

# **CONTACT – CONQUEST – COLONIZATION**

## **Practices of Comparing between Europe, Africa, Asia, and the Americas, from Antiquity to the Present**

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International Conference

Conference Report



Universität Bielefeld

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**PRACTICES**  
**OF COMPARING**

## REPORT: LUISE FAST, JOHANNES NAGEL

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Practices of comparing were always an integral part of cultural encounter. Identifying and consolidating differences and similarities have been major dynamic forces structuring attempts of creating and shaping discourses, identities and hierarchies in a global context. The international conference was held to reconsider sources from contexts of cultural contact, conquest and colonization in different parts of the world under the paradigm of comparing as a cultural practice. Rather than looking at comparison as a method, the conference focused on what people did when they compared, and how these practices contributed to the dynamics of cultural encounters across the physical, intellectual and imaginary contact zones all over the world. Examining the negotiation of differences as well as similarities, the conference went beyond postcolonial engagements with 'othering' and highlighted the usefulness of the approach of "practices of comparing" as an analytical tool for a more comprehensive understanding of the formation and dynamics of cultural contact.

The **first panel** examined comparative engagements with gender and marriage in China, the Philippines, and India from the 16th to the 19th century. Both NADINE AMSLER (University of Bern) and MARYA SVETLANA CAMACHO (University of Asia and the Pacific, Manila) presented research on Jesuit writings on China and the Philippines from the 17th century. Amsler discussed how the search for similarities between Chinese and European society norms structured Jesuit writings about gender arrangements. Jesuit strategies of comparing, she argued, were intricately connected to moral judgement, not only serving the purpose of demonstrating to their European readership the capacity of Chinese society for Christian salvation, but also informing their self-fashioning as 'Western literati' as a mission strategy. Camacho's examination of Jesuit writings on 17th century Philippines similarly traced practices of comparing as a method to identify aspects of local culture that could be accommodated into Christianity, such as dowry and inheritance customs. Both Camacho and Amsler showed how the Jesuits' humanist education provided points of reference for their comparisons of gender roles and matrimonial practices in the mission field. SUBHASREE GHOSH (University of Calcutta), provided a counterpoint from 19th century India, exploring how the 'rule of difference' as overarching imperial discourse entailed the colonization of the Indian female body. Tracing the judicial response to child marriage throughout the century, Ghosh argued that the female body became a site of contention between the colonial administration and Indian nationalists, who rejected British attempts to model age of consent and marriage practices according to European sensitivities. Discussants noted that facing the diversity of Indian marriage customs, colonial practices of comparing created and essentialized the idea of 'Indian marriage' in the first place.

The **second panel** was devoted to Moors and secret societies in (North-)Africa and highlighted the ambiguity of comparative practices in a larger African context. In her presentation on Spain and its North African 'other', SARA MEHLMER (Mainz University) discussed shifting modes of comparison during and around the Hispano-African War of 1859–60. Mehlmer showed how the Spanish recourse to differences between itself and its North African neighbor was used to legitimize military intervention and to unite Spanish society, while a turn towards an emphasis on analogies signifying a romantic orientalist imagination can be found in art and literature of the 19th century. Shifting perceptions and the entanglement of different modes of comparison, Mehlmer argued, shaped the relationship between Christian Spain and Muslim North-Africa, and resulted in a discourse of 'unequal similarity' of that region. STEPHANIE ZEHNLE (Kiel University) also highlighted the ambiguity of comparative practices in her paper on African secret societies. Comparisons between the globalizing masonic societies and native secret societies, Zehnle argued, did not follow coherent patterns and were used to exclude, demonize or rehabilitate certain groups according to changing political demands and habits.

In the first evening lecture, PETER C. MANCALL (University of Southern California, Dornsife) spoke about the role of representations of nature in Early Modern European colonization in the Americas. Mancall highlighted how Europeans were not the first to closely observe nature, since indigenous illustrations of birds reveal an accurate understanding of nature that was just as concerned with establishing successful strategies of survival. On the English side, published imageries of American nature helped to sway public opinion in favor of colonization. These images depicted American nature as paradise, and compared indigenous people to the 'barbarian' ancestors of the English (the Picts) to make an argument for the advanced state of European 'cultural evolution'.

**Panel III** on "Surveying and establishing empires in the Americas" further developed ideas about the connection between colonial expansion and practices of comparing. MARCELO FABIÁN FIGUEROA (University of Tucumán) examined the Malaspina Expedition which surveyed territories across Spanish America between 1789 and 1794. He showed how comparative practices were foundational to the Political Economy literature which informed the evaluation of the Spanish colonies. Furthermore, the reports of the expedition themselves compared colonies of different empires regarding their economic functions and value, as well as they compared colonies to the economies of European countries. In her presentation on U.S. tropical medicine 1898–1910, JULIA ENGELSCHALT (Bielefeld University) likewise analyzed practices of comparing as a means to establish colonial rule in the U.S. overseas empire. U.S. medical discourse aided the construction of a 'tropical other' which was depicted as a health hazard

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to the white male colonizer. While based on an implicit comparison between colonial periphery and home country, this 'tropical anxiety' ignored, for instance, that environmental conditions in some parts of the U.S. might have been more extreme than in some of the colonies. The longevity of tropical anxiety demonstrates the influence of ideological factors on practices of 'scientific' comparison.

In his keynote lecture on the comparative method of Göttingen University's 'Wissenschaft vom Menschen', DEMETRIUS EUDELL (Wesleyan University) analyzed the lives and works of the three 18th century scholars Johann D. Michaelis, Christoph Meiners, and Heinrich M. Grellmann. They attempted to establish a 'Wissenschaft vom Menschen' not based on speculative philosophy of history, but on empirical evidence and its analysis based on comparative methods. Eudell convincingly showed how their attempts to come to terms with differences between groups of humans resulted in racialized notions of difference, which he described as "knowledge" in the sense of a "form of conceptualization". Focusing on these essentializing practices of comparing, Eudell made the argument that historians have overstated the contrast between a cosmopolitan 18th century and a racist 19th century.

The **fourth panel** engaged with comparative practices in the realm of literature, media and communication. VOLKER BAUER (Herzog-August-Bibliothek Wolfenbüttel) presented a paper on an early 17th century book series (the political series of the German publisher Renger) on European and non-European polities. By analyzing political entities based on a standardized set of criteria, the volumes were not only based on the assumption of intercultural comparability, but in itself presented an invitation to compare. By including non-European entities, Bauer argued, the book series created a political sphere shared by realms in- and outside of Europe, creating a level playing field in which distinctions and global hierarchizations were negotiated. TINA JANSSEN (University of Warwick) demonstrated in her examination of William Jones's translation of Arab and Sanskrit literature, that European comparisons with their oriental 'other' not always aimed at showing inferiority. Encouraging comparisons between the newly uncovered oriental literature and the established European literature canon, Jones hoped to provide fresh impulses and to elevate contemporary European literature. BENNO NIETZEL (Bielefeld University) contributed an additional perspective with his examination of the role of comparing in international communication research during the first phase of the Cold War. Scholars such as Lazarsfeld, Nietzel argued, engaged in comparative research in order to inform media strategies that in turn invited audiences across the ideological divide to compare political systems and lifestyles, turning comparative practices into modes of psychological warfare.

In his evening lecture on the comparative implications of 18th century astronomy, ALEXANDER HONOLD (University of Basel) traced the interaction between astronomy and geodesy in the production of knowledge about the world. Thinking about the world as a globe, Honold contended, did not render itself easily to the discourse on equality and difference as it questioned the legitimacy of 'natural' orders and global 'ladders of prosperity.' According to Honold, this dilemma was addressed by the division of the earth into grids, providing a reference system to argue cultural and societal differences and hierarchies. Astronomy thus provided a mathematical way of producing difference and a legitimization for a global formula of inequality.

**Panel V** turned to practices of comparing in imperial peripheries, as well as to a methodological reflection from the field of archaeology. Both ELOISE WRIGHT (University of California, Berkeley) and EZEKIEL STEAR (Pasadena City College) examined how practices of comparing originating in imperial centers could be adjusted and subverted by actors in peripheral regions. In her presentation on writings about civilization on the imperial Chinese periphery, Wright focused on local history writings in Yunnan province. While the writings on local ethnic groups initially reflected an 'imperial gaze', comparisons were also used by indigenous scholars who infused them with additional context to come to more positive conclusions. By participating in imperial practices of comparing, they reframed themselves as people of the center. Investigating the epistolary of Nahua scholar and politician Antonio Valeriano in 16th century colonial Mexico, Stear demonstrated how practices of comparing could be used as a means of intercultural mediation within empire. Using comparative practices, Valeriano constructed a discursive field, which included the Spanish emperor. Comparing Mexican politics and society to Greco-Roman tropes, for instance, enabled him to communicate with Philip II. Accommodating European religion, economics, and political organization, Valeriano made the case for his own authority and merit. SOPHIE HUEGLIN (Newcastle University) changed the focus from practices to methods of comparing. Introducing the dualism of petrification and liquification, Hueglin reflected on the possibilities of cross-cultural comparison from an archeological perspective. Focusing on processes of petrification and liquification, it might become possible to compare long-term changes in architecture and material culture in general. The potentials and limits of this change in focus from objects to 'processes, vectors, and contexts', as well as the extent to which this heuristic might transcend comparison, were controversially discussed.

**Panel VI** on the construction and de-construction of race in the U.S. featured CHRISTIAN PINNEN (Mississippi College) and WILFRIED RAUSSERT (Bielefeld University). Both examined how notions of race were products of

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contested processes based on practices of comparing. Using the city of Natchez as case study, Pinnen showed how changes in the political control over the Louisiana territory at the end of the 18th century changed the 'slave codes' and hence the legal statuses of both enslaved and free African Americans. The ambiguity in between these legal regime transitions was used by Americans, English, Spanish, and African Americans to (re-)negotiate definitions of race and slavery. For this, they must have relied on comparisons between the various cultural and legal notions of race and slavery. Examining the cultural production of the 1920s 'Harlem Renaissance', Raussert analyzed how artists attempted to create a new, self-reflexive identity for African Americans. They contrasted this 'new negro' with the 'old negro', both subverting and inverting notions originating in White supremacy.

The contributions of this conference highlighted the many functions of comparative practices in the dynamics of contact, conquest, and colonization. By focusing on peripheral regions, negotiation processes, and micro-level agency, these perspectives showed how this focus might serve to analyze the emergence of modern global power relations while avoiding static and one-sided interpretations. The conceptualization of practices of comparing as a driver of historical change has proven to be a potentially powerful analytical tool and heuristic. The organizers reiterated the SFB's objective to work toward a paradigm shift from an analysis of dichotomies to an analysis of practices.