual variation, choices, and outlooks. We want to attend both to individual choices, decisions and innovations and persons' contributions to and understandings of their cultures and societies and also to trends and commonalities in cultures and societies. So much of cultural change, cultural variation, multitude of cultural choices, dynamics of decision-making, individuality, and even cultural and social trends and how all of this interacts with changes or resistance to change in economics, politics, migration, media, education, international connections, and religion can be understood through attention to the memoirs, life histories, stories, and narratives of individuals. For this panel, speakers who recount memoirs/stories of individuals gathered through interviews, conversations, recording narratives, gathering of letters or other written or published materials are invited to present some of the narrative or narratives and what can be learned from them. We are also open to analyses of life histories/stories gathered previously by others and what can be learned from them.

6. New Realities: The Role of Technology in Shaping Everyday Life in the Middle East
Convenor: Seyed Abdolreza Hosseini (abdr.hosseini@gmail.com)

The rapid proliferation of technological advancements—ranging from cars and applications to intelligent infrastructures—has profoundly transformed everyday life in the Middle East. These technologies have not only reshaped the way individuals work, communicate, and navigate urban spaces but have also embedded themselves so deeply into social consciousness that their influence is often taken for granted. This panel explores the agency of these technological actors in structuring daily routines, labor practices, urban mobility, and communal interactions. By examining how these tools, systems, and AI mediate human experiences, redefine public and private spaces, and influence cultural and economic landscapes, we aim to shed light on the evolving interplay between technology and society in the region. Through interdisciplinary perspectives, we seek to critically engage with the methodological and conceptual challenges of studying these shifts, questioning whether technology merely facilitates change or actively constructs new realities.

7. Rituals in Movement: Pilgrimage, Globalization, and Diaspora
Convenors: Paulo Pinto and Gisele Fonseca Chagas (philu99@gmail.com; giselechagas@id.uff.br)

Rituals are a central part of the religious life of Middle Eastern communities around the globe, connecting them through shared patterns of devotion and worship, as is the case with shared rituals such as salat. Besides their recurrence in different places, rituals also connect communities through their participation in the circulation of people, symbols and experiences across the Middle East and its diaspora. Rituals can shape the movement of people, as in pilgrimage, as they can be shaped and changed through the dislocation of those who perform it, as in the case of immigrant, refugee, and diasporic communities. Rituals can also move through vast spaces, as in the case of globalized cults and devotions. This panel welcomes papers based on ethnographic research on rituals and movements in different Middle Eastern and diasporic contexts.

8. Decolonial and Feminist Movements in Central Asia: Resistance, Agency, and Transformation
Convenor: Rano Turaeva (Rano.Turaeva@lmu.de)

This panel explores the intersections of decolonial and feminist movements in Central Asia, bringing together scholars and activists to examine the evolving landscape of gender, power, and resistance in the region. Amidst the legacies of Soviet modernity, contemporary state policies, and global feminist discourses, Central Asian activists and intellectuals are shaping new narratives of agency and justice in their efforts to decolonise power matrixes of discourse making and representation. Panelists will discuss how decolonial perspectives shape scholarly discourses and inform feminist struggles, addressing such themes as gendered nationalism, post-Soviet patriarchy, epistemic disobedience, and the role of digital activism, artwork in shaping decolonial and feminist discourses. Contributions will critically analyze the dominant knowledge creation in the region, the tensions between Western and other knowledge, global feminist frameworks and local traditions, the impact of authoritarian governance on feminist organizing, and the strategies

employed by grassroots movements to challenge systemic inequalities. By bridging academic analysis with lived experience, this panel aims to foster a deeper understanding of the challenges and possibilities of feminist and decolonial praxis in Central Asia, offering insights into how these movements navigate repression, co-optation, and transnational solidarities.

9. Emerging Spiritualities: The Trajectory of New Spiritual Practices in Turkish Society

Convenor: Kerem Görkem Arsalan (kg.arslan@unistra.fr)

In the 19th century, magnetism and spiritualism gained prominence in the Ottoman Empire. Following the establishment of the Turkish Republic, neo-spiritualists congregated within specific social circles. Simultaneously, growing interest in Eastern mysticism paved the way for the development of new spiritual identities in contemporary Turkey. As for the 2000s, the democratization of the internet further facilitated the diffusion of European spiritual trends, intensifying interest in occultism, witchcraft, and paganism, particularly among younger generations. The widespread adoption of communication technologies and social media, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, accelerated the popularity of fast-consumption spiritual practices and prompted the integration of folkloric Islamic traditions into these new spiritual frameworks. This interdisciplinary panel, drawing on religious anthropology, marginalization studies, and history, will examine how these emerging movements challenge established religious norms and navigate tensions between secularism, individualism, and religious conservatism. These spiritual transformations raise essential questions about the intersection of religion, identity, and social change in a rapidly evolving cultural landscape. Discussions will focus on the sociopolitical and cultural factors driving these movements, their interactions with state and religious authorities, and how individuals are reshaping their spiritual identities amid the pressures of globalization and modernization. This panel seeks to provide a comprehensive analysis of the shifting religious and spiritual dynamics in Turkey and their broader implications for contemporary society.

10. Research in Progress

Convenor: Soheila Shahshahani (soheilairan@gmail.com)

11. Toward Visual Anthropology: A screening of documentary films from the Middle East followed by a discussion

Convenor: Shilan Sa'adi (shilan.saadi80@gmail.com)