Global Networks

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The British Economic and Social Research Council's New Research Programme on **Transnational Communities**

Transnational Communities is a £3.8 million, five-year research programme recently commissioned by the British Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC). Through a range of commissioned projects, conferences and publications, it aims to increase social scientific understanding of the contemporary rise of various kinds of long-distance social networks affecting both local and large-scale economic patterns, international migration, political movements and cultural inter-penetration.

There are many historical precedents and parallels to such networks. Yet today information technologies – especially involving telecommunications (telephone, faxes, e-mail and the Internet) – serve to connect such networks with increasing speed and efficiency. Transnationalism describes a condition in which, despite great distances and notwithstanding the presence of international borders (and all the laws, regulations and national images they represent), many kinds of relationships have been intensified and now take in real time in a planet-spanning arena of activity.

Many different kinds of transnational communities are gaining in power and significance. The overseas Chinese, for example, are estimated to have a national Gross Domestic Product larger than China's. Several countries, such as Egypt, Pakistan, El Salvador and the Philippines, are hugely dependent on the remittances of their emigrants. Transnational communities pool resources, distribute information, mobilize politically, and exercise considerable cultural influence across borders. Contemporary transnational communities are at once the products of, and catalysts for, globalization. They also represent challenges to many areas of foreign and domestic policy, such as security, investment and trade, asylum, immigration and multiculturalism.

Among the seventeen projects commissioned within the ESRC Transnational Communities Programme, research concerns topics such as: the role of exiles in post-conflict reconstruction, the Russian diaspora and post-Soviet economic restructuring, Japanese and Korean corporations in Britain, immigrants and dual citizenship, the indigenous people's movement, the place of broadcast media within ethnic diasporas. One of the programme's flagship projects concerns global Islamic networks by way of Sufism.

Entitled 'Ethnicity, politics and transnational Islam: A study of an international Sufi order,' the main aim of this project is to broaden our understanding of how Islam functions across boundaries of states, communities and ethnic groups. The project leaders are: Prof. Jorgen S. Nielsen of the Centre for the Study of Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations, Selly Oak Colleges, Birmingham; Dr Galina Yemelianova of the Centre for Russian and East European Studies, University of Birmingham; and Dr Martin Stringer of the Department of Theology, University of Birmingham.

While contemporary research attention on Islam has concentrated on its political expressions, the Sufi tradition continues to be important for the majority of Muslims. Through a hierarchical chain of adherence to the spiritual leader, or *shaykh*, the Sufi orders (*tariqas*) link local communities across many different regions. One of the more ubiquitous of such contemporary *tariqas* is that led by Shaykh Nazim al-Qubrusi al-Haqqani. With roots in the Ottoman Empire and especially in the Caucasus, it now has centres in North America, Britain and most of Western Europe, the Middle East and South and Southeast Asia. The *tariqa* has had particular success in attracting converts from outside Islam and among young educated professionals in the Muslim world.

Communications play a significant role in maintaining the cohesion of this transnational network and the *tariqa* makes extensive use of all forms of media publication including a notable presence on the Internet managed from the US. Through fieldwork and a detailed analysis of texts, the project aims to develop an understanding of how, and with what degree of success a form of Muslim organization, which is central to traditional Islam, is able to adjust to rapidly changing contemporary environments, to establish the significance of modern electronic communications relative to more traditional media, and to update and refine our knowledge of how Sufi forms of Islam function locally and transnationally.

The project will be based on ethnographic and anthropological fieldwork running concurrently in three locations. In parts of the northern Caucasus, the *tariqa* exists in a more or less traditional form, which is now relating actively to the post-Soviet weakening of the central state and general economic and political instability. In Lebanon, the *tariqa* has grown significantly in the years following the end of the civil war and, with fast-growing telecommunications links, could be seen as being in a state of transition. In Britain, the *tariqa* has a number of centres, some with a mainly ethnic minority following, others with a multi-ethnic composition including significant numbers of converts. Texts in a variety of media forms will also be gathered in the three locations together with a regular survey and recording of materials on the Internet. These will be analysed in terms of content, audience and the circumstances of their production and in relation to the fieldwork results.

The interdisciplinary nature of such study of religious organization is likely to raise a number of theoretical issues to do with the interaction between ideas and organization and how far a shared community can function with different discourses. The project will contribute to a broadening of our understanding of contemporary transnational Islamic organizations and thus assist policy makers, the media, and agencies working with Muslim communities in reaching better informed policies and practices.

Other activities of the ESRC Transnational Communities Programme include: a weekly seminar series; annual conferences; and workshops organized within Britain and abroad, bringing together academics and non-academic users. A *Working Paper Series* has been established in both hardcopy and internet-downloadable formats, and the programme is associated with three academic book series. The Transnational Communities Programme will also be supporting a newsletter, an on-line world news digest and an internet-searchable bibliography. Information on the projects and all other aspects of the research programme can be found on the ESRC Transnational Communities Programme website (http://www.transcomm.ox.ac.uk). ✦

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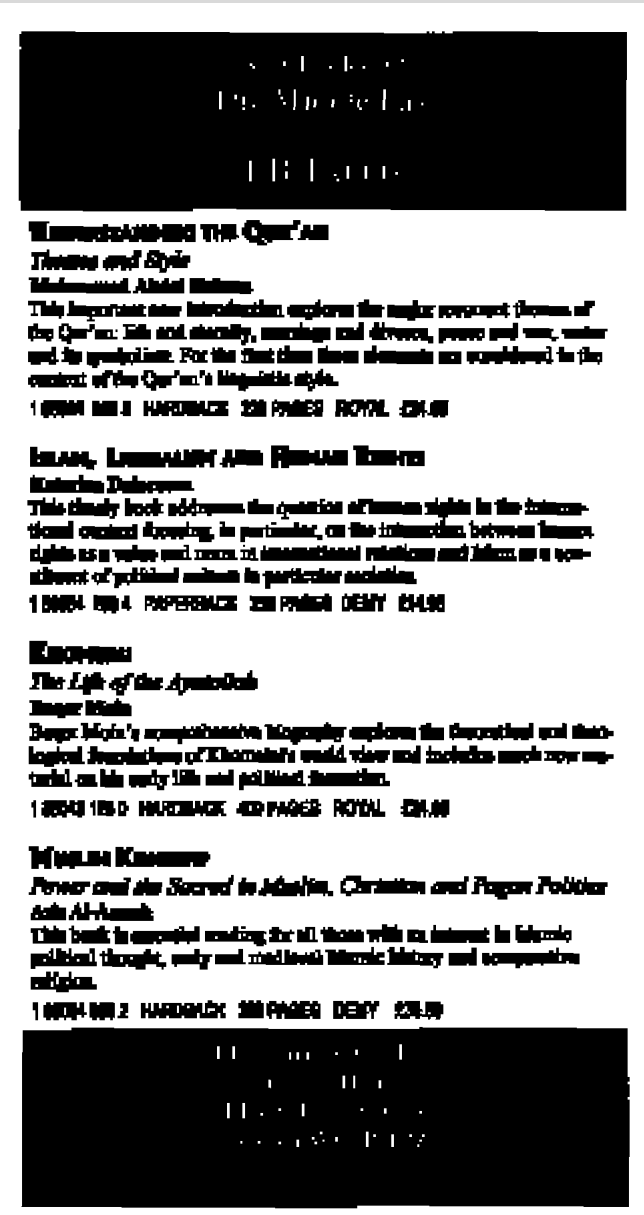

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