

LETTER FROM THE EDITORS

Dear Readers:

Since 2005, the SOAS Journal has been dedicated to showcasing the talent and diverse specialties of SOAS doctoral researchers. This year's theme has been 'Identities: Power and politics' and its aim has been to attract papers that particularly transcend boundaries of conventional approaches and disciplines to assess questions around power and identity formation. Power is a multifarious, multidimensional concept that is increasingly conceived as fluid and ubiquitous under Foucauldian thinking. In this edition, young researchers explore questions and issues of power and identity in politicised discourse, and articulate and interpret these issues through their different positionalities and in different knowledge systems. We believe that the articles that follow cumulatively offer different appraisals of power-laden discourses and practices that enrich our thinking concerning the intersection of global and local feminisms, global and local notions of personhood, the creation of hierarchies through the symbolic manipulation of food supply, the politics underlying the branding of national identity in changing contexts, ideals of personhood and morality as reflected in children's tales from different cultures, as well as cross-cultural thinking around ubiquitous power differentials between men and women.

In her article 'Looking for the Indian woman's identity: Discrepancies and power imbalances across theory and popular culture' Monika Hirmer provides us with a literature review that spans second- and third-wave feminism in the West and the manner in which these waves influenced the representation of Indian women. The author observes that, while in scholarly literature there is a discursive shift from dichotomous notions juxtaposing 'woman as goddess/woman as whore', to a more fluid and complex image of women who do not conform to the mainstream value system, a similar shift could not be traced in Indian popular culture, which responds to demands of collective imagery. The originality of her submission lies in the query whether shifts in discourse represent actuality or simply changes in academic paradigms reflecting vested interests. The paper traces discursive change and asks important questions that everyone in cross-cultural, feminist and agency studies in both the West and in India should reflect on.

In 'The meaning of *Adabu* and *Adhabu* for the 'child protection' discourse in Zanzibar' Franziska Maria Fay relates the concepts *adabu* (manners/discipline) and *adhabu* (punishment), which constitute local notions of child socialisation, to the 'child protection' discourse in Zanzibar, Tanzania. She argues that the two concepts, which are ultimately interwoven, are considered within the research community to mutually contribute toward achieving children's social personhood. International child protection discourses that forbid corporal punishment, however, have generally ignored such local concepts. The author concludes by calling for 'the need for child protection policy and practice [to move] beyond universalised ideas of well-being and towards more meaningful approaches of protecting children in their everyday environments.' We believe that this submission makes an invaluable contribution to the literature that deals with development practice in the cross-

cultural context. It could provide particular guidance to development organisations that work to adjust their methods and approaches to local knowledge systems.

Building upon Marcel Mauss' work on gift economies, in 'Foodways and Empire in Asante History, Ghana', Brandi Simpson Miller innovatively explores the far-reaching power dynamics that underlie and define food exchange. The paper convincingly demonstrates that rituals of commensality are symbolically laden means, endowed with a type of soft power that wields repercussions reaching far beyond the gastronomic experience, extending into socio-cultural, political and economic domains. In particular, the author analyses state dinners hosted by two different Asante kings in the nineteenth century and decodes how the symbolic use of food was deployed as diplomatic device with the purpose of establishing specific relationships of superiority and inferiority between the hosts and their European guests.

In her article 'Mankurtism, monuments and marketing: Identity and power in post-Soviet contemporary art of Central Asia', Kasia Ploskonka analyses how notions of identity are articulated in post-Soviet nations through contemporary art. Subsequent to the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 the need emerged for nations of Central Asia to build new identities, on a local as well as an international level. With a focus on Kazakhstan, the author explores how the nation has been repositioned in the present through the evocation of specific elements from its past. This nation branding is expressed through the phenomenon of *mankurtization*, the erection of new monuments and strategies of marketing. The author argues that in these processes of identity deconstruction and reconstruction at the intersection of complex contradictions, including social structures, religious traditions, and contemporary globalised desires, there has been a selective forgetting and privileging of specific elements guided by the new elites in their attempts to consolidate their positions on international platforms.

The volume concludes with two translations. Nadežda Christopher's translation of two children's stories, also from Kazakhstan, provides unique insight into what could be described as Kazakh ideals concerning personhood and morality. The author's translated stories, as she herself states, are driven by a primary desire to 'provide some insight into the culture and the mentality of the Kazakh people' with whom she conducted her PhD research. While these stories are children's tales, they should be approached as building blocks of socialisation that influence adults and entire cultural mentalities, and can therefore serve as crucial analytical frames for cross-cultural understanding.

The second work of translation by A. Ebru Akcasu, is a series of letters from the early 1900s composed by various literati regarding gender equality within Islam. Their authors ponder the possibility of equality considering biological, social, cultural, and religious parameters that are salient in the equality discourse within the societies they know. Through letters, they express their own speculations about reasons that continue to contribute to the unequal status of females and males, but also rationalisations as to why equality is rightful and desirable. It is especially gratifying to see how these authors juxtapose local problems of gender inequality to those of Western societies and societies of other times, reminding us that attitudes and norms that propagate gender inequalities are not unique to a specific religio-cultural context or historical moment, but are transnational and require attention by everyone throughout the world.

It is our hope that the readers of this volume will benefit from and enjoy the carefully selected publications as much as the Editorial team did in the process of reviewing them.

With best wishes,

Romina Istratii and Monika Hirmer.