

03-b

CROSSROADS ASIA Postscript to Concept Paper



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Postscript to Crossroads Asia through the Lens of Mobility and Migration

Working Group Migration

Crossroads Asia Concept Papers, ISSN: 2192-6043

Competence Network Crossroads Asia: Conflict – Migration – Development

Editors: Ingeborg Baldauf, Stephan Conermann, Anna-Katharina Hornidge, Hermann Kreutzmann, Shahnaz Nadjmabadi, Dietrich Reetz, Conrad Schetter and Martin Sökefeld.

How to cite this paper: Migration Group (2014): Postscript to “Crossroads Asia through the Lens of Mobility and Migration - A Conceptual Approach”. In: Crossroads Asia Concept Paper Series, No.03-b.

Partners of the Network:



Imprint

Competence Network *Crossroads Asia: Conflict – Migration – Development*

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Postscript to Crossroads Asia through the Lens of Mobility and Migration - A Conceptual Approach

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1. Introduction

People's migration and different forms of mobility are the joint areas of investigation in our working group. In the literature on social networks, migration and borderland studies, the mobilities of people, objects, and ideas are considered constitutive for the creation and reproduction of different layers of translocal connections. Mobility and connectivity/connectedness evolved as the key elements of the working group approach and are central aspects characterising the current stage of our research. In this supplement to the original concept paper on migration (Crossroads Asia Working Group Migration 2012) we reflect on the practicality of our initial conceptual framework in the light of our fieldwork experience, empirical data and findings. Some concepts have proven their value in our research contexts, while others we had to rethink, to enhance and to complement with new conceptual ideas. During the research process, new aspects came to the fore and gained importance, such as the power of discourses and processes of boundary setting and enacting. In the following we document some of our ongoing conceptual reflections with particular focus on different modes and formats of mobility and connectivity, and reconnect these considerations to the emerging Crossroads Asia Studies approach (Mielke & Hornidge 2014).

2. Modes and Formats of Mobility

Mobility is one of the central aspects in our work. It is linking our projects but is at the same time embracing a broad range of phenomena. Our research work centres on people's migration and internal displacement in the context of war and insecurity in Afghanistan (Work Package (WP) Christoph Wenzel), flows and connections in Afghan marital networks (WP Ayfer Durdu), migration networks that facilitate higher education and livelihood change in high-mountain areas of India and Pakistan (WP Andreas Benz), transnational community-building in religious networks (WP Dietrich Reetz), migration and coping strategies in the aftermath of the inter-ethnic conflict in the Ferghana Valley (WP Aksana Ismailbekova), processes of Re-Islamisation in Tajikistan (WP Petra Tiller), and the mobility of slaves across and beyond Central Asia in the 18th and 19th centuries (WP Elena Smolarz).

Spatial mobility – linked to highly diverse ambitions from securing survival to obtaining higher education to spreading ideas and concepts, both secular and religious – is central to our research work. This spatial mobility is often linked with social mobility or at least the hope of achieving any form of improvement by employing the strategy of mobility or benefiting from existing translocal ties. Mobility in our case studies is reflected in flows of migration or travel for labour, education, marriage, pilgrimage and religious activism, trade and flight. Its material aspects include old and new transport links, telecommunication networks, mobile goods and presents, and remittance transfers; its immaterial aspects comprise information, ideas and ideologies that are passed on through telecommunication, mass media and the internet, but also through hard-copies of books and CDs or just through the stories of travellers and returning migrants.

In light of the heterogeneous character of these flows, we want to further clarify our understanding of the term. We understand 'flows' as regular or at least repeated (not exceptional and only singular) movements with a spatial dimension. Similar to this, the Crossroads Studies-Paper defines "*flows as purposeful, repetitive, programmable sequences of exchange and interaction between physically disjointed positions held by social actors in the economic, political, and symbolic structures of society. We include migration - the movement of actual people - among these flows.*" (Mielke & Hornidge 2014:20)

An analysis in terms of flows appears as a 'natural' fit when dealing with mobility. The example of the working package researching 'the mobility of women through marriage' (WP Ayfer Durdu) shows that flows can be more than a convenient analytical tool providing a true conceptual perspective. Marriage materialises here as a confluence of flows of people, goods, commitments and social status, concerning first of all women given into marriage, matrimonial payments, ceremonial 'gifts' and binding prestations, promises to be trusted and fulfilled, negotiations and bargains— and social status bestowed on some, withdrawn from others, as a consequence of the rules of the matrimonial market.

At the same time it appears useful to differentiate various dimensions of mobility, such as strategy, ability, potential, or objective. In several cases flows depict the commitment of actors to strategically make use of translocal mobilities, provoked or encouraged by the frail nature of the social and economic fabric in the region. Translocal mobilities may be part of coping, avoiding, or risk mitigation strategies of people or groups emerging from certain settings deemed disadvantageous (Benz 2014a, 2014c; Wenzel 2014). Other cases investigate strategies feeding on expansive ambitions of agents following certain ideas or ideologies. The example of Uzbek migration from Osh discusses conflict coping strategies. People affected by repeated outbreaks of inter-ethnic violence in Osh pursue conflict avoidance as a post-traumatic approach. Even though the Uzbeks, like other ethnic groups in Central Asia, used to practice migration during peaceful times as a way to earn money and send remittances back to their families, another form of migration has been imposed upon them as a result of conflict leaving Kyrgyzstan temporarily in search of safety (Ismailbekova 2013, 2014).

In this example as well as in other working packages, it becomes obvious that actors' strategies of mobility are closely linked to places, social positions, and opportunities. Not all people at one locale, being a meeting place or node in overlapping networks (Massey 1991), share the same strategies to get along, diversify their income, save their physical integrity, or achieve secular or spiritual education (Benz 2013b). In many cases people feel forced or coerced to become mobile; it is not perceived by them as their free choice. In that sense 'force' or coercion become relational and positional and go far beyond 'flight' and 'forced migration'. All our projects detect this relational and positional character of mobility, places, and social actors. The same dynamic is displayed in the working package on 'forced migration' of slaves (WP Elena Smolarz) where coercion takes on various shapes and forms for the slaves which also includes scope for greater social mobility for them through spatial movement.

As most forms of mobility being central to our work have some kind of regular, repetitive and purposeful character, it may be necessary to refine the categorizations of mobilities and the movement of people. Defining categories of migration introduces a lot of "ontological uncertainty" (Novak 2014 (forthcoming)), especially in the discussion about political categories like refugees or internally displaced persons (IDP) (Bakewell 2011, 2008). Deciding on such categories involves 'boundary works', as laid out in the Area Studies discussion paper outlining "Crossroads Studies" (Mielke & Hornidge 2014:25), i.e. the (power of) negotiating and defining social categories and their boundaries. Such boundary drawing is also involved in the negotiation of the emic concept of 'muhajir' vs. the international concept of IDP in Afghanistan (Wenzel 2013a). The choices involved in adapting local categories or mediating 'international' discourses, e.g. in the context of humanitarian assistance, exemplify knowledge production at different spatial levels.

3. Modes and Formats of Connectivity

‘Opportunity Networks’ – translocal connection- and community-building as a strategic tool

Migration and spatial mobility often serve as a strategic means to reduce risks and increase opportunities in the context of coping and livelihood strategies, or to achieve economic, political, ideological or religious objectives. Empirical evidence from several working packages indicates how strategic mobility ties in with different modes and formats of connectivity and social interaction. There appears to be a dialectic relationship between mobility and connectedness based on social interaction: on the one hand, spatial (as well as social) mobility is a catalyst for establishing (new) connections, and, on the other, connectivity often enables and facilitates (new, increased) mobilities. It is thus not mobility alone which is used as a strategic means for securing survival and improving livelihoods, but also the utilization, nurturing and strategic development of social connections, and with this, social capital (or “network capital” (Urry 2007, 2012) in ‘opportunity networks’. Different modes of connectivity, on which such ‘opportunity networks’ operate, have been researched by members of the working group. In one case they comprise of kinship networks in Mazar-e Sharif, Afghanistan and Gorno-Badakhshan in Tajikistan (WP Ayfer Durdu). Here, connectedness in the form of ‘relatedness’ is produced through strategic marriages opening channels for potentially beneficial flows of people, goods, communication and ideas as well as for social status advancement. Afghan refugees stranded in Mazar-e Sharif (Wenzel 2013a, 2013b, 2014), and Wakhi from Gojal striving for higher education and professional employment (Benz 2013a, 2014a, 2014b, 2014c) have been pursuing a blend of kinship networks, shared regional identity, ethnicity and friendship in their ‘opportunity networks’. The expansion of religious network activities of Deobandi and Tablighi missionary movements (WP Dietrich Reetz) from South Asia into Central Asian countries like Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan has not only contributed to building transnational religious communities, but has also brought benefits for individual members of these networks. For example, graduates of the International Islamic University (Islamabad, Pakistan) from Tajikistan could occupy key positions, both private and public, in the young Islamic sector of the country. The Islamic education from Pakistan appeared not as a burden but as a facilitating factor and a career opportunity, as the graduates brought structured Islamic knowledge which so far has been scarce in Central Asia. These graduates and activists skilfully adapted their newly gained knowledge to the local cultural and political environment in both Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. At the same time they used their access to Pakistan's English-speaking political and commercial environment to acquire additional precious knowledge and training enabling them to play an active role in translocal and transnational processes of globalization, on aspects of trade, administration, governance or management. One could argue that the region is increasingly structured by such ‘opportunity networks’ which make use of the potential of social, cultural, religious and economic bonding in a way compatible with promises and hopes of both material and immaterial gains.

From figuration to positionality

The Crossroads Asia network started with a major reference to Elias’ concept of figuration in order to gain a deeper understanding of people’s interactions in social contexts and their socio-spatial implications. In the course of empirical research and data analysis, the figuration concept indeed helped us to understand and demonstrate how mobility and connectedness can create new and changing patterns of interaction in space and over time. With its particular take on the structure-

agency dialectics, the figuration approach proved to be valuable for conceptualizing social relations and practices in defined actor settings, such as kinship networks. The analysis of the marital networks in Mazar-i Sharif, Afghanistan and in the Vanj district of Gorno-Badakhshan, Tajikistan (WP Ayfer Durdu) produced new insight into this relationship. It showed that for gaining a deeper understanding of the interplay between structures and actors in the study of social life, it is necessary to shift the focus from normative models of attitudes to the empirical exploration of networks of actual interrelations and flows. The concept of 'relatedness', as discussed in the literature on 'new kinship studies', underlines the importance of people's active role in conceptualising and constructing the modes and formats of how they relate to each other and through which categories and rules these relations are enacted. Interactions, as the central constitutive element of connections (Freitag and Von Oppen 2010:20), are guided by such shared and negotiated concepts and imaginaries of belonging, positioning and identification. While the concept of figuration proved to work well in comparatively small, well-defined inter-personal networks (e.g. kinship), the need to broaden Elias' concept was felt when dealing with networks connecting heterogeneous actors, objects and places at different scales and across borders and boundaries of very different kinds. The dynamics of slave trade in Central Asia during the 18th and 19th century and its complex networks of actors (WP Elena Smolarz) are characterized by such diversity. For instance, ransom networks established with the objective of redeeming slaves of Russian origin in Central Asia included a broad variety of actors and agents, such as Russian imperial institutions (e.g. the "border commission"), rulers of Kazakh and Turkmen background, merchants of Bukhara and Khiva, agents acting on behalf of the Russian Empire, and slaves themselves. These actors belonged to different political systems, to different social and religious groups. The ransom network can be understood as a translocal network acting across political frontiers, as well as social, cultural and religious boundaries. The concept of 'positionality' could provide a promising way to broaden Elias' idea of actors' positioning within figurations by complementing the social dimension with a spatial and a temporal dimension. Sheppard (2002) understands positionality as a tool to conceptualise and explain the changing mutual socio-spatial situatedness of agents to one another across space and time (Alff 2014; Alff & Benz 2014). Further, it draws attention to the active role actors and interactions play in social positioning. They are involved in processes of 'othering', discursive distinctions, social boundary-drawing, imaginaries and categorizations establishing difference and defining identity (Mielke and Hornidge 2014:24).

Towards a more relational reading of connectivity: from the network to the meshwork?

The network metaphor, which we used as one of our central concepts in the first three years of Crossroads Asia research in order to gain a better understanding of migration and mobility processes, focuses on connections (ties, links, relations, exchange, flows) between entities or nodal points with a certain mutual stability. Elias (1970) applies the network metaphor in his conceptualization of figurations as consisting of individuals (as given entities), connected in a fluctuating web of relations, interdependencies and power-balances. Moving conceptually from figurations towards positionality also demands that we revisit the network metaphor (cf. Alff & Benz 2014). Positionality suggests a more thoroughly relational reading of connectivity. From such a perspective, connections are not simply established between pre-given entities (e.g. actors, institutions, places, objects, ideas) which then are put in relation to each other in networks of nodes and edges. The role of relations in creating the very entities considered has to be addressed as well. According to Ingold (2006:13) entities only come into existence and are constituted within relational fields. Therefore, they cannot be thought of as separate from their environment. Consequently, a mere interactional perspective

(relations between pre-given entities) needs to be replaced by a “transactional perspective” (Verne 2012:26), which considers entities not as “independent existencies present anterior to any relation” (Cassierer 1953:36, cited in Verne 2012:26) but as themselves being the very result of relations (cf. Conradson and McKay 2007). This implies a shift of analytical focus “from the elements and identities towards relations, from traits to processes” (Berndt and Boeckler 2008:3, cited in Verne 2012:26). Ingold suggests moving from the network metaphor and its seemingly solid, static and self-containing nodes, towards a “meshwork” image of the lifeworld as a “field of interwoven lines” (Ingold 2006:13), in which no clear boundary between an entity and its environment can be drawn.

Dynamics and Trajectories of Translocal Connectedness

One of our main research foci in the migration working group was on tracing and understanding the socio-spatial and temporal trajectories of mobile connectedness. Conceptually this was grounded in Elias’ dynamic model of social figurations epitomized in what he calls the ‘Figurationsprozess’ (figurational process). In this process, relations, power balances and actor constellations are constantly fluctuating. Aiming at contributing to a new reading of Area Studies, we were particularly interested in the spatial references of these figuration processes, e.g. their rooting in and implications for certain places. The issue of understanding, analyzing and describing the nature and quality as well as the magnitude or quantity of trajectories of mobile connectedness has been raised in all working packages of this working group. Examples comprise the figurational dynamics of slave trade and ransom networks in Central Asia in the 18th and 19th century (WP Elena Smolarz), the recent dynamic developments of transnational Deobandi and Tablighi networks expanding from South Asia into post-Soviet Central Asia (WP Dietrich Reetz), and the expanding migration networks of the Wakhi of Gojal and their implication for regional (and translocal) development (Benz 2013a, 2014a, 2014b, 2014c). We found that the dynamics of connectivity are shaped by and negotiated through what could be called ‘boundary works’ (Mielke and Hornidge 2014:24) in processes of boundary setting, enacting and their redrawing. These can become manifest in changing border regimes and fluctuating attempts to control cross-border flows. For instance, the fall of the Soviet Union gave a boost to the figurational dynamics of Islamic missionary networks in the region opening space for them to spread into the post-Soviet states (WP Dietrich Reetz). ‘Boundary works’ can also become manifest in processes of discursive bordering, e.g. in categorizing who counts as a ‘refugee’ (Wenzel 2013a), in re-defining kinship relations (WP Ayfer Durdu), or in creating a shared religious identity between formerly unconnected groups of *maulai* and *khoja* Ismailis (Benz 2013a, 2014b). Based on insights from our empirical studies, we feel the need to broaden the initial conceptual approach followed in our working group. We need to consider more explicitly the power of discourses and boundary-producing knowledge regimes at different scales affecting people’s lives and daily social practices. Future research and analysis will pay more attention to setting discourses and categories, drawing boundaries and defining knowledge.

Spaces and Places of Translocal Connectivity

Three aspects/questions concerning the spatial anchoring of figurational processes became particularly important in our empirical studies: a) how places are created and shaped by diverse flows passing through and by networks overlapping there; b) how events and developments in one place effect events in other interconnected places; c) how people’s actions in and between interconnected places are shaped by influences and events from other places at various geographical scales, and how to make a living and manage in a translocalised, interconnected world. We will deal with each in turn.

Places in an Interconnected World of Flows

An important reference point for a better understanding of the relationship between place and flows is offered by Van Schendel's (2002) concept of 'process geographies'. Rejecting spatial categories as 'ontologically given – as static, timeless containers of historicity' (Van Schendel 2002:658), he suggests moving from 'trait geographies' towards the study of interconnections in what he calls 'flow studies' (Van Schendel 2002:665). Flows play a central role in the creation of process geographies, and, as flows move through localities, they define the character and destiny of places, 'contributing to their rise and fall' (Van Schendel 2002:662). A similar reading of place has been offered earlier by Massey (1991), who considers places as 'meeting points', in which various 'networks of social relations and movements and communication' weave together in a particular locus, creating a 'place' as the 'particular, unique point of their intersection' (Massey 1991:27). This thoroughly relational understanding of place is also close to Ingold's concept of the meshwork, as outlined above.

From Figurational Process to Translocal Development

The central argument of dynamics in figurations is concerned with the idea that change in one part of the figuration will cause reactions, shifts and adaptations in the entire arrangement. Following a more spatial reading of Elias' figurational process (as outlined above), this argument can be applied to places as well (cf. Mielke and Hornidge 2014:21). People, places and events that are distant in space can be interconnected in such ways that 'what happens in one place has a direct bearing on the other' (Zoomers and Van Westen 2011:379), in a process which Zoomers and van Westen (2011) term 'translocal development'. They draw on established notions of 'translocality' as a blueprint for interrelations across space. For example, Freitag and von Oppen developed their take on translocality with the intention of providing 'an intermediary concept which helps to better understand and conceptualise connections beyond the local' (Freitag and Von Oppen 2010:3). For them, translocality describes 'the sum of phenomena which result from a multitude of circulations and transfers. It designates the outcome of concrete movements of people, goods, ideas and symbols which span spatial distances and cross boundaries, be they geographical, cultural or political' (Freitag and Von Oppen 2010:5). For Zoomers and van Westen, the 'local'/'locality' remains critical from a translocal perspective as a place of social and cultural interaction, as a 'meeting place' (Massey 1991:28) and 'specific node' (Zoomers and Van Westen 2011:378). There, countless overlapping networks, relations and communications of different nature meet and weave together. An understanding of what happens in a particular place needs to take into account and has to be read as reaction to the interdependent developments and changes in the whole figuration. This has been exemplified by the impressive economic and socio-cultural development trajectory of the Wakhi of Gojal in Northern Pakistan, which can only be understood by taking into account a broad range of translocal links (Benz 2013a, 2014a, 2014b, 2014c).

Making a living in a translocalised, densely interconnected world

Against the backdrop of this new reading of space and place emerging from our empirical studies, central central question arises: how are people's actions in and between interconnected places shaped by influences and events from other places at different geographical scales? How do people make a living and manage in a translocalised, densely interconnected world? The answers to these questions are, as one might expect, diverse.

For example, patterns of migration and flight in and from Afghanistan are shaped by a number of factors ranging from the local (e.g. insecurity due to Taliban raids and oppression) to the international level (e.g. the international military intervention in Afghanistan). The insecurity in parts of the country

that is forcing people to look for safer surroundings elsewhere, mostly in cities, is part of a larger regional power struggle and not limited to the territory of Afghanistan. At the same time many developments taking place in the cities are owed to the fast and intense changes that are characterizing the Afghan urban space. Processes such as international intervention, world market integration, technical 'modernization', and 'cultural globalization' make them spots of global connectedness. The way ordinary people are acting in these overlaying surroundings, how they interpret and try to adapt to what is going on is a central part of this research. There are many examples in our research showing how international and universal discourses are becoming part of people's daily life and how they are influencing daily social practices (Wenzel 2013a, 2013b, 2014).

How local people's subjective concepts of Islam are shaped by various non-local/translocal factors in urban and rural contexts of Tajikistan (WP Petra Tiller) constitutes another case in point. Mental mobilities, flows of ideas and images influence the subjective concepts of Islam of local people through various actors. The government, migrant workers and Islamic clerics educated abroad – as well as television, the internet, CDs and books – all play their part. In addition, it is not only the figuration of Islam read as a 'development process' that is important, but also its actors and the flows of related ideas, theories and images. The impact these flows have on the subjective concepts of Islam is of central interest in this working package (Tiller & Herbers 2013).

4. Conclusion

In this Postscript to our concept paper on migration (Crossroads Asia Working Group Migration 2012) we developed and compiled some new thoughts and advancements of the initial concepts with which we started off Crossroads Asia research and which we documented in our first concept paper. After scrutinizing their applicability and utility in the context of fieldwork experiences and in light of empirical findings from our research, we have refined the terms and concepts central to our work. We have reflected on the character of mobility and connectivity and emphasized the importance of the ideas of positionality and situatedness. These aspects guided us, as we have outlined in this paper, in re-thinking the concepts of the 'network' and the 'figuration' and in pushing them a bit further by stressing the positions, specifics and opportunities of actors in contexts of mobility and migration as well as the dynamics of translocal connectedness.

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Information on the competence network Crossroads Asia

The competence network Crossroads Asia derives its name from the geographical area extending from eastern Iran to western China and from the Aral Sea to Northern India. The scholars collaborating in the competence network pursue a novel, 'post-area studies' approach, making thematic figurations and mobility the overarching perspectives of their research in Crossroads Asia. The concept of figuration implies that changes, minor or major, within one element of a constellation always affect the constellation as a whole; the network will test the value of this concept for understanding the complex structures framed by the cultural, political and socio-economic contexts in Crossroads Asia. Mobility is the other key concept for studying Crossroads Asia, which has always been a space of entangled interaction and communication, with human beings, ideas and commodities on the move across and beyond cultural, social and political borders. Figurations and mobility thus form the analytical frame of all three main thematic foci of our research: conflict, migration, and development.

- Five sub-projects in the working group **"Conflict"** will focus upon specific localized conflict-figurations and their relation to structural changes, from the interplay of global politics, the erosion of statehood, and globalization effects from above and below, to local struggles for autonomy, urban-rural dynamics and phenomena of diaspora. To gain a deeper understanding of the rationales and dynamics of conflict in Crossroads Asia, the sub-projects aim to analyze the logics of the genesis and transformation of conflictual figurations, and to investigate autochthonous conceptions of, and modes of dealing with conflicts. Particular attention will be given to the interdependence of conflict(s) and mobility.
- Six sub-projects in the working group **"Migration"** aim to map out trans-local figurations (networks and flows) within Crossroads Asia as well as figurations extending into both neighboring and distant areas (Arabian Peninsula, Russia, Europe, Australia, America). The main research question addresses how basic organizational and functional networks are structured, and how these structures affect what is on the move (people, commodities, ideas etc.). Conceptualizing empirical methods for mapping mobility and complex connectivities in trans-local spaces is a genuine desideratum. The aim of the working group is to refine the method of qualitative network analysis, which includes flows as well as their structures of operation, and to map mobility and explain mobility patterns.
- In the **"Development"**-working group four sub-projects are focusing on the effects of spatial movements (flows) and interwoven networks at the micro level with regard to processes of long-term social change, and with a special focus on locally perceived livelihood opportunities and their potential for implementation. The four sub-projects focus on two fundamental aspects: first, on structural changes in processes of transformation of patterns of allocation and distribution of resources, which are contested both at the household level and between individual and government agents; secondly, on forms of social mobility, which may create new opportunities, but may also cause the persistence of social inequality.

The competence network aims to mediate between the academic study of Crossroads Asia and efforts to meet the high demand for information on this area in politics and the public. Findings of the project will feed back into academic teaching, research outside the limits of the competence network, and public relations efforts. Further information on Crossroads Asia is available at www.crossroads-asia.de.

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