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Samuli Schielke und Mukhtar Saad Shehata (Berlin)

The dream of stability and the semi-cities: How conservative strivings transform society between Egypt and its diasporas

Rural-urban and international migrations in and from the Global South are often socially conservative projects: strivings to actualise conventional ways and ideas of a good life. They are grounded in the imagination and practice of what in Arabic is widely referred to as “a normal life” (*hayah 'adiya*), “a life worthy of humans” (*hayat bani adamin*), or “stability” (*istiqrar*). Migrants from northern Egypt travel to Egyptian cities, western Europe, and Arab Gulf states where they work to build or maintain a normal, settled adulthood at home. A key effort of theirs is to build houses in their regions of origin. These houses unite strivings for moral and material comfort, upward social mobility, and rootedness in local communities. And yet in the process, their dream of a good, normal life at home appears to be unsettling itself by the virtue of its own success. This becomes evident in transformations of social status, gender roles, and built environment in rural areas that are transforming into “semi-cities” where rural traditions and urban consumerist lifestyle intermingle. Especially in families that seek to combine urban lifestyles with residence in the village, women establish new tactical avenues of action. A new form of life takes shape, one that seeks to reproduce patriarchal ideals but at the same time undermines them.

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Institutskolloquium Sommersemester 2022 (Leitung: Markus Verne)

Wann? Dienstag, 14. Juni 2022, 18:15–19:45 Uhr

Wo? HS 13

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