SAUDI ARABIA IN THE GERMAN-SPEAKING IMAGINATION: IDENTITY, SPACE AND REPRESENTATION

by

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Abstract

This research aims to explore how representations of Saudi Arabia in German travel literature, pilgrimage accounts and online media have transformed the Saudi Arabian space and its place in the European imagination. German travelers, pilgrims, and expatriates enter the foreign Saudi Arabian space, and decipher it in their narratives. The diachronic analysis of several representative texts by German authors from the 18th and 19th centuries narrating their journey to what is today known as Saudi Arabia, shows that the images conveyed in their writings should be conceived in a multidimensional way beyond the lens of historical analysis, taking into account notions of gender, personal motivations, nationality and religion. Analysis of pilgrimage accounts by German converts from the 20th and 21st century reveals an unreflected representation of Western societies and German people in the Middle East. These narratives play a fundamental role in building a bridge connecting Muslim immigrants living in the diaspora with German converts. However, to quote Marcia Hermansen (1999) “even though Western Muslim narrators avoid the excesses of their Christian precursors, they are not completely free from a colonial gaze and “Orientalist” attitudes”: in their narratives both the desert and the Bedouins become an imagined and fictionalized trope. In the last part of my dissertation I explore the blogosphere produced by German expatriates living in Saudi Arabia, arguing that expatriate blogs have become a space for cultural representation and othering, that share similarities with the genre of travel writing.
INTRODUCTION

In the German literary and cultural imagination, the words “Arabia” and “Saudi Arabia” have carried multiple meanings that range from open unmapped deserts to specific locations like Mecca and Medina, the holy cities of Islam. They also refer to a powerful country whose oil revenues impact national and international economies. Karl May’s (1842-1912) evocational construction of the Bedouin as a “noble savage” and tribal desert nomad, as well as the popular notions of tribalism and representations of the desert as a space of anti-progress, were expounded by eighteenth- and nineteenth-century German scientists, travelers, and adventurers who journeyed to the Middle East and visited the Arabian Peninsula. In 1932 the different administrative territories of the Arabian Peninsula were unified under what is today known as the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Today, German converts to Islam refer to Saudi Arabia as a sacred space. Without knowing, they build on many of the tropes from much earlier European travelers’ reports.

In this dissertation, I explore numerous representations of the region that comprises Saudi Arabia in German travel literature and pilgrimage accounts from the 18th century to present time, as well as in contemporary digital media.

Western scholarship on Saudi Arabia is a relatively recent phenomenon. However, in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries a number of European descriptions and evaluations of the Wahhabi movement were published. These descriptions were all written by non-Muslim European travelers, historians and authors such as Carsten Niebuhr or Johann Ludwig Burckhardt, and they provide factual information about the reform moment, which
turned out to be the impetus for the unification of the Arabian peninsula and the birth of the state of Saudi Arabia (Tuson, Burdett, 1992).

During the 19th century and early years of the 20th century, a number of Europeans entered various parts of the Arabian Peninsula, although relatively few of them reached the Najd and the northern parts of the territories that today constitute the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Bidwell’s introduction to the book *Travelers in Arabia* by D.G. Hogarth (1904) deals with the journeys of these travelers. What results from the study of these narratives is that European visitors were mostly concerned with geographical investigation, ancient archeology and epigraphy, and above all, with reporting the details of their journey with descriptions that are usually brief and superficial and that addressed contemporary readers. This literature fills the gaps between classical Orientalism and modern ethnography. In particular Andrew Shryock’s *Nationalism and the Genealogical Imagination: Oral History and Textual Authority in Tribal Jordan* (1997) defines literature about the Arabian Peninsula in the 19th and 20th century as a “scholarly travelogue” and this reflects the nature of these early accounts. Among these works of particular significance are Doughty’s *Travels to Arabia Deserta* (1888) and Niebuhr’s *Travels in Arabia* (1792), along with Burton’s *Pilgrimage to al-Medinah and Meccah* (1855) and folkloric monographs such as Burckhardt’s *Notes in the Bedouins and Wahabys* (1831), Musil’s *Manners and Customs of the Rwala Bedouins* (1928) and, among others Dickinson's *Arab of the Desert* (1949).

The political-historical essay, *Saudi Arabia: A Kingdom in Transition* (1993), published by The Saudi Arabian Cultural Mission to the United States of America, reports that the images of that country are a confused mixture of facts and fiction built upon the phantasmatic tales from *The Thousand and One Nights* that revolve around genies, veiled
women, and incense, in a territory that comprises large territories non defined as Saudi Arabia located. Over the years, the image of Saudi Arabia has focused on Mecca and Medina, cities that have been pictured as crowded with pilgrims who visit these Holy Cities. The representation of the country is thus split between two sets of images, the phantasmatic and the spiritual one.

Furthermore, scholarship on the history and politics of Saudi Arabia usually includes prefaces describing how, over the decades, the country has been marked by a clash between tradition and modernization to an even greater degree than other countries. Up until the twentieth century, Saudi Arabia was portrayed as an extremely isolated place, inhabited only by nomadic populations of Bedouins. The Najd, also known as Central Arabia, has never experienced European colonialism, while the Hejaz, the region that includes Mecca and Medina, had always been off limits to non-Muslims. The author of Saudi Arabia: A Kingdom in Transition (1993), Abdulaziz Al-Sweel, states that Saudi Arabia has been able to maintain its balance between conservative Islamic values and cultural norms and rapid modernization that characterizes the evolution of social, economic and political changes.¹

Saudi Arabia is constantly described as a country of contrasts that the Western world has stereotyped and with which it continues to be fascinated. According to Al-Sweel, images of Saudi Arabia lie in the eyes of the beholder. The representation and significance of Saudi

¹ In particular the author connects the term modernization with the technological advances of the twentieth century by defining that religious values and the "Arabian pride" do not make the country immune to technological and economic progress. The author describes modernity and spirituality as embodied by the distinctive architecture. The simplicity of the historic and "unostentatious" mosques represents the austerity of Islam and the conservative religious convictions while the oil industry has brought a new display of architecture with new angularities and designs but still the author states that the contrasting sights sounds and smells of Saudi Arabia stir all the senses (8-9). The author admires the fierce pride of Saudis who have not abandoned their own identity in favor of an “alien philosophy.” He admires Saudis’ ability to invest their oil revenues in economic development and modernization while warding off the impact of rapid change on their customs and traditions and these changes have occurred in 25 years which is such a short time that have made it difficult to negate the traditional values of Islam (65-67).
Arabia are continuously being negotiated according to the religious persuasions and cultural backgrounds of travelers and readers. For instance, Westerners’ ideas of Saudi Arabia became news at the time of the 1973/74 oil embargo and the Arab-Israeli dispute. The country of Saudi Arabia was criticized for not adopting more rigid policies against Israel. In turn, Israel accused the Saudi government of having possible connections to Islamic terrorists organization such as Al Qaida. In the Muslim world, however, the significance of Saudi Arabia is mostly restricted to the Holy Cities of Mecca and Medina and the annual pilgrimage or Hajj.

In their essay, *The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia*, David E. Long and Sebastian Maisel (2010) describe the historical background of Saudi Arabia. They also focus on Saudi Arabians' ability to maintain a “delicate balance” between conservative Islamic values and rapid modernization. This remark, common to most essays and works about contemporary Saudi Arabia, almost seems surprised about the coexistence of these disparate and contrary aspects of maintaining Islamic traditions while expanding its economy. They maintain that the personal accounts of early Western travelers to Arabia are often a better way to understand the history of the country before the globalization process, the residual effect of which has been to colonize the country culturally. Furthermore, in Long’s and Maisel’s view, the writings of Carsten Niebuhr, Richard Burton, and H. St. John Philby have been formative for all future representations of Arabia.

The first part of my research focuses on travel narratives of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, building on Todd Kontje *German Orientalism* (2004) and Nina Berman’s *Orientalismus, Kolonialismus und Moderne: Zum Bild des Orients in der deutschsprachigen Kultur um 1900* (1997). German Orientalism is my starting point. As
Kontje sees it, early representations of the Orient were at the base of Germany’s mapping of the world and became central in defining German national culture by putting it in relation to the Eastern world. The investigation of German Orientalism and European travel writing through the lens of post-colonialism or neo-colonialism is largely due to Edward Said’s theoretical formulation of what is known as orientalism. The publication of the book *Orientalism* in 1978 created a new paradigm for the critical examination of Euro-German travel writings and topics associated with the representation and construction of the Orient as both an imaginary geographic and cultural entity peripheral to the Euro-German center. According to Said by naming, describing, and representing the Orient in contrast to western ways, Western cultures dominate and exercise authority over the Orient. The relevance of Said’s theoretical framework to the study of Euro-German discursive representation and construction of Saudi Arabia is indisputable.

The second part of my research project is dedicated to the writings of German-speaking converts to Islam. The narratives of authors such as Muhammad Asad (1954), Hagar Spohr (1995) and Kristiane Backer (2012) reflect the issues Western Muslims face living in their countries of origin as well as the representation of Western societies and Germans living in the Middle East. Here, the spiritual journeys to Mecca acquire greater significance than do their accounts of the physical landscapes. To be sure, the religious identities of these authors play a major role in their analyses of the subject.

In this dissertation, I argue that pilgrimage narratives play a fundamental role in the building of bridges that can connect Muslim immigrants of the diaspora with German converts. The common denominator is “Muslim” but without any distinction of nationality and ethnic background. This is significant because it reflects a shift in the way Westerners
have regarded the Orient in the post-colonial period, and it paves a new way for what it means to be or to become Muslim in contemporary Europe. Pilgrimage accounts no longer focus on the act of travelling or on the adventures and dangers of crossing mountains and deserts. Instead, these narratives focus largely on the spiritual experience of the Muslim pilgrimage, the *Hajj*. I argue with Marcia Hermansen (1999) that even though Western Muslim narrators avoid the excesses of their precursors, they are not completely free of the colonial “gaze” and the “Orientalist” attitudes embodied in the travel literature of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Converts to Islam criticize what they perceive to be corruption in the Middle East and the condition of women, while the representation of the Bedouins continues to be one of the main points of discussion. The portrayal of the contemporary government in particular shows a consistent image of Saudi Arabia over the centuries, showing similarities with the narratives of early travelers to Arabia such as Heinrich von Maltzan or contemporary converts to Islam such as Hagar Spohr.

In order to compare the eighteenth and nineteenth-century travel literature with contemporary non-Muslim authors, I investigate not only contemporary travel literature and pilgrimage accounts from the twentieth and twenty-first centuries but also the blogosphere, including accounts of German expatriates who live in Saudi Arabia because they have been relocated by companies like Saudi Aramco and a number of other international companies. In this study, I consider blogs to be a form of travel literature since they share similar rhetorical conventions with the genre of travel writing. These blogs represent continuity with the

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2 The relations between Saudi Arabia and Germany are currently friendly and without tension. They were formalized after the treaty of friendship between Germany and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Also Saudi Arabia is for German companies a very attractive market. There is a long tradition of international cooperation between Germany and Saudi Arabia. Since 1975 the GIZ (Deutsche Gesellschaft fuer Internationale Zusammenarbeit) has delivered advisory and procurement services to various state and parastatal institutions in the Kingdom. (www.giz.de)
narratives of the previous centuries, with a more specific addition of photography to substitute for drawings and sketches. My research addresses the following questions. First, how have representations of Saudi Arabia in travel literature, pilgrimage narratives, and online media influenced and shaped the image of Saudi Arabia for German audiences into the present time? Second, how have German travelers entered a foreign space and deciphered it? Third, since German representations of Saudi Arabian cities such as Jeddah and Mecca persist, what is their function in public discourses today? Fourth, how do modernization discourses contribute to the ideological shifts in the images these texts produce? Fifth, which roles do the pilgrimage accounts of German converts to Islam play in the mediation between the German public sphere and the community of Muslim immigrants living in Europe? Sixth, how do the blogs of German expatriates living in Saudi Arabia create a discursive and rhetorical space where the politics of representation takes place? Finally, as previously mentioned, do blogs share similar rhetorical conventions with the genre of travel writing? And how do the historical and historical backgrounds of the authors have changed, if they have?

The scope of this research draws on several theories and fields: discourse analytic approaches to literature, autobiographical theory, postcolonial theory, media theory, conversion studies, and Orientalism. This study seeks to move beyond the boundaries of current interpretations of German studies and humanities and seeks to explore genres outside of the canonical literature, including pilgrimage narratives and the blogosphere, which have never been investigated comprehensively in the area of German scholarship.

With regard to the analysis of the representations of Saudi Arabia in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, I engage in a close reading of selected literature. With the aid of discourse analysis, we are able to investigate patterns that are present explicitly and the
relationships between them. Close textual readings enable us to explore cultural meanings of texts that then open a window on community’s cultural transactions. Discourse analysis will be crucial in order to analyze the notion of Saudi Arabia in travel literature, in pilgrimage accounts, memoirs, and the blogs of German expatriates living in Saudi Arabia today. By way of clarification, I have selected only those travelers who have visited parts of the Arabian Peninsula that following the unification in 1932 became what is today known as the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

With regard to travel literature, I base my research on post-colonial theory and the theory of space. For that, I draw on the works of Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (1994) and Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (1983). Doreen Massey’s *World City* (2007) has shaped my reflections on the nature of space. According to Massey (2007), the term “space” implies the simultaneous multiplicity of spaces that are open and relational and contain a system of overlapping voices. According to Mary Louis Pratt’s work *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (1992), travel writing by Europeans about other parts of the world created a “Euroimperialism.” Importantly, Pratt explores the difficult question of how travel writing constructs and produces the “rest of the world.” Here, also, I draw on Steven Martinson’s (2008) understanding of the intermixing and mutual permeation of multiple cultural elements in literature that create transcultural “third” spaces and I apply this to the pilgrimage accounts. From this perspective, cultures permeate and transform into hybrid identities that retain their most unique features. In sum, cultures are not closed systems. They are “open fields” that interact with multiple cultural spheres that are ever active and interactive, continuously transforming themselves.
My research on pilgrimage accounts is based on studies dealing with conversion, such as those by Monika Wohlrab-Sahr (*Konversion zum Islam in Deutschland* 1999), Karin van Nieuwkerk (*Women Embracing Islam: Gender* 2006), and Ali Köse (*Religious Conversion: Is it and Adolescent Phenomenon? The Case of Native British Converts to Islam* 1996).

Proceeding from the literature on the conversion process, I consider pilgrimage accounts as post-conversion narratives wherein religious belonging and national belonging intertwine. In particular, I apply the theory of “diasporic consciousness” by Paul Gilroy (1997) who defines various relationships of belonging that develop among communities and groups which experience social and cultural dislocation in everyday life. In the case of German Muslims and converts, an awareness of diasporic consciousness helps to describe the religious dislocation of those “divided souls” who oftentimes do not feel themselves fully accepted in their own home country and among those who are born Muslims, yet still manage to share through their pilgrimage narratives a common experience within the transnational Muslim community (*umma*).

In retrospect, my analyses are based on the assumption that narratives of German Muslims help to create public images of what Anderson called an “imagined community.” That community is formed through the transformation of the politics of representation of Muslims that reduce the significance of geopolitical and spatial boundaries. In other words, pilgrimage narratives do not establish any specific belonging. Rather, they create links between transnational communities while maintaining their ethnic cultural identities. In this context I apply a combination of the theories of transculturation elaborated by Pratt and Martinson.
The last portion of this study is devoted to published accounts and the blogosphere of German expatriates. This research is conducted through a close textual analysis of their writings, the socio-constructive media discourse analysis and qualitative content analysis of a number of blogs that have created a discursive and rhetorical space where the politics of representation take place. My analysis of the blogosphere has two primary objectives. The first is to explore how contemporary Saudi Arabia is represented and to compare the blogosphere with the “traditional” travelogues of the nineteenth, twentieth and twenty-first century. The final purpose of the dissertation is to understand the discursive process through which German bloggers use the blogosphere to create an imagined community. Drawing on the postcolonial and discursive perspectives of Edward Said, Stuart Hall, Mary Louise Pratt and Doreen Massey, I argue that expatriate blogs are transcultural spaces of cultural representation that share certain rhetorical devices encountered in the genre of travel writing.

Until now, no one in the fields of German studies and German Orientwissenschaften has focused on literary representations of Saudi Arabia. Thus, the present study fills a gap in our knowledge of the representation of that world culture in German-speaking discourse. Even today, Saudi Arabia is still considered an unknown space in the European imaginary even though, and at the same time, the steady increase in the number of European conversions to Islam has contributed to regarding the sacred city of Mecca as the primary desired destination of European Muslims. Despite the fact that the Middle East and travelling to the Middle East have always been a central theme in Islamic and Christian writing, Saudi Arabia has remained isolated, lying at the fringe of academic studies. In actuality, the Holy Land, North Africa, what is today Turkey and the Levant, have been the main destinations of European travelers who wish to experience what they think is the “exotic.”
Nina Berman’s study, *Orientalismus, Kolonialismus und Moderne: Zum Bild des Orients in der deutschsprachigen Kultur um 1900* (1997), is the point of departure for my analysis of German literature on the subject. Berman traces five phases in Germany’s relationship with the Middle East. She identifies the first phase as that of the Crusades, which she defines as characterized by religious prejudice against both Muslims and Jews. The second one is the period of the Ottoman conquests of Europe, which encouraged hatred and fear against Muslims. The third phase occurred following the unsuccessful siege of Vienna, when a more reassured Germany developed a fascination for everything “Oriental.” The fourth phase is defined as ethnocentric and defines the moment when European powers began to exercise economic, political, and military power in the Middle East and around the world; and the fifth and last phase is the period after 1945, marked in Germany by ambivalence towards Turkish “guest workers.” Berman’s argument is based on the analysis of literary texts. According to her, however, the relationship between Germany and the Middle East should be considered as a result of the respective historical times. I build upon Berman's phases but I also suggest that the diachronic analysis of several German speaking authors dealing with the Middle East shows that the representation of the Middle East and the images proposed and carried out in these writings should not be fully explained through only a historical lens. In fact, my analysis of different texts and genres throughout different historical periods discloses that elements from the five different phases are still present and they add to each other at different historical times. The present study proceeds multidimensionally by taking into account notions of gender, religion, as well as personal motivations. This approach allows us to pinpoint common trends in German literature that are not linked exclusively to a

3 The Siege of Vienna in 1529 was the first attempt of the Ottoman Empire to capture the city of Vienna and it represented the extent of the Ottoman Empire at that time.
specific historical frame but have been perpetuated throughout the centuries. Most travelers of the Christian faith, such as the Baron Heinrich von Maltzan, described mostly the adventurous aspects of their journeys. They revealed, albeit partially, the psychological significance of the Muslim pilgrimage for both Muslim and non-Muslim Germans. When analyzed diachronically, the travel literature of both Muslim and non-Muslim German speaking authors is shown to present Mecca primarily as a spiritual space of collective experience. Even though Mecca has experienced considerable infrastructural progress over the years, its literary representation and religious role in the collective imagery have remained unchanged. The literary descriptions of Saudi Arabia provided by Christian German authors led me to ask whether German Muslim and non-Muslim narrators shared the same view, motivations and impressions or whether the religious background of the authors has shaped their view of Saudi Arabia more then their nationality. These descriptions show that while certain elements and attitudes have changed over the centuries, a common image of the Middle East has persisted going beyond history.

To recap, my main purpose in this dissertation is to compare different cultural sources and genres and analyze whether the images of Saudi Arabia today in German-speaking cultural production have shifted throughout the centuries while bearing in mind the gender, nationality and religious backgrounds of the authors. I also trace the evolution of the images of the country presented in the narratives of German-speaking travelers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In particular, I compare numerous images related to the portrayal of spaces that often reappear in these narratives, namely, the harem, the bazaar, the desert vs. the urban space, the city of Mecca vs. Jeddah, the “city Arab” vs. the Bedouins as well as representations of women in the Middle East.
This dissertation seeks to achieve a fundamentally new interpretation of the role of cultural production in shaping representations, by exploring the significance of travel literature, pilgrimage accounts and the blogosphere in providing a literary and visual discourse on power. The varied literary corpus I am analyzing provides a literary discourse analysis on power and interrelationships between history, literature, media and politics.

**Arabia vs. Saudi Arabia: from Scheherazade to King Saud**

The writings of Karl May (1842-1912) have shaped, and continue to shape, German views of the Orient and other cultures, including the American West, South America and China. In his *Orientzyklus*, May included six volumes: *Durch Wüste und Harem* (published in 1892 but retitled in 1895 as *Durch die Wüste*), *Durchs wilde Kurdistan* (1892), *Von Bagdad nach Stambul* (1892), *In den Schluchten des Balkan* (1892), *Durch das Land der Skipetaren* (1892), and *Der Schut* (1892). In particular *Durch die Wüste* revolves around the travels of the main character Kara Ben Nemsi, an adventurer in the 1880s who narrates in first person his travels and adventures throughout the Ottoman Empire with his Bedouin servant and friend, Hadshi Halef Omar Ben Hadschi Abul Abbas Ibn Hadschi Dawud al Gossarah. Karl May's descriptions of the Orient have shaped the German and European imagery about exotic countries that were not at everybody's reach. In *Orientalism and the Jews* by Ivan Davidson Kalmar and Derek Jonathan (2005) it is thoroughly discussed how Karl May's Orient Cycle (1881-88) already suggests a trend that became very popular in the nineteenth century and that reflected the European longing for a pre-modern world. For instance, while in the eighteenth century the European attention was focused on the Ottoman Turk, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries shifted toward the Arab and in particular the Bedouin. This change of focus was emblematic of a change in the relations between Europe and the East. This also
belongs to Nina Berman's third phase: the Ottomans, who still ruled the Orient in the
seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, in the nineteenth were losing power, and travelers were
less interested in the powers ruling the region and were more focused on the indigenous
inhabitants. In this new relationship, Arabs and Muslims were “frozen” in the past and they no
longer represented a threat to the European powers that were moving towards what they
defined as progress, and the desert best represented this pre-modern world. Nineteenth century
writers contrasted the Bedouin with the Arab living in the city. The Arab of the city was not
representing progress but the decline of a glorious past (Kalmar, Derek 18-20).

The representation of Saudi Arabia and more generally of the Middle East has been
influenced by the collection of stories called *Alf layla wa-layla*, (1475-1525) known in the
Anglophone world as *The Arabian Nights.* These stories have influenced the way Europeans
have constructed and imagined the Middle East and its people. After the translation of the
stories into French by Antoine Galland (1704) and, especially, into English by Sir Richard
Burton (1884-1886), *The Arabian Nights* became highly popular among European readers.
The stories were the easiest and most immediate way to visit unknown and exotic lands full of
wonders through the phantasy adventures of Aladdin, Sinbad, Ali Baba, and Sheherazade, the

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4 The original title in Arabic *Alf Layla wa Layla*, is without doubt the most famous eastern literary classic. The
tales told by the Princess Sheherazade such as Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves or Aladdin and his magic lamp or
even trips of Sinbad the sailor became part of the imagination of so many children in the world.
The background story of the Arabian Nights revolves around King Shahriyar who, disappointed and enraged by
the betrayal of his wife, conceives a mortal hatred for the entire female gender. He orders the vizier, who is also
the father of Sheherazade to bring him a virgin every night: he would spend the night with her and the next
morning he would execute her. The massacre continues for three years until the beautiful, wise and courageous
Sheherazade offers to spend the night with the king. Sheherazade keeps alive the curiosity of the king with his
extraordinary stories for a thousand and one nights. When Sheherazade stops telling the stories, King Shahriyar
has by then forgotten his hatred of women; time and imagination have reconciled with life. Sheherazade saved
herself and the other girls. Sheherazade has become for the West the most famous of all odalisques who
populated for centuries European literature, art galleries and ballet stages, while for the Arab world Sheherazade
is the symbol of the force of intelligence, the charm of the word, the power of seduction and in this sense
Sheherazade is far from the model of the sensual and passive odalisque that is dear to the Western imagination.
legendary Arab princess who fulfills at the same time the role of a storyteller. The Arabian Nights have provided a body of images of the Middle East that have captured the imagination of European readers.

In the introduction to the English edition of *The Arabian Nights*, the translator Richard Burton writes:

> From my dull and commonplace and ‘respectable’ surrounding, the Jinn bore me at once to the land of my pre-direction, Arabia, a region so familiar to my mind that even at first sight, it seemed a reminiscence of some by gone metem-psyche life in the distant past.

Burton introduces a topic that will be a common thread in all the narratives I analyze, namely the ambivalence of Arabia imagined simultaneously as a familiar, yet unknown space, and frozen in a past time whose longing becomes one of the main motivations of the adventurers who decide to travel those regions. Burton adds that “This [English] translation is a natural outcome of my pilgrimage to Al-madinah and Mecca” (5). Thus, even though *The Arabian Nights*

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5 The German interest in the exotic tales of the Arabian Nights had been strong ever since the eighteenth century. Several translations appeared in Germany between 1895 and 1928 such as the ones of Max Henning (1895-99), Felix Paul Greve (1907-08) and Enno Littmann (1921-28). In addition, a number of adaptations for a juvenile audience appeared (see Fähndrich 2000: 103) and provided visual images of Arabia. Most of these illustrated editions from this period utilize innovative technologies in the reproduction of images and colors and could be “viewed” as spectacles. At the turn of the 20th century the images entered the visual discourse with the birth of the cinema and Germans began participating in the new visual culture as spectators in 1895 with the first public screening in Berlin. According to Donald Haase the Arabian nights have been perceived mostly as a visual experience and the content and narrative structure of the Arabian Nights has been adapted in the cinematic work of several filmmakers such as Ernst Lubitsch (Sumurun, 1920), Fritz Lang (Der mude Tod, 1921), and Paul Leni (Das Wachsfigurenkabinett, 1924). Also according to Hesse (1970: vol. 12, 56) the Arabian Nights provided the image of Arabia which satisfied the Orientalist's need and its representation fixed in images created the “East” as a visual experience (The Arabian Nights, Visual Culture, and Early German Cinema, Donald Haase. Fabula. Berlin: 2004. Vol. 45, Iss. 3/4; pg. 261).
Nights is not spatially defined and most of the stories take place in Persia and Mesopotamia, it is his personal journey to the cities of Mecca and Medina that encourages Burton to translate those stories. In his view, the entire region belongs to a cohesive imaginary realm without national borders and cultural distinctions.

Furthermore, through these fictional stories, Burton seeks to reveal a world of cultural practices that are completely unknown to Europeans. In other words, Burton appropriates the fictional world of the Arabian Nights to create an “Arabian” world for his fellow citizens by providing fictional images passing them for real.

These volumes offer the opportunity to notice practices and customs which interest all mankind and which “society” will not hear mentioned. He (the reader) will not think lightly of my work when I repeat to him that with the aid of my annotations the student will readily and pleasantly learn more of the Moslem's manners and customs, laws and religion than is known to my fellow countrymen in their hour of need (5).

The Arabian Nights became the source from which images of the Middle East were created, a magic world of genies, magic lamps and flying carpets. The image was that of a generic Middle East that had no connection to the actual geographical space. It represented a fantastic idea of Arabia that fueled the European imagination. The Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies scholar Philip F. Kennedy defines The Arabian Nights as a “poliphonic, travelling text” (2013) that entered the European culture and transformed the way Europe was looking at other cultures, transforming the way Europe perceived the Middle East.
A Brief History of Saudi Arabia

In order to understand the narratives analyzed in my research and in particular the contemporary ones, as well as the pilgrimage narratives and the blogosphere, one needs to draw the main lines of the history around the unification and foundation of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. In its broadest sense, the term “Arabia” includes Lebanon, Syria, Yemen, Oman, Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, the Sinai and the United Arab Emirates. However, before the foundation of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia by Ibn Saud, in 1932, Saudi Arabia consisted of four regions: the Hejaz, Najd and parts of Eastern Arabia (Al-Hasa) and Southern Arabia (‘Asir). Hejaz and Najd make up the largest part of today’s Saudi Arabia. In particular this is helpful in understanding why most of the first travelogues analyzed in the following chapter refer to “Arabia” instead of Saudi Arabia and this explains as well the difficulty in tracing which one of the travelers had visited what today is called Saudi Arabia. Among the number of travelers who wrote about their journeys to Arabia, I have selected only those who visited and wrote about those regions of Arabia that belong to contemporary Saudi Arabia.

In the early 18th century, a Muslim scholar and reformer named Shaikh Muhammad bin Abdul Wahhab began advocating a return to pure Islam and what he believed to be its original form. Religious scholars and leaders viewed his teachings as a threat to their power and Abdul Wahhab had to find refuge in the town of Diriyah, which at that time was ruled by Muhammad bin Saud. Muhammad bin Abdul Wahhab and Muhammad bin Saud signed an agreement to restore the teachings of Islam and they established the first Saudi State.

6 For historical details about the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, see Tim Niblock, Saudi Arabia: Power, Legitimacy and Survival (2006).
By 1788, the Saudi State included the entire central region known as the Najd and by the early 19th century, included Mecca and Medina and most of the Arabian Peninsula. The popularity and success of Al-Saud aroused the suspicion of the Ottoman Empire, which at that time was the dominant power in the Middle East and North Africa. In 1818, the Ottomans dispatched a large expeditionary force to the western region of Arabia and they besieged Diriyah. In 1824, under Turki the Al-Saud family regained political control of central Arabia, they transferred the capital to Riyadh, and established the second Saudi State. Under Turki and his son Faisal the Saudi state was able to regain control over the lands lost to the Ottomans and enjoyed a period of prosperity. However in 1865, the Ottoman armies captured parts of the Saudi State, which was ruled at that time by Abdulrahman, the son of Faisal. With the support of the Ottomans, the Al-Rashid family of Hail tried to overthrow the Saudi State. In 1891 Abdulrahman bin Faisal Al-Saud had to seek refuge among the Bedouins in the Rub’wAl-Khali, the vast desert of Arabia and then from there Abdulrahman and his family, including his son Abdulaziz, traveled to Kuwait, where they remained until 1902. In 1902, Abdulaziz marched into Riyadh determined to regain the Masmak Fortress, its most emblematic symbol. Between 1924 and 1925 with the capture also of the Hijaz that included Mecca and Medina, Abdulaziz united all the tribes into one nation. On September 23, 1932, the country became the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

7 Turki bin Abdullah bin Muhammad (1755-1834) was the founder of the Second Saudi State and regained political control of the Najd area during the period from 1821-1834 following the administration of the Ottoman Empire.
CHAPTER I

FROM ARABIAN PENINSULA TO SAUDI ARABIA IN THE GERMAN-SPEAKING IMAGINATION: A BRIEF HISTORY, PROMINENT THEMES, AND RHETORICAL STRATEGIES

The first part of this dissertation is dedicated to the early German-speaking travelers who wrote about what used to be referred to as the Arabian Peninsula, its people and culture in different historical moments, which after 1932 became the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. I identify major themes and rhetorical conventions in travel literature and trace the historical continuity between the travel narratives of the past, contemporary pilgrimage accounts, and online accounts that represent Saudi Arabia. According to Walter Weiss (1977), the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has remained a “weisser Fleck,” or “terra incognita” in Western perceptions. Saudi Arabia has long been closed to Western travelers. Even today the country is not fully accessible to individual tourism. Tourist visas are not granted for Saudi Arabia, and non-Muslims are allowed to enter Saudi Arabia only with a working visa sponsored by a company or as participants in organized “Study Tours” that allow them to visit a number of

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8 In this framework I am referring to Western Europe.
archaeological sites in a controlled manner. Until now, non-Muslims have not been permitted to travel to the Holy cities of Mecca and Medina. The German ADAC Travel Magazine (2008, 107) points out that “the doors are unlocked, though relatively slowly and still not for the entire country. The advertisement projects Saudi Arabia as a composite of the past and future: “Es wartet ein unbekanntes Land voll antiker und futuristischer Städte, bizarrer Wüstenlandschaften, und eine Gesellschaft im Aufbruch, die oft anders ist als ihr Image in der westlichen Welt” (ADAC Travel Magazine: 2008, 107). This statement reinforces the Western notion that Saudi Arabia is an unknown country that still maintains its traditions, while at the same time strives towards innovation.

Even though Saudi Arabia has been a major focus of interest for the West, in terms of its economic, political and strategic position, too many people know all-too little about daily life in Saudi Arabia. Westerners tend to focus on stereotypical lives of women as they have been portrayed in the media. The Western image of the country was framed by, and remains frozen in the images conveyed in the Arabian Nights. In Western public discourse, Saudi Arabia’s image is almost exclusively conveyed through the images of the cities of the more liberal Jeddah and the conservative Mecca. The types of texts that shape and carry

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9In 1994 there was the first official position on tourism and domestic tourism was encouraged as a way to preserve the values and traditions of Saudi society and developing internal tourism including the other Gulf countries would have helped boosting the income sources and that the KSA has attributes that can be considered tourism assets. Arabia offers the possibility for tourists coming from other Gulf countries to travel while respecting their faith and culture and where restaurants and accommodations are suitable for Muslim families. In order to attract tourists Saudi Arabia is focusing on the following attractions: Pre-Islamic civilizations such as the Nabateans, the trade routes such as the frankincense, the life and times of the Prophet, Jeddah as the gateway to the holy cities and Bedouin traditions (Peter Burns, in Tourism in the Middle East, Continuity, Change and transformation: 223-227). Prince Sultan launched the Saudi Commission for Tourism and Cultural Heritage (STCH) in 2000 In December 2004 the SCTR announced it would issue tourist visas for the first time, only to suspend them three months later by claiming that the Country needed to improve its infrastructure. However they would encourage pilgrims to stay longer for tourism and they will encourage Saudi tourism.

10 It [the traveler] awaits an unknown land full of ancient and futuristic cities, bizarre desert landscapes, and a society on the move that is often different from its image in the Western world.
the “images” for the Saudi Arabian space can be diverse. Because of the sparse representation of that country in Western public discourse, the travel literature, pilgrimage reports, and blogs of German expatriates living mostly in Jeddah and Ryadh will be analyzed as a cohesive corpus. Travel writing, pilgrimage accounts, and travel advertisements project significant images of Saudi Arabia in Germany. Access to the holy cities of Mecca and Medina has been forbidden to non-Muslims. To this day, these two “holy cities” remain sealed off to non-Muslims. Non-Muslims learn about the rituals taking place in the holy cities only through the narrative descriptions of Muslims. While the description of these cities is commonplace in the travel literature of past adventures and in the pilgrimage accounts of contemporary authors who converted to Islam, references to Mecca do not appear in contemporary narratives and blogs of non-Muslim expatriates. In fact, expatriates typically remain enclosed in their Westernized compounds in the cities of Riyadh and Jeddah, which is where most foreign companies are located. Not only do they not travel to Mecca and Medina, they do not express a desire to visit these cities.

From a literary point of view, the journey to Mecca has always been a central theme in both Islamic and Christian travel writing. As early as the fourteenth century, authors wrote to entertain and inform prospective travelers about the dangers they might encounter during their travels. In the early 1500s, a few Christians arrived in Mecca
following trade caravans. They had learned enough Arabic to pass for Arabs. This very fascinating feature of travel accounts will be discussed in a later chapter.  

Throughout this investigation I identify three different representations of the Arabian space and refer to them as: “the Islamic Oriental City”, the “de-romanticized Orient” and the “modern emerging city.” Until the beginning of the nineteenth century cities that today are part of contemporary Saudi Arabia, are represented in the travel literature as examples of “Islamic Oriental Cities.” With the urban development in the 1930s, cities are often described as spaces of a “de-romanticized Orient,” where “economic interests gain importance over tradition and the Petrodollar triumphs over romance” (Jung 1958: 84). The bazaars of the old city also lose much of their charm. Again terms such as “Middle Ages” and “Modernity” are employed as binary constructs and Saudi Arabia is depicted as caught in a struggle between two opposite temporalities. The “orientalist” exoticism and fascination disappear and are replaced by a narrative of disappointment. The Orient is viewed as having disappeared and modernization is seen as the negative effect of the influence of the West.

11 See for more information the article by Jeffrey, A. (1929) “Christians at Mecca.” The Muslim World 19, pp. 221-232 and the comprehensive work of Wolfe, M. (1997) One Thousand Roads to Mecca: Ten Centuries of Travelers Writing about the Muslim Pilgrimage. Until Marco Polo, Western travelers writing about the Middle East were mostly religious men who shaped their descriptions of the Orient according to the Bible. With the end of the Crusades, travelers’ accounts shifted from religious content to the description of the Orient. In 1503, Ludovico di Varthema from Italy was one of the first Christians to travel to Mecca and Medina, but he was more interested in narrating his own adventures than in describing the cities he visited and the local mores. Vincent Leblanc, a French sailor from Marseilles, claims to have made the journey in 1568. The English prisoner Joseph Pitts travelled to Mecca in 1680, but he did not consider the Kaa’ba interesting enough to mention. The Spaniard Domingo Badia y Leblich went on a pilgrimage in 1807 disguised as a Muslim and claiming to be a descendant of the Abbasif Caliphs of the West (Jeffrey, 1929: 221-232). Later, the Italian Giovanni Finati, the French officer Leon Roches, and the Finnish traveler and Orientalist Georg August Wallin undertook the journey to the holy cities. In 1877, another Englishman, John Hurgonje, wrote his treatise on the origin and nature of the pilgrimage and, in 1885, journeyed to Mecca where he lived for six months studying Islam. Almost ten years later, the French Algerian photographer, Gervais Courtellemont, visited Mecca on a secret commission from the French Government. In 1925 the English C. E. Rutter spent almost a year in Mecca and Medina disguised as a Syrian Muslim (Wolfe, 1997: 79-162). Among these travelers Sir Richard Burton is one of the most famous of his generation. He travelled between the years 1851-1853 by caravan to Mecca and Medina in the disguise of an Afghan doctor from India.
In the third phase, the “emerging modern city” the disappointment in the destruction of the fabulous Orient is no longer mentioned. Western influence and modernity are portrayed in a positive way. Elements such as the traditional Saudi clothing and the traditional architecture are often referred to as “pre-modern,” especially in narratives from the 1980s and 1990s that embrace the notion of “modernization.” The first narratives I analyze belong to what I consider the first phase in the representation of Middle Eastern cities and to what Berman (2002) would consider the phase following the siege of Vienna when a more reassured Germany developed a fascination for everything Oriental.

One of the German travelers who belongs to this phase of Orientalizing the Arabian space is Arnold von Harff (1471-1505) from Köln, who claimed to have visited Arabia. His illustrated journal was written in New High German, edited in 1860 by Eberhard von Groote, and published by J. M. Heberle. Its lengthy descriptive title lists numerous destinations: *Die Pilgerfahrt des Ritters Arnold von Harff von Köln durch Italien, Syrien, Aegypten, Arabien, Aethiopien, Nubien, Palästina, die Türkei, Frankreich und Spanien, wie er sie in den Jahren 1496 bis 1499 vollendet, beschrieben und durch Zeichnungen erläutert hat.*  

12 Harff narrates his pilgrimage from Cologne to Rome, to Mount Sinai to visit the Monastery of Saint Catherine, through Cairo to obtain permission from the Sultan to pass safely through Egypt, Arabia, Syria, the Holy Land and other parts of his dominion. He describes Cairo, Jerusalem, Beirut, Antioch, Turkey, Rumania, Greece, Wallachia, Bulgaria, Serbia and Bosnia. In his extensive travelogue, Harff clarifies that he has visited

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12 The Pilgrimage of the Knight Arnold von Harff from Colonia through Italy, Syria, Egypt, Arabia, Ethiopia, Nubia, Palestine, Turkey, France and Spain as it was completed, described and sketched in the years between 1496-1499.
many countries that are not included in the usual route of this pilgrimage in order to explore towns and districts and observe the habits of the local people. He decides to use a well-known route for his pilgrimage so that if “anyone has in mind to undertake such a pilgrimage, he may look through this book and take it gratefully as a trusty guide” (2-4). Harff’s intention is to instruct his readers and serve as a guide for future travelers. For instance, after visiting Cairo he describes the Muslim faith, the rituals of circumcision, and the month of fasting, which Harff believes took place in October instead of varying according to the moon calendar (119). He describes his departure from Cairo and his journey to the Monastery of St. Catherine through the desert of Arabia where six hundred Arabs approached his group in the desert. He describes them as “rough, blackish, hard people” (136). These nomads have no houses. They carry only tents with them through the desert together with their camels, sheep, goats, wives and children. Descriptions of people are sparse, but it is clear that Harff’s intent is to describe the local populations as primitive. There are no villages or towns, no gardens, but only sun and heat and mountains and valleys. Harff completed his journey from Cairo to St. Catherine’s Monastery in almost eleven days. From Mt. Sinai in Palestine, Harff travelled with a group of six hundred Christians, Jews and Muslims. He arrived in Negra after a four-day journey. After four more days of traveling, he reached Schara, and finally Mecca.

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13 The original version is in new high German: “So doch darum hane ich mich weder gemoyt ind geflissen vrrer beyder kurstliche gnaden zo eren ind walbewallen dese pylgrimmacien wye ich die vollenbraicht haue die gruntlich off zo schryen ind dal van eyn boich zo maichen, off vre kurstliche gnaden in der meynonge wurde dese pylgrymmacien zo vollenbrengen, dat dan vre kurstliche gnaede in diesem boiche mit mir zo wyllen eyn guide wegwijsone vinden moechte” (133).

14 In reality it is determined by the moon calendar and changes every year accordingly.
In the notes to the English edition, the editor Korth expresses doubts that Harff or for that matter any traveler would be able to make the journey in such short time. Harff states that a Christian renegade helped him enter the city of Mecca in disguise. Tellingly, Harff does not describe the city of Mecca in detail but provides only a few general statements. For example, he claims that Mecca is a very pleasant city surrounded by a beautiful garden of trees. He states that a “very beautiful mosque built as high as any on earth” stands in the center of the city. The author claims that he and his companion had entered the city of Mecca without covering their heads and barefoot demonstrating their devotion, crying and screaming, until they reached the end of what he calls the “church” where they saw a fine black marble tomb that they believed to be the tomb of the prophet Mohamed. (154) Also, Harff mentions that he did not see any pictures or idols in the “church,” and after a short time he returned to his caravan. Harff also mentions that beside Mecca there is “a fine and large river.” The absence of a river in Mecca, along with many other implausible observations, suggests that Harff relied on fantasy to embellish his accounts.

This has led several scholars to question the veracity of Harff’s journey, in particular, the scholar of Islamic Studies, Charles Fraser Beckingham (1949) who claims that Harff’s travelogue includes a number of fantastic elements and accounts of amazons and sea

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15 Boldensele states it took twenty-five days from Cairo to Mecca, while Mandebille believes it took thirty-two days and Harff explains that he could not enter Mecca because Christians and Jews had to remain on a mountain about half a German mile from Mecca, which they could see very well.
16 Christian renegades were those Christian prisoners in North Africa and in the Middle East who, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries embraced the Islamic faith and had started working and serving their new masters.
monsters he encounters while travelling in Madagascar\textsuperscript{17} and shows a confusion about dates and facts. For instance, Beckingham points out that the account of Harff’s departure from Sinai to Mecca is believable up to the point of his arrival in Palestine, while the actual travelling time between Cairo and Mecca is questionable. Whereas the pilgrim caravans usually took nearly forty days to complete that journey, Harff claims to have accomplished the journey in much shorter time.

Eldon Rutter,\textsuperscript{18} one of the editors of the travelogue, (1928) remarks that Harff’s descriptions of the mosque are also inaccurate since, as Harff writes, it is “built as high as any on earth.” This is a strange remark for someone who had seen the mosques in Cairo and Medina since the \textit{Kaa’ba} is only about 50 feet tall. Harff also narrates that everyone entered with their head uncovered and bare-foot; however, when pilgrims wear the \textit{Ihram}, the mandatory attire for the pilgrimage, they often wear sandals. The pilgrims proceeded to the “east end of the church” where the tomb of Muhammad was located (Rutter, 1928). Since the entrance to the city is not allowed to non-Muslims, one would expect an enthusiastic and longer account of the city. Also, like so many of his European contemporaries, Harff believed

\footnote{17 Especially in the description of his travels in Madagascar he includes tales of horned snakes, sea monsters, dog faced men, and people who were so small who lived in a nut shell. Through the descriptions of one of the most popular travelogues of his time, Harff creates a fantastic and imaginary world that had the function to impress godfearing Europeans of that time whose knowledge of the world was mostly dictated by biblical stories. The following is a description in the original language of the fantastic creatures he describes: “Dat eyn were eyn draiche des mers Leuaicon genant in dat ander were eyn walvisch. Soe hat der Leuaicon vier voesse mit Klanwen wie eyn grijff, ouch groisse breyde flymmen wie floegel da emit er wael eynen widen sprunck buyssen deme wasser deyt. Ouch hat er eynen dicken langen swantz, da emit er gar heirlich sleyt ind eynen dicken langen swantz da emit er gar heirlich sleyt ind eynen grossen mount mit eyme groissen gebyss, so date r mit den langen klauwen, mit scharffen gebyss, mit dem swantz ind dutch die sprunge der floegelen gar drenklich ind groisse noit dem walvisch kurlaicht” (137).

18 Eldon Rutter is the author of The Holy Cities of Arabia. 2 vols. pp. xv + 303 and vii + 288. London and New York: Putnam, 1928. 42s. In his travelogue he describes his adventures in Arabia by describing the people he came into contact with, but leaving out the geographical descriptions since most of the traveling took place during the night.
that Muhammad was buried in Medina and that his tomb was actually the object of the Muslim pilgrimage while, in fact, it is only a part of it.

While I find the discussion about the veracity of the travelogue interesting, the motivation behind the narration is perhaps more interesting. Why would Harff fabricate his visit to Mecca? I argue that Harff feels compelled to show his readers the entire route of the pilgrimage while filling in the gaps of his journey with fantastic narrations or by repeating things he had heard previously from other travelers. Harff's language is extremely informal and his descriptions are short and of only a general nature. He appears to be trying to convince his readers that he has been “there” and legitimize his pilgrimage. His account thus is a product of the imagination about Mecca based on the narratives of other travelers, oftentimes Muslim travelers, who were telling their Christian friends about the “forbidden” Mecca.

Harff describes a given city to meet what he believed were his Christian readers’ expectations. In this way, even though Harff includes a brief and incomplete description of Mecca, it still serves the need to fill a gap in the journey. What intrigues me in this description is the fact that, while for the other cities Harff provides long and detailed descriptions, when it comes to Mecca, Harff spends less than a page to describe a fantasized Mecca, full of inaccuracies and incorrect details about the city. It is as if Harff would almost feel responsible to mention Mecca as one of the cities he has visited even though for only a few paragraphs and provides only sparse description of the city. Remarkable in its overall absence, he arguably includes Mecca as part of his route to provide legitimacy to his journey. Whether credible or incredible, these so-called travel
accounts provide Europeans with a powerful image of Arabia that becomes fertile ground for the future narratives.

Many early European travelers who were known to have been in Arabia, were Christians who had abandoned their missions by converting to Islam or just escaping and living among the people they had met during their missions. These travelers were messengers in disguise taking important news to Europe, survivors of shipwrecks, or captives. The Austrian Johann Wild (1585-1611) was one of those early travelers who, like Harff, claims to have visited the forbidden cities of Mecca and Medina as a captive in 1607. He was captured by the Ottomans as a slave in 1604 and was bought by a general of the Jannizziari in Istanbul, but a couple of months later his master was killed. Wild then became the property of a Persian master who took him as a personal servant during his pilgrimage. Wild travelled to Egypt with his master in order to join a caravan to Mecca. In his travelogue, *Neue Reysbeschreibung eines Gefangenes Christen Anno 1604*, Wild seemed enthralled by the people he encountered and their customs. In his travelogue he wrote: “Du solltest den prunkvollen Weg des Volkes von Mekka sehen, welches auf den Berg marschiert, die Flanken ihrer Kamele mit Teppichen bedeckt, und die Frauen und die Kameltreiber sangen alle entlang der Straße”\(^\text{19}\) (Wild). Words like splendid or ostentatious to describe the procession of women singing and camel herders lends a magical quality to the event.

Wild's description of the city of Mecca is no more than a couple of sentences, and as in the case of Harff, the statement is quite general. It is included to show his readers that

\(^{19}\) You should see the magnificent way of the people from Mecca that march on the mountain, the flanks of their camels covered with carpets, and the women and the camel drivers were all singing along the street.
he has visited „the forbidden city“ of Mecca, and that from his position in the city he could aesthetically admire the view of pilgrims and their caravans entering the city. After a stay in Mecca, Wild travelled with his Persian master to Jeddah, where he embarked on a mission to Abissinia. They travelled through the Nile to Jerusalem where he was sold, as he writes, to a “friendly old Turk” who gave him his freedom as a gift. In 1611, Wild went to Nurnberg, and in 1613, he published his travel account.

The Swiss explorer Johann Ludwig Burckhardt (1784-1817) is one of the most reknown explorers of his time, and he is also the first one among these early travelers who describes in meticulous detail his travels throughout Arabia. Burckhardt was born in Lausanne and received his education in Leipzig and Göttingen, and later studied in London and Cambridge. He was not a pilgrim like Harff or a liberated captive like Wild, but he was a scientist and an archeologist who had left England with an expedition as a member of the British African Association to uncover the source of the Niger River and a number of archeological sites. His travels took him to Malta, Aleppo, Damascus, Cairo, Palestine and the region, which is modern-day Saudi Arabia and which in his time, was defined with the comprehensive name of Arabia. During this journey, he also excavated the ancient city of Petra. After spending two years in the Levant he mastered Arabic and he studied the Qu’ran. It is not clear whether he really converted to Islam, but in order to better assimilate to the local customs and gain acceptance among the people he met during his expedition, he recounts that he equipped himself in the Oriental fashion, but somehow slightly different from the real Syrian costume since he had no wish to pass as a native, as he mentions in a letter from Malta dated May 22, 1809. His motivations behind his travels
through Arabia explain the encyclopedic and descriptive style of his travelogue, which differs from the more personal diary style of the previous accounts.

In 1814 Burckhardt visited Arabia. He describes his experience in *Travels in Arabia* (1829) and *Notes on the Bedouins and Wahabys* (1831), both published in English. *Travels in Arabia* is an account of Burckhardt’s personal travel experiences, while in the *Notes on the Bedouins and Wahabys* he reports information he heard from other travelers. In *Travels in Arabia* he describes, after a limited stay in the holy cities, the life of the Meccan community. He criticized the community for exploiting pilgrims’ financial resources during the pilgrimage (Wolfe, 162-197). I argue that Burckhardt is presenting himself as an expert who feels a responsibility to reveal to his countrymen what he had witnessed first-hand during his travels. His information is provided in an extremely formal way, and only in rare moments does he allow himself to express emotions, since his travelogue and observations were commissioned and he was not writing for his own pleasure only. I agree with Kenneth Sandbank (1981), who points out how Burckhardt's style reveals the taxonomic approach that in the 19th century was a fashionable way of writing. Burckhardt is considered one of the most important travelers of his time whose work represents a common trend in the 18th and 19th century travel writing. The main purpose of travelling was “scientific” exploration, when travelers wanted to bring back home results and encyclopedic accounts. Burckhardt’s *Notes on the Bedouins and Wahabys and Travels in Arabia* takes the form of a travel diary organized temporally and spatially. The book begins with Burckhardt’s arrival in the Hejaz and his entrance into the city of Jeddah in the
morning of July 15, 1814. Burckhardt arrives in Jeddah after a fourteen days boat trip along the African coasts of the Red Sea and he falls ill as soon as he arrives in the city where he will remain for a month. He describes that “the entrance to the town, upon the side nearest the sea is protected by a battery which overlooks the entire fort, and is surmounted by one enormous piece of artillery capable of discharging a five-hundred pound shot, which so renowned throughout the Arabian Gulf, that its reputation alone is enough to protect Jeddah” (118). He describes the city in details and in particular the local markets and the products such as for instance the different qualities of tobacco.

Following the visit to Jeddah, Burckhardt travels to Mecca. When describing Mecca he argues that the city is known not only as a spiritual place but paradoxically also for its cruelty. His account takes note of the potential vulnerability of visitors to Mecca during the Hadj and the harsh punishment that thieves presumably receive to discourage crime. It should be noted that Burckhardt also references an incident nearly two hundred years prior to his arrival so that he embeds his “knowledge” in a long history:

During [his] stay [in Mecca], a man was beheaded, by sentence of the Kadhy, for having robbed a Turkish pilgrim of about two hundred pounds sterling; this was the only instance of the kind which came to my knowledge, though thieves are said to abound in Mecca, while the Hadj continues. The history of

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20 The city of Jeddah has a particular meaning in the travel narratives. Jeddah lies on the Red Sea and it usually provides the first contact with Saudi Arabia: it is in fact on the old trade routes and it is the main seaport and airport for ninety percent of all pilgrims who visit Mecca every year. Jeddah is considered the main gateway to Mecca and one of the most cosmopolitan cities in Saudi Arabia, as opposed to the conservative Riyadh and of course Mecca. In Jeddah, visitors belonging to different faiths are usually welcome and for non-Muslims, Saudi Arabia ends with the visit of Jeddah because travelling beyond Jeddah is forbidden.
Mecca, however, affords many instances of the most cruel punishments: in AD 1624, two thieves were flayed alive in this street (Travels to Arabia, 117).

Fascinated by the underworld of this spiritual place, Burckhardt judges the brutal means and punishments that occur in the city. He continues: “In proceeding from the Shebeyka along the broad street, northerly, we came to a bath, which, though by far the best of the three in Mecca, is inferior to those of other Asiatic cities” (2). (Sandbank, 1981) When describing the local baths, he locates them in a spatial context, comparing them to the ones that could be found in other Asiatic cities. By doing so, Burckhardt turns himself into an expert not only on Arabia but the whole Eastern world. As Sandbank (1981) points out Burckhardt also takes notes of the Bedouins, describing their locations, physical landforms, the availability of water and pasture, urban centers, and political boundaries.

Burckhardt wrote his account in English for an English-speaking audience because his mission was commissioned by a British government that was expanding its colonial empire, but his use of Arabic terms, especially those untranscribed into Latin orthography, are meant to further the idea of the authenticity of his reports as well as his expertise in Islamic studies. Sandbank states in his exhaustive paper on Burckhardt’s approach to the Orient that, in order to create a satisfying representation of “reality,” Burckhardt organizes his narration into sketches while describing the world in a taxonomic way. Burckhardt explores the Bedouin world through an attention to detail that begins with the camel itself and broadens to include details about the human sphere. He begins with a description of camel saddles that becomes more and more vivid in detail: he describes the qualitative difference between the two saddles used by the Bedouins, the hesar and the ketteb. The
hesar is described quite closely through its primary attributes. “The saddle or hesar consists of a heap of carpets and abbas, rising about eighteen inches over the pack-saddle, so as to afford a commodious seat” (24). The ketteb, the second type of saddle, is described as having skins attached. Even though reality is approached in a classificatory way, Burckhardt transitions toward the development of a subjective viewpoint from which to enter into the “Bedouin world.” The Bedouins are represented as a simplification of human nature. They “constitute a nation of brothers” (367), acting “without any philosophical principles, but guided merely by the general feelings of his nation” (360). The Bedouins’ virtues become the embodiment of an ideal purity. Burckhardt in his travel account writes that

The wandering Arabs have certainly more wit and sagacity than the people who live in towns; their heads are always clear, their spirits unimpaired by debauchery, and their minds not corrupted by slavery: I am justified in saying, that there are few nations among whom natural talents are so universally diffused as among the Bedouins (187).

Bedouins are described as different not only from the Ottomans but also from the settled Arabs: “the poorest Bedouin of an independent tribe smiles at the pomp of a Turkish Pasha” (p. 360). Burckhardt correlates the qualities of “simplicity” and “purity” with the positive attributes of the Bedouins to create a representation of an idealized, nature bound way of living. However, he appears to be less interested in people and more interested in nature and the physical concreteness of reality. In Travels Burckhardt
describes the city of Taif, a city located in mountains near Mecca, in a very detailed manner:

Tayf [sic] is an irregular square, of thirty-five minutes quick walking in circumference; it is enclosed with a wall and a ditch, newly constructed by Othman el Medhayfe. The wall has three gates, and is defended by several towers (84).

In his description, he provides an inventory of physical attributes, and the description of the town itself is reduced to its spatial contexts. For instance, he writes, “Tayf is an irregular square” and later while describing the city of Baitullah, Burckhardt continues by assessing: “Where the valley is wider than in other interior parts of the town, stands the mosque, called Beitullah [Baitullah], or El Haram, a building remarkable only on account of the Kaaba, which it encloses” (134). He also includes a number of Arabic words and terminology that once again have the purpose of securing his status as an expert on this region in the eyes of European readers.

Again the mosque is situated exclusively as a physical landmark and without regard for its spiritual meaning. When talking about the Ka'aba in Mecca Burckhardt only mentions its physical and architectural description. For him, the monumentality of the building is emblematic of its significance at the heart of the mosque. For instance he describes that

The Kaaba stands in an oblong square, two hundred and fifty paces long, and two hundred broad, none of the sides of which run quite in a straight line. . . This open square is enclosed on the eastern side by a colonnade: the pillars stand in a quadruple
row: they are three deep on the other sides, and united by pointed arches, every four of which support a small dome, plastered and whitened on the outside. . . On the east side are two shafts of reddish gray granite, in one piece, and one fine gray porphyry column with slabs of white feldspath. On the north side is one red granite column, and one of fine-grained red porphyry. Among the four hundred and fifty or five hundred columns, which form the enclosure, I found not any two capitals or bases exactly alike (134-135).

Nothing in the description touches on the religious meaning of the mosque, the description is almost exclusively incorporated into an architectural account and physical attributes of the mosque. In the eyes of Burckhardt, the mosque loses its spiritual meaning, or at least this meaning is not clearly expressed, and it is reduced into its physical characteristics. The dimensions, the layout of the columns, all reduce the entity “mosque” into a purely physical architectural context where the columns become the main signifier of the physicality. This emphasis on physical description can be explained, at least in part, by the absence in his narrative of what a modern-day reader would take for granted, namely, photographs.

Burckhardt includes only a few accounts of the inhabitants, but he generalizes their character traits and judges whole populations as inferior compared to European standards. He claims to be an expert with empirical knowledge of his subjects, since he has lived among the local population for extended periods of time. Burckhardt remarks:
For my own part, a long residence among Turks, Syrians, and Egyptians, justifies me in declaring that they are wholly deficient in virtue, honor, and justice; that they have little true piety, and still less charity or forbearance; and that honesty is only found in their paupers or idiots (376).

His ideas about the Arabs are drawn from colonial discourses of the “other” that produce an image of decadence and degeneration. He writes: “The Arabians are a very proud, high-spirited nation; this may be said even of those who inhabit the towns, however corrupted the true Bedouin character may be among this degenerate race” (51). The population is viewed as irrational, immoral and as genetically inferior, thus Burckhardt contributes to the “orientalizing” image of the Middle East that Western culture reproduced and cultivated as Edward Said theorized in his seminal book *Orientalism*.

Even though Burckhardt’s alleged ethnographic descriptions of diverse populations remains undifferentiated, when it comes to the Ottoman Turks he describes them as characterized by a mixture of indolence and sadism. He compares the Ottoman Turks with the Bedouins, which he also describes as full of vices but noble at the same time.
This description of the Ottoman Turks embodies the widespread, shared European view of the Ottomans at the time.\footnote{In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries the Ottoman Empire became the largest and most influential of the Muslim empires in the modern period. Later, in the eighteenth century, among all the exotic cultures that inhabited European popular imagination, that of the Ottoman Empire was one of the few of which a significant number of Western Europeans could have had some direct experience. Since the 16th century, there had been occasional Ottoman embassies in various cities in Europe, but in the second half of the 17th century, the Ottomans began to lose ground. After their final military defeat, many Ottoman envoys were regularly sent to Europe in order to establish political alliances and cultural exchanges with the West. For centuries, most of south-eastern Europe remained under Turkish rule and European writings were full of description of Turks and other “enemies” of Christianity. The stories and impressions recorded in this literature derived from a wide variety of sources from several centuries. In the 16th century, about 2,500 publications about the Turks were spread around Europe, mostly written in German. Some of these sources were provided by former slaves and men of letters who wrote, after their travels, about their strange and at the same time incredible adventures in the mysterious Orient. Western travelers from the East such as pilgrims, merchants and diplomats, contributed to the building and propagation of the image of “the Turk” in the West. In the Renaissance, the Ottoman Empire was mainly described as alien and infidel and the perceptions of the Turk and of the Turkish presence in Europe were of a different kind (Lewis, pp. 72-84). The theme of “fear” was predominant: the Turk was a “violent conqueror” and a “villainous invader” willing to menace the Christendom. Turks were often represented as the embodiment of evil, and many Europeans saw themselves mainly as Christians threatened by the Islamic enemy. However, this characterization was not unanimous: in the seventeenth century, many travelers who came into contact with the “mysterious” culture, reported in their writings that Turkish people were kind and tolerant. For instance, among the virtues that have been accorded to the Turkish people, tolerance was one of the most recurrent and many travelers described the Turkish capital as the only city in Europe where all faiths and cultures could live together with tolerance. Among them, many Jews who had escaped from the persecution of the Inquisition in Europe found the world of Islam to be much more tolerant and more welcoming (Lewis). By the eighteenth century, the old myth of the Turk as barbarous, cruel and villainous began to give way to the new myth of the non-European as the embodiment of exoticism and decadence. This new image of the Turk, replaced the once prevalent images of power and menace, and when the Ottoman decline became more evident, Europe began to be less fearful of the Muslim world. The European Enlightenment produced many new ideas for the reform of Western society, and the call to abandon prejudices towards religious minorities that had held sway in Europe for centuries became one of the most important.} At that time, Arabia was under Ottoman rule.

Yet, Burckhardt’s understanding of the Bedouins was complexly ambivalent since he evoked the image of the noble savage while pointing to what he perceived as their shortcomings. He wrote that the Bedouins “with all their faults, were one of the noblest nations which I ever had an opportunity of becoming acquainted…” At the same time, Burchkardt contended that “the Bedouins are most greedy of gain, and by no means of good faith in common pecuniary transactions. In proportion as they reside near to a town, this avaricious spirit becomes more general among them….” (14) The proximity of the Bedouin to “civilization” and its corrupting effect is a recurrent motif in the description of the tension
between nature and culture. Burckhardt’s description corroborates an initial fascination with and allure of the nomadic way of life bound to nature and its deromanticization later after experiencing their lifestyle.

the Bedouin mode of life may have some charms even for civilized men; the frankness and uncorrupted manners of the Bedouins must powerfully attract every stranger; and their society in traveling is always pleasant. But after a few days' residence in their tents, the novelty subsides; and the total want of occupation, and the monotony of the scenery, efface all the first impressions, and render the life of a Bedouin insupportable to any person of active disposition (356).

Burckhardt reinforces the European imaginary of the Bedouin that can be maintained only at a distance and upon “first impressions.” An infatuation with the Bedouin is purely an intellectual one that is not reflected in the reality once he has the opportunity to experience the Bedouin culture first hand. He associates the Bedouin's “frankness and uncorrupted manners” with monotony while “civilized men” are associated with being active thus constructing an immutable binary opposition in European perception. In the following passage he conflates the body of the Arabs of the Hedjaz with the landscape in which they live and fixes skin color as a main signifier of class and origin: “The colour of the Mekkawy and Djiddawy is a yellowish sickly brown, lighter or darker according to the origin of the mother, who is very often an Abyssinian slave...” (182). Here Burckhardt binds together the dark and brown skin color with a specific social status, the
one of being a slave, perpetuating the European mindset of his times, that connected the fact of being of slave origins to the skin color.

The lower class of Mekkawys are generally stout, with muscular limbs, while the higher orders are distinguishable by their meager emaciated forms, as are also all those inhabitants who draw their origin from India or Yemen (182).

The body type and color, in this passage, become the ultimate context determining the categorization of Arabs into status groups. It will become a signifier also in the accounts of the converts to Islam that I discuss in chapter 2. Burckhardt continues the description of what he perceives as the typical Mekkan man who should be represented, namely: “sitting in his house robe, near a projecting latticed window, having in one hand a sort of fan, generally of this form, made of chippings of date-leaves, with which he drives away the flies; and in the other, the long snake of his Persian pipe” (184).

By fixating on this image, the author reduces the population of Mecca to the image of a specific man and essentializes a population. The image produced is not much different from the Orientalist paintings of Delacroix and from what later authors will do by using photography to freeze time in their exotic representations of the Bedouins they encounter, as analyzed in chapter 2. The opposition of the timeless, ideational representation of a Bedouin’s “essential purity” and the temporal representation of the settled Arab's degeneration and corruption conveys a notion of time as a decadent process.

During his travels, Burckhardt adopted the name Sheikh Ibrahim Ibn Abdullah, and when questioned, he claimed to be a convert to Islam and showed his scrupulous observance of Muslim religious duties (93). It is, however, paradoxical given his account
of the culture and remains unclear whether Burckhardt converted to Islam or whether he was just pretending to be Muslim by masquerading himself in Arabic clothes and speaking Arabic, in order to travel freely throughout the Middle East since at that time the countryside around Jeddah was still dangerous for travelers. Later, on 24 August 1814, Burckhardt set out on his journey to Taif, a city in the Mecca province. It is alleged that the guide he hired never suspected that Burchkardt might not be a Muslim. Burchkardt agreed to take a more direct road, from which they obtained a fine view of the holy city as they descended from the hills to the eastern side of the town. During his stay in Taif, Burckhardt knew that he was being observed and he never was left alone for a moment. Although professing to be of the Muslim faith, Burckhardt confided to officials that he was an Englishman. Burckhardt was reluctant to leave Taif because he did not want to raise any more suspicion about his faith. Though Burckhardt requested a passport from the Pasha Muhammad Ali who was residing in Cairo to facilitate his travels, the Pasha would not provide one, while telling Burckhardt that he might act as he pleased at his own risk. Somehow the Pasha was more concerned with Burckhardt as a potential spy than at the idea of his visiting the holy places. After his visit of the city of Taif, Burckhardt headed towards Mecca.

Mecca was not far away from Taif and once Burckhardt entered Mecca he performed the required rites: the visit to the Great Mosque and the circumambulations of the Ka'aba. Even though Burckhardt does not go into much detail upon arriving at Islam’s holy sites, he was so struck with the appearance of the black Ka'aba that he remained in a position of adoration. The only time he describes his emotions is when he recalls rising, bursting into a flood of tears, and in the height of his emotion, instead of reciting the usual
prayers of the visitor, only exclaims “O God, now take my soul, for this is Paradise!” (104) He expresses very subjective feelings of adoration as if he would like to fulfill the expectations of the readers who want to learn about the experience of entering a sacred and at the same time forbidden place. His expression of adoration is probably the only one of enthusiasm that can be found in his travelogue. Burckhardt’s visit to Mecca satisfied his curiosity about exotic scenes and customs and he aimed to contribute to knowledge about the Orient for the European audience (101).

His description of Mecca, for the most part, centers on the holy place as a city in itself and not only as a spiritual place like the brilliance of the Great Mosque after dark, when all the lamps were lit, as was customary through Ramadan. The area around the Great Mosque serves as the only public space and gathering point for the population. During his stay he gathered facts and information for an encyclopaedic description of life in Mecca: “a town, with streets generally here broader than in other places, stone houses built to accommodate pilgrims, since according to him everyone living in Mecca makes money out of the pilgrims.” We finally get more personal information when Burckhardt describes his daily routine in Mecca. He uses the opportunity to show once again his expertise in engaging with the locals:

I usually spent the early part of each morning, and the later part of the evening, in walking around the town, and frequenting the coffee-houses in its extremities, where I might meet with Bedouins, and treating them with a cup of coffee, soon engaged them to talk about their country and their nation. During the mid-day hours I remained at home: the first part of the night I
passed it in the great square of the mosque, where a cooling breeze always reigns (103).

Burckhardt’s descriptions of Mecca are rather mundane. In particular he is intrigued with Mecca as a deserted and trash-filled town after the period of the hajj, when all of the pilgrims have left:

Of its brilliant shops, one fourth only remained: and in the streets, where a few weeks before it was necessary to force one’s way through the crowd, not a single hajji was seen, except solitary beggars... Rubbish and filth covered the streets, and nobody appeared disposed to remove it. The skirts of the town were crowded with the dead carcasses of camels, the smell from which rendered the air, even in the midst of the town, offensive and certainly contributed to the many diseases now prevalent. Several hundreds of these carcasses lay near the reservoirs of the Hajj, and the Arabs inhabiting that part of Mecca never walked out without stuffing into their nostrils small pieces of cotton, which they carried suspended by a thread round the neck (110).

Burckhardt continues his journey to Medina, the holy city of Islam. This reflects Burckhardt’s intention to create a mapping of the Middle East where both people and places become part of a discursive “lexicon” of Arabia in which every single item is catalogued in a way that European readers can find well defined and pre-established definitions of what the Middle East is and what should be expected when one travels there.
Another traveler, Carsten Niebuhr (1733-1815), a German cartographer, was like Burckhardt, part of a scientific expedition to Arabia and the compiler of expeditions results. In particular, Niebuhr was part of the first Danish expedition in Arabia and also its sole survivor. The expedition, *The Arabian Journey*, sponsored by King Frederik V (1746-1766), included three specially selected scientists: the natural historian Peter Forsskål, the philologist Frederik Christian von Haven, and Carsten Niebuhr.

The members of the expedition set out to find answers to a series of scientific questions, gather evidence of natural history, purchase Oriental manuscripts, and observe life in the unknown and mysterious Arabian world that they were commissioned to explore. Upon his return, Niebuhr published several works to introduce the Arabian world to his European contemporaries. His works were illustrated with maps and drawings of cities and mountains, people, ancient ruins and more.

Niebuhr’s maps became one of the most remarkable achievements of his time in the field of cartography. For over a century they served as the only guide for travelers who were venturing to Arabia. In his *Reisebeschreibung von Arabien und anderen umliegenden Länder* (Travelogue of Arabia and other surrounding countries, 1774-1778), Niebuhr emphasizes the fact that Mecca is a sacred city forbidden to non-Muslims. Niebuhr wrote: “My curiosity would have led me to see this sacred and singular structure (the *Ka’aba*) but no Christian dares enter Mecca.” He explains:

Not that there is any such express prohibition in the laws of Mahomet, or that liberal-minded Mahometans could be offended; but the prejudices of the people in general, with respect to the sanctity of the place, make them think that it
would be profaned by the feet of infidel Christians (Niebuhr 32)\textsuperscript{22}.

Later, Niebuhr reports an event about which he may have heard:

An infidel who audaciously advanced within sight of Mecca, but was there attacked by all the dogs of the city and was so struck with the miracle, and with the angust aspect of the Kaa’ba that he immediately became [a] Musulman (33)\textsuperscript{23}

Niebuhr’s account suggests that the only Europeans who had been in Mecca were Christians who had converted to Islam after having been enslaved by a Turkish master and having spent some time in Turkey. Most Europeans learned about Mecca through Muslims’ reports and drawings. For instance, since Niebuhr was not a Muslim, he based his insights on a drawing of the Holy place that he obtained at Kahira. Later, he had the opportunity to see a better drawing by another Turkish painter who sold them to pilgrims. From these descriptions, Niebuhr learned each single detail about the Holy places in Mecca and in the following chapters he explains the rites of the \textit{Hajj}.

Niebuhr’s travelogue focuses mainly on his experiences in Yemen, but he includes his personal experiences in Arabia, though he spends a short time there. Niebuhr writes about his impressions of the Arabs, who he does not distinguish according to nationality or ethnicity. According to Niebuhr, Arabs seemed to be more civilized the farther they proceeded from Egypt. This is very similar to what other travelers such as Burckhardt

\textsuperscript{22} Translated from German by Robert Heron
\textsuperscript{23} Translated from German by Robert Heron
believed and reported in their accounts. He describes the inhabitants of Luhaiya as curious, intelligent, and polished in their manners. He also tries to assimilate to the local mores to reposition himself within the host culture. He writes, “I had for some time endeavored to suit myself to the Arabian manner of living and could now spare many conveniences to which I had been accustomed in Europe,” but he associates the Arab manners mostly with their appearance, and does not distinguish between any nationality, or ethnicity, simply including everybody under the common denominator of “Arab.” In order to disguise himself to travel throughout the Arabian Peninsula, he grew a large beard, which according to Niebuhr, was the Arab fashion. Long beards and long robes gave them what Niebuhr and the other European travelers defined as a very oriental appearance. To disguise themselves further, each member of the expedition assumed an Arabic name; under these pretensions their real condition was so perfectly concealed that they claimed to arouse no suspicion of being European.

Niebuhr distinguishes clearly between things learned from personal experience and things learned from others. In a section of his book entitled *Of Arabia in General*, he deals with information about Arabia that has gathered from other sources. In particular, he reported information about the government of Arabia, the Hijaz and the holy cities, Yemen and its history, the Hadhramaut, Oman, Hasa and Najd, the bedouins, their manners, religion, customs, language, sciences and agriculture, and the natural history of Arabia. Niebuhr shows that this is an attempt to provide the reader with an encyclopedic knowledge of a region that until then was still remote and unknown to the majority of Europeans.

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24 Harbour at the southern end of the Gulf of Djazan on the Arabian coast of the Red Sea (E. J Brill’s First Encyclopedia of Islam, 1913-1936, Volume 5)
As in other traveler’s accounts, the Bedouins are the focus of the narration and Niebuhr describes them as inhabiting a large part of the Arabian Peninsula:

The inhabitants of this vast country resemble the other Arabs in their moral qualities; they are at once robbers and hospitable…I have however learned that the inhabitant of the Najd carry on a considerable trade among themselves, and with their immediate neighbors; and it is therefore not improbable that an European might travel in safety even through this remote part of Arabia (121).

Among the subjects Niebuhr investigates is the question of polygamy in Arabia. He provides a counterimage of the pervasive image associated with the harem that stirred the popular imagination in fictional accounts of Arabia. Contrary of popular European notions, he observes that most Arabs do not usually take the four wives which his religion permits. “None but rich voluptuaries marry so many wives, and their conduct is blamed by all sober men” (149). He also counters the idea that Arab women are treated like slaves: “The Arabian women enjoy a great deal of liberty, and often a great deal of power, in their families” (214).

In his description, Niebuhr challenges common representations of Middle Eastern women and provides a more nuanced understanding of class differences and daily life. The most valuable and important part of Niebuhr’s representation is his account of the social and political conditions in Arabia in the chapter titled “The new religion of a part of Najd.” This was the first information to be received in Europe about the Wahhabi movement,
whose founder, Muhammad ibn `Abd al-Wahhab (1703-1792), was alive during Niebuhr’s time in Arabia (87).

Niebuhr did not reserve judgment on what he perceived as the teachings of the Wahhabi and admits that he “can say nothing positive with respect to its tenents” since he did not personally meet any of its disciples. He heard from other travelers that he encountered during his journey about the places he could not visit and through their accounts he quickly grasped the basic principles of Wahhabi teachings and the mood that lay behind the movement. He learned from a man who had travelled through Najd of the superstitious practices which had developed among the Sunni sect, that he claimed contradicted the spirit of the Prophet’ teaching, and that Wahhabism sought a return to the purity and simplicity of Islam. (88)

In his accounts, Niebuhr is less focused on the architectural and physical aspect of the cities as it was in Burckhardt’s travelogues. He is more interested in depicting the customs of the people he meets, and he aims to challenge the stereotypical depictions of other European travelers. Niebuhr attempts to provide insightful descriptions of the Middle East that go beyond common representations.

As analyzed in the previous narratives, the descriptions of Arabia by eighteenth and nineteenth century European travelers center on the Bedouins. While the nomads command a fascination, they are nonetheless described as “inferior and savage people beyond the edges of the truly civilized world” (Niebuhr, 9). In addition to Islam, the Arabic cities and their institutions, were regarded by Europeans with the most intense interest. The European fascination for Arabia was connected to the interest in exploring the holy cities of Mecca and Medina. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Europeans did not seem
to feel that there was much that they might learn from other cultures. In addition to the pervasive fascination with the Holy cities of Mecca and Medina, the nomadic Arab, the Bedouin of the desert retained the most powerful appeal. Niebuhr writes, “if any people in the world afford in their history an instance of high antiquity, and of great simplicity of manners, the Arabs surely do. Coming among them, one can hardly help finding oneself suddenly carried backwards to the ages which succeeded immediately after the flood” (12). For Niebuhr, as for Burchkhardt, the Arab exemplified the “Noble Savage,” a relic of an ancient and an ethical age uncontaminated by civilization. It was freedom that the nomadic Arab exemplified in the European imagination and a closeness to nature that Europeans, yoked by the constraints of ‘civilization’ and exiled from paradise, perceived as lost. “The spirit of liberty,” Niebuhr wrote, “with which this warlike nation is animated, renders them incapable of servitude.” He continues, “The poverty of the wandering Arabs is plainly voluntary. They prefer liberty to wealth, pastoral simplicity to a life of constraints and toil, which might procure them a greater variety of gratification.” Niebuhr expresses how Bedouins represent what has remained of an ethical age where the simplicity of life becomes the way to remain authentic and souverain.

Ulrich Jasper Seetzen’s (1767-1811) path to the discovery of the Middle East resembles that of Carsten Niebuhr. Seetzen studied medicine at the University of Göttingen, while pursuing his interests in natural history, technology and geographical exploration. In June 1802, he travelled through Vienna along the Danube towards Istanbul where he spent six months. From there, he travelled with a caravan towards Izmir and arrived in Aleppo (in today’s Syria), where he remained from 1803 to 1805. He then travelled eastward to the Arabian Peninsula, increasingly motivated to his surprise by the
realization of the many similarities between the people of the Middle East and Europe:

“Meine Begierde Arabien und Afrika zu bereisen, ist eher noch vermehrt, indem ich täglich finde, dass die Orientalen eben so Menschen sind als wir”25 (Pfullman, 509).

Seetzen learned Arabic, formally converted to Islam and dressed as a Muslim. Between 1808 and 1809 he began traveling and documenting his experiences in a journal. In 1806, he set off for the region that today is known as the border between Jordan and Israel, and continued his expeditions through the Sinai Peninsula toward Cairo. There he joined a group of pilgrims who were on their way by sea to Jeddah. Under the pseudonym of Musa al-Hakim, and entered several mosques and in October 1809, he travelled to Mecca together with the group of pilgrims with the intention of entering the “temple” and secretly drawing its structure and documenting its environment. He found the drawings of Niebuhr and claimed that they were imprecise, which in his estimation, “war nicht zu verwundern ist, da die Todesstrafe auf die Abzeichnung dieser Orte gesetzt ist”26 (515). No Muslim up to that time had painted the big mosque. In October 1809, Seetzen travelled through Medina to Lahak and returned to Mocha, a port on the Red Sea, from where he sent to Europe the letters he had written in November 1810. What is certain after that day in November is that in October 1811 Seetzen was found dead two days after his departure from Mocha on his way to Taiz, a city in the Yemen highlands (Pfullman, 408). His death, it has been presumed, resulted from the suspicion his research may have aroused.

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25 My desire to travel to Arabia and Africa, has increased by finding daily that the Orientals are people just as we are.
26 It is not surprising that the death penalty is foreseen as a punishment for drawing this place.
Baron Heinrich von Maltzan's (1826-1874) pilgrimage to Mecca in 1860 is described in *Wallfahrt nach Mekka* (1865). Maltzan studied law in Heidelberg and when his father died in 1851, his inheritance allowed him to travel to Syria, Palestine, Persia, Egypt, Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia. Between 1850-51, he first travelled to Belgium and England and then to Italy and France and dedicated himself to research on the Mediterranean countries with large Muslim populations. During his stay in Algeria he improved his knowledge of the Arabic language and of Islam and learned the rituals of prayer, the ablutions, and parts of the Quran by heart. In 1860, when Maltzan had already been in the Arabic world for more then ten years, he decided to travel to Mecca without converting to Islam. On his arrival, he writes of his complete disappointment and even describes the rituals of the pilgrimage as very boring. He compares the big mosque to a citadel full of demons and mentions the several difficulties encountered during the journey such as the hot weather and the sweaty odor of the pilgrims who were crowded together.

While returning from the visit to Arafat, a granite hill east of Mecca, where pilgrims gather for the most important day of the pilgrimage, Maltzan records overhearing a conversation between two Turkish men in a Turkish *hamam* who were talking about him. They suspected that he was a Christian disguised as a Muslim. Maltzan left Mecca as soon as possible and escaped from the country without visiting Medina.

It is interesting to note that Maltzan’s travel account of Mecca was not published until 1865, after the death of the Muslim Abdurrahman, who helped him obtain the documents to get to Mecca. Maltzan had to publish his accounts only after the death of Abdurrahman because not only was it punishable by death for a non-Muslim to enter Mecca but also for those who helped a non-Muslim gain entry (Pfullman, 289).
The description of Jeddah in the travel writing of 18th and 19th century journeymen like Niebuhr, Seetzen, Burckhardt and Maltzan is of an Islamic-oriental city that inspires and reflects a great fascination for the Orient. Since the beginning of the 18th century the East increasingly became a sphere of political and economic interest. The European representation of the Orient, however, was rarely reflected or came close to its reality, but more consistently was a composition of fantastic, adventurous and erotic tales. This image of the Orient was perpetrated mainly by Orientalist artists and authors whose literary works such as fairy tale of the One Thousand and One Nights or the fictional novels of Karl May discussed in the introduction ignited the European imagination.

The word “Orient” recalls nomadic peoples, exotic caravansereis and bazaars, veiled women, harems, and spices. Yet, while critical theories in cultural studies have unveiled the desires and anxieties and laid bare the fictionality of “orientalism,” these images of the exotic while extremely stereotyped and essentializing, retain their power even in contemporary public discourses. These images have etched themselves deeply in the subconscious of Western narrativation and indeed as Edward Said astutely recognized, Western scientists, painters, photographers and writers, contributed substantially to the figment of the imagination called “the Orient.” The “Orient,” as Said argued in his book Orientalism in the late 1970s, is merely a construct. Even though the early accounts were classified as “true representation” these travelogues reveal the vested interests and limits to cultural understanding. Many travelers travelled as pioneers, driven by their curiosity and romantic notions of unfamiliar territories, and oftentimes looking to fulfill a need that Europe could not answer.
In his description of Jeddah as an Islamic-Oriental city in his travelogue (1865), Baron Heinrich von Maltzan subscribes to an evaluative narrative that sets the European apart from his object of study. He refers to its residents as “extravagant” Arabs, and women are depicted as erotic objects. The “Orient” is a space of extreme contrasts without a golden mean. Maltzan writes:

Der Orient ist das Land der exzentrischen Gegensätze, der extravagantesten Übertreibungen. Wie ein Araber nur geizig oder verschwenderisch, nie aber vernünftig sparsam zu sein versteht, so weiß auch keine Araberin in ihrer Wohlbeleibtheit die vernünftige Mitte zu halten. Entweder aufgedunsene Fettigkeit oder skelettartige Magerkeit, eines von beiden, aber selten ein passendes Mittel, ziert diese Priesterinnen der Liebe\textsuperscript{27} (242).

According to Maltzan, Arabic women are not moderate in their behavior, but are instead excessive “priestesses of love.” He also describes a culture of revenge as an integral characteristic of the Bedouin:

In vielen Beziehungen haben die Beduinen Arabiens Ähnlichkeit mit den Kabylen von Algerien und Marokko. Namentlich was die Zähigkeit betrifft, mit welcher sie an der barbarischen Sitte der erblichen Blutrache festhalten, von der sie

\textsuperscript{27}The Orient is the country of eccentric contrasts, the most extravagant exaggerations. An Arab understands only being stingy and extravagant, but never reasonably economical, so Arab women cannot even keep a balance in their corpulence. These priestesses of love are graced by either bloated fatness or skeletal thinness, either one or the other, but rarely a suitable balance.
The contrast between the Bedouin and the Arabs of the cities is a very common theme in the description of Arabia and Jeddah. In this case, the Arabs living in the cities are represented as corrupted by their civilization and no longer pure or clean. “Noch in einem anderen Punkt unterscheiden sich die Beduinen vorteilhaft von den städtischen Arabern, das ist in der Reinlichkeit” (245).

Travelogues from this period are a mixture of old-fashioned ethnography and taxonomy. The purpose of the journey, according to Maltzan, “was mainly of an archaeological and epigraphical nature” but also to narrate the story of Arabia as the previous travelers did.

The interest in traveling to the Middle East hardly subsided. Julius Euting (1839-1913), who was born in Stuttgart and studied theology in Tübingen, began a study of oriental languages after completing his theological education. Inspired by the travels of the Englishman Charles Montague Doughty, he visited the Arabian Peninsula on his 1883-1884 journey. Euting investigated during his travels the “traces of pre-Islamic history in the form of inscriptions and monuments.” With his travel diary, *Tagebuch einer Reise in Inner Arabien* (1896) he intended to “present a readable description of my personal experiences, impressions and observations to a larger audience.” His diary is a mixture of personal reflection and details ranging from the various sounds employed by the natives to call their

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28 In many respects the Bedouins of Arabia resemble the Kabyles of Algeria and Morocco. Notably with regard to the tenacity with which they cling to the barbarous custom of hereditary blood revenge, from which they never distance themselves and that they propagate from generation to generation.

29 The Bedouins differentiate themselves from the Arabs who live in the city also in another aspect, the cleanness.
animals, such as the term “Hirrrtsbô!” used by the Bedouins to call the camels who disobey. He also included an observation that the women of Maan were prone to applying nicotine juice from pipes to their lips and teeth. His language and style become at moments comedic. For instance, he uses exclamations as they maybe found in comic books like “Brrrh!” but he also includes elements typical of an adventure novel (Pfullman). Because Euting is more interested in the archeological and epigraphic aspects of his expeditions, the Arabs that he met are not characterized in detail.

Travelers like Niebuhr, Maltzan, Euting and Seetzen who were of the Christian faith, reveal the psychological significance of the pilgrimage in addition to documenting the adventurous aspects of their journey. In particular, they show a curiosity for crossing forbidden territory and being able to describe the city of Mecca for other Europeans who were not able to travel to the Arabian Peninsula. In their accounts Jeddah and Riyadh remain protagonists in the narrations of non-Muslim authors since they are also the most accessible places.

The literary representation of Jeddah mirrors the diversity of its development and the changing role that the city has played over history. Jeddah is portrayed differently than Mecca in the travel narratives, reflecting the development of the city throughout the centuries, since it does not hold spiritual meaning. Jeddah has always been described in its relation to Mecca. For instance, at the beginning of the 19th century, Jeddah was portrayed in the travel literature discussed so far as an example of an Islamic-orientalist city. In what I call the second phase of travel literature, the city of Jeddah is portrayed first as a “deromanticized Orient”, followed in later writing by descriptions of a modern city. Jeddah remained under Ottoman rule until 1916 and in 1925 was governed by Ibn Saud.
Despite the modernization of Jeddah in the last century, the concept of the Islamic-oriental city is still applicable to today's Jeddah. Even though the functional structures of the city have changed at least since the emergence of modern nation states, Jeddah is still partially presented as an Islamic and Middle Eastern town and characterized as “Islamic-Oriental.” These changes are reflected in Friedrich Krause's book, Stadtgeographische Untersuchungen in der Altstadt von Djeiddah (1991). Krause investigates the elements of the “islamic-oriental” city of Jeddah still discernable today. Krause describes the topography of Jeddah and its architecture as a mirror of the political situation of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the inner peace of the last centuries. He also mentions the fact that a defense of the local rulers against the city’s population was not needed. The single house remains the dominant element in the city as well as the mosque and the bazaar that play a decisive role in Jeddah.

This cityscape surfaces in the narratives of the authors of the 19th century. Bazaars and narrow streets are the focus of narration and became a recurrent topos in the literature of this period. In his essay, Krause describes contemporary Jeddah as being in opposition to other Muslim cities, “das heutige Djeddah einen auffallenden Gegensatz gegen andere moslemische Städte”30 (107). However, the positive aspects associated with Western features of the city are mentioned along with and in contrast to the exotic negative aspects of its “oriental” past. This reproduces a binary description of the city of Jeddah, whereby on one side the city mirrors the economic development of Arabia, and on the other side, its conservative aspects are reflected mostly in the preservation of traditional architecture.

With the expansion of the city and the seaport during the oil boom of the 1930s, the city

30 Contemporary Jeddah is in striking contrast with the other Muslim cities.
has strongly developed and has shown a new face. During this new phase, Jeddah is often described as a space of “entromantisierter Orient.” This de-romanticized Orient embodies a phase of disappointment and disenchantment for the German authors who describe that only the negative and least appealing aspects of the Orient have remained untouched. Hermann Jung (1958), in his book, “Arabien im Aufbruch. Eine Reise in die neue Zeit” (1958), embodies this third phase in which he describes a number of Middle Eastern countries through a historical analysis of various nationalist movements in Arabic countries. When it comes to Saudi Arabia, he focuses on “Der Kampf mit dem Fortschritt,” the fight against progress, and devotes two chapters to this internal struggle: “Djiddah-Mekka: Entromantisierter Orient” and “Dharhan-Hochburg der schwarzen Goldes.” In particular he almost exclusively portrays Saudi Arabia as “entromantisierter Orient,” where the petrodollars triumph over any romance:

Bei der Einfahrt in Djiddah, der mit 300 000 Einwohnern
größten saudi-arabischen Stadt, taucht wie eine völlig
unorientalischer Silhouette mit Babyhochhäusern auf. Man ist
enttäuscht. Das soll Arabien sein? Man hatte von diesem Hafen
der Mekkapilger eine andere Vorstellung31 (Jung, 1958: 84).

Jung describes the city of Jeddah far from the Oriental imaginary. He criticizes the Saudi Arabian leadership that does not seem concerned with the fact that Jeddah is losing its traditional features and is letting “the oil dollars triumph over the Romance” (Jung 1958: 84). This is important because it reveals a change in the way Western travelers and

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31 At the entrance to Jeddah, which is the largest Saudi Arabian city with its population of 300,000, appears as a completely non-oriental silhouette with baby skyscrapers. One is disappointed. Should this be Arabia? One had a different idea of this harbor for Mecca pilgrims.
scholars have considered the shift during the so-called modernization and internationalization of Saudi Arabia.

Despite the technical and architectural development of the city, such as swimming pools, sports fields, cinemas, air conditioners and Western-style buildings, in his description of the cities, “oriental” and “negative” traits become synonymous: the male pedestrians “dominate” the streets of Jeddah, and women are rarely seen. If they walk the streets, they are veiled in black clothes. In the old town, the main protagonists are the old neighborhoods with their mosques and minarets, the Mashrabiya, the typical window protected by carved wood. According to the description of Jung, the Mashrabiya seem grotesque in the inner city, and they will soon disappear during the urban redesign. The bazaar of the old town also loses much of its charm. Traditional Arabic handcrafted products are sold, but next to them, the traveler will find western products such as nylon underwear or cameras, even though “das Fotografieren in Saudi Arabien oft noch mit Lebensgefahr verbunden ist”32 (Jung, 1958).

Again and again, terms such as “Middle Ages” and “modernity” are used as binary oppositions. Jung describes Saudi Arabia as engaged in a visible struggle between its past and modernity. According to Jung, the “oriental” exoticism disappears, and only the cultural struggle and the negative aspects of society remain. This portrayal of Saudi Arabia shows that the Oriental portrayals of the 18th and 19th century are no longer there where the traveler expects it, the city's development has left intact only the negative aspects, and according to him, it has destroyed the fabulous “Orient.” Authors of these later travelogues no longer want to confirm the expectations of an Arabia that their readers expect; they

32 Photography in Saudi Arabia is still connected to risk of death.
want to write about what they believe is the “true” Arabia with both positive and negative aspects. And yet, what is deemed negative seems to be mired in an absence of what Jung expects of the “orient.” The sense of disillusionment results from the lost image of a past orient that is filled with nostalgia for an “other” Europe. It is as though modernization did not fit the expectation of European travelers and it did not represent the alternative they sought in the Orient.

This different relationship to the Saudi Arabian space is expressed in the third phase of the representation of the cities that emerge from the narratives following the 1950s.

The description of Jeddah by Walter Weiss in his publication Saudi Arabien (1977) also belongs to what I am calling the third phase in the portrayal of the Saudi Arabian space. Weiss defines the rapid development of Jeddah that offers “ein Kulissenwechsel, der den Reisenden rapide aus der Vormoderne ins 21. Jahrhundert katapultiert.”

The disappointment owing to the destruction of the fantastic Orient is no longer mentioned or thematised. Instead, Western modernity is portrayed uncritically and as normalized.

Jeddah is described as “modern” and compared to the Western idea of modernity and its people, in Jung’s estimation, are a model for what the whole Saudi Arabia should be, with the exception of the traditional Saudi clothing and traditional architecture, which he refers to as “Vormodern,” pre-modern: the white shirt, red and white cotton cloth with the black cord. These elements, which are still regarded as “oriental,” as opposed to “modern” are part of the cityscape:

Als echter Saudi trägt Hatem den Thaub, das weiße, knöchellange Hemd, und auf dem Kopf Schmagh und Uqal, das

33 A change of scenery that rapidly catapults the traveler from the pre-modern period to the 21st century.


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34 As a real Saudi Hatem wears the Thaub, the white, ankle-length shirt, and on his head Schmagh and Uqal, the red white cotton cloth with black cord (…). There are the well-heeled youth of the city, beefed up with Rouge, Ray-Ban glasses and rhinestone embroidered abaya (floor-length garment for women), like the honor. In all directions, the rectangular street grid extends to the dusty horizon of the ironing board flat desert: a faceless sea of concrete and glass, cut from dead straight, multi-lane asphalt tapes and interspersed with architectural signs for the future.

35 Ibn Saud - King between tradition and progress.

36 Taif: development, structure and traditional architecture in an Arabic city in transformation.

37 Modernity and Tradition: the example of Saudi Arabia.
For the modernization theorists, the dualistic concepts of “tradition” and “modernity” emphasize the starting and the end point of a trajectory that the “other” societies should follow. The concept of modernity and its counterpart are the keywords that are repeated over and over again. A number of these last studies are not travel accounts but scholarly works on Saudi Arabia that are still attempting to offer a portrayal of the country.

Max Reisch (1912-1985) is one the authors who belongs to this third phase in the representation of Saudi Arabia and its constructed reality. He studied in Bolzano and Kufstein and graduated in architecture and international business from the University of Vienna. An engineer, businessman, traffic pioneer and rally master of 1950, he travelled with his companion Rolf Hecker. As a 20-year-old engineer for structural engineering, Reisch in 1932 embarked on his first distant journey in the Sahara. Even though Saudi Arabia was closed to Western tourism, Max Reisch and Rolf Hecker managed to arrive in Riyadh with their motorcycles (Keller, 2002). In his travelogue Arabien Einst und Jetzt (1958) Reisch dramatically describes the lights of modernization that attract his attention and the sand of the desert the he believes keeps Saudi Arabia far from complete modernization.

38 Reisch’s numerous expeditions led him to almost all the continents of the earth. In particular, he travelled by motorcycle to India (1933) and with a Steyr 100 to Indo-China (1935), as well continuing his world tour with Hecker.

For Reisch, Saudi Arabian space is untamable because of its vast desert and thus far from the possibility of a full modernization. The sand is described like a veil that covers the peninsula. However it is not only the lights that have given the city its “modern” face but also the fact that locals have adapted Western customs mixed with what is more traditional among the customs of the Arabs. Also when Reisch meets with Ibn Saud, the first King and founder of Saudi Arabia, who united the inhabitants into the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in 1932, the attention to his physical features produces a caricature of an Arab.


Jetzt, das wir hier sind und Raschid el-Gailani für uns beim

\(^{39}\) In the distance appeared lights. She quickly became a whole sea of lights. We approached the goal of the evening’s journey through the Arabian desert. When we had first seen so many lights, it was probably because we had looked down from a hill on the widespread systems of the palace. But now gliding silently down the car, the lights disappeared, and behind the high mud walls one saw only the indirect glow of many strong lights in that seemed to break in a blur in the sky. Only there was no fog, but the sand that acts constantly like a veil over Arabia.
König eine Lanze gebrochen hat, ist leicht reden; aber wenn wir von El-Kertsch angefragt hätten, ob wir nach Riyadh kommen dürften, so hätte die Antwort ohne Zweifel ebenso orientalisch- höhe die Antwort ohne Zweifel ebenso orientalischer wenn wir von El-Kertsch angefahren sind⁴⁰ (201).

In this description, Reisch brings together the physical features of what he defines as Arab royalty with what he considers Oriental customs.

Ibn Saud unterhielt sich nun mit Dr. Hecker isch-her wenärztliche Probleme, und ich konnte meine Gedanken fortspinnen. Also, nun waren wir hier in der verbotenen Stadt, und das war die Große Chance unseres Lebens, denn ich weiß, wie Berichterstatter großer Zeitungen aller Nationen in den Randstaaten Saudi-Arabiens, also in Jordanien, im Irak und in Kuwait, warten und warten und doch niemals in das verbotene Land hineindürfen, geschweige denn bis ins Herz des Islam, in die Königstadt Riyadh⁴¹ (201).

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⁴⁰ His face is thin and dark-toned, the nose slightly curved, shaped tall and noble. He is the type of pure breed Arabian without any African twist. The eyes of His Highness are hidden by very dark, large glasses. (200) And I thought to myself: Oriental politeness! Now that we are here and Rashid al- Gailani was broken for us the king a lance is easy to talk; but if we had asked El - Kerch if we can come to Riyadh, the answer would undoubtedly well gelautet Oriental politely: “Currently not possibly at a very much later date.”

⁴¹ Ibn Saud now talked with Dr. Hecker some medical problems and I was able to continue spinning my mind. So, now we were here in the Forbidden City, and that was the great opportunity of our lives, because do I know how Rapporteur of large newspapers of all nations, wait in the peripheral countries of Saudi Arabia, so in Jordan, Iraq and Kuwait and wait and yet never allowed to enter into the forbidden land, let alone to the heart of Islam in the royal city of Riyadh!
Aware of his privileged position to enter a space rarely open to tourism, Reisch expresses an eagerness to share his experiences with various press outlets. His emotions related to his visit of the sacred cities differ little from the travelers’ accounts of the previous centuries. Still Reisch, as someone who belongs to the third phase of representing Saudi Arabia, adds his fascination with the process of the modernization of Saudi Arabia. Yet, the comparison with Europe, whereby Europe and the West are featured as reference point and model of values and of civilizing processes, remains intact.

Zuerst wurden drei Gänge nach europäischer Art serviert. Ich beobachtete Seine Majestät und stellte fest, dass er diesen Gängen sehr zusprach. (...) Der König im Morgenland hat Reisen nach Europa und Amerika unternommen und dort manches für gut und richtig befunden, was nach wahhabitischen Anschauungen abzulehnen wäre. Es wurde mit Messer und Gabel gegessen, ganz nach europäischer Sitte, ja noch mehr, nach sehr feinen Pariser Tischmanieren. Allerdings – je weiter man an der Tafel nach unten blickte, desto lockerer wurden die Sitten, und bei den arabischen Speisen griff man am unteren Ende der Tafel auch herzhaft mit den Fingern zu\(^\text{42}\) (202).

\(^{42}\) First three courses were served in the European manner. I watched his Majesty, and found that he was really representing these courses. At the end there were three Arab transitions, and I secretly agreed with him, that these deserved honor. The King in the Orient has made trips to Europe and America, where many found good aspects and they should reject the Wahhabi beliefs. It was eaten with a knife and fork, according to European custom, or even better, by very fine Parisian table manners. However - the more you looked down at the table, the looser were the customs, and when it was time for the Arabic food, they started reaching the bottom of the table with their fingers.
Reisch’s narration rehearsed and reinforces the dichotomy between modern and “pre-modern Arabness” and the merging of cultural customs. In the chapter on the German-speaking expatriates, I will discuss how online presence and the published narratives continue these traditions. I have decided to analyze these contemporary narratives in the further chapter because they do not belong to travelers but to people who live in Saudi Arabia for an extended period of time.

These travel accounts analyzed in this chapter reveal common threads among the German narrativization of Saudi Arabia for German audiences. Even though the purpose of the journeys may be different, certain tropes dominate and are established. The “otherness” of Saudi Arabia in relation to Europe emerges as the most persistent theme. German travelers from as early as the late eighteenth century continue to remind their compatriots of the exciting and simultaneously uncomfortable differences between the cultures and peoples of Arabia, and later Saudi Arabia, and the European perspectives. Sometimes these differences are framed in a favorable light to invoke a sense of exoticism. More than often the Arabian lifestyle is highlighted in strong contrast to and diametrically opposed to Western values of scientific progress, women’s emancipation and ways of organizing public and domestic life. Parallel to notions of exoticism and spirituality, the travelers cited produced the image of a land mired in corruption and inflected by conservativism. The accounts that were consumed and shared by European and German travelers between the late nineteenth and twentieth century showed a strong belief in the so called civilizing mission of the West, which was to guide the Middle East as well as Arabia through Western democracy, science, education, and human rights. To use Mary Louise Pratt’s (1992) words in describing a colonial gaze in the appropriation of “other” cultures,
symptomatically positions native populations as “reductive, incomplete beings suffering from the inability to have become what Europeans already are, or to have made themselves into what Europeans intend them to be” (152). Like Pratt, David Spurr (1993) recognized this particular colonial discourse in his reading of Western travel and journalistic writings about other non-Western cultures. He points out that Western producers of the discourse rely on the same set of colonial rhetorical principles in representing cultures other than their own. Those self-proclaimed broad-minded German liberal travelers/writers infused the familiar colonial rhetoric in their writings. Their portrayals of Saudi Arabia switched back and forth from a nostalgic admiring of what their Western minds fantasized and longed for as the ancient and authentic Arabian wisdom to stereotypes of Saudi Arabia’s backwardness and degeneration. The representation of this dichotomy between modernity and tradition shows that recent narratives are still marked by a Western-centered point of view. Despite the technological development of the city, the social ecosystem is still described as traditional. This representation corresponds to the interest and fascination with the exotic, but also speaks to the concern for tradition that is preserved in the “dust” of the desert.

In spite of pressures to modernize, the notion of the “Orient” persists in the imagination of contemporary authors as before. The abovementioned travel writings of the Western travelers to Saudi Arabia provide a sketch of the West’s encounter with Saudi Arabia. The travelers/writers played important roles in shaping the experience of Saudi Arabia in the western imagination. Their writings serve as the template upon which German pilgrims and bloggers construct their own narratives about contemporary Saudi Arabia. Not only do the authors I discuss in an upcoming chapter inherit their
predecessors’ same vantage point to observe Saudi Arabia, they also incorporate many of the rhetoric and discursive strategies from previous Western accounts of the country and its culture.
CHAPTER II

PILGRIMS AND CONVERTS: HAJJ ACCOUNTS OF GERMAN CONVERTS

The journey to the heart of Islam is the pilgrimage to Mecca and to Medina. The trip to the heart of Islam is at the same time the trip to the human soul (Die Reise nach Mekka, Hagar Spohr)

Mecca as a collective space

The Hajj, the Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca, is the most important form of Islamic travelling and expression of the Islamic faith and constitutes the fifth of the five pillars of Islam. Every year, over two million Muslims perform the pilgrimage to the city of Mecca, emphasizing in this way the unity of the Umma, the Muslim community, before Allah. The pilgrimage in Islam is both a collective and a personal experience, and the holy city of Mecca represents the main reference point in the life of Muslims who pray in its direction their entire life. Mecca and its Kaa’ba, are the main focus of the narratives of Muslim pilgrims who write about their spiritual experience during the Hajj. Even though access to the sacred city of Mecca is forbidden to non-Muslims, in the past centuries a few European

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43 The five pillars of Islam are the Shahadah (declaring there is no god except God and Muhammad is God’s Messenger), the Salat (ritual prayer five times a day), Sawm (fasting during the blessed month of Ramadan), Zakat (alms giving), and the Hajj (pilgrimage to Mecca) at least once in a lifetime if the Muslim is able to do it).

44 According to The Oxford English Dictionary, a pilgrim is “one who journeys to a sacred place as an act of religious devotion,” while a “pilgrimage” is “a pilgrim’s journey.” The central Muslim pilgrimage, the Hajj, is a journey mandatory for every Muslim who has reached the age of puberty and can afford it. Even though the Hajj is mandatory in modern Islam, many categories of people are exempt from this duty, such as minors, the sick, and women who are unable to travel with their husbands or relatives.

45 Kaa’ba in Arabic means “cubic building.” According to the Qur’an, the cubic-shaped structure was built in the city of Mecca by Adam according to a divine plan and rebuilt by Abraham and Ishmael. The Kaa’ba contains the black stone, the most venerated object for Muslims.
travelers, as mentioned earlier, have entered Mecca in the disguise of Muslim pilgrims. In this chapter, I focus on the pilgrimage accounts of those Germans and Austrians who have converted to Islam and travelled to Mecca during the 20th and 21st century. I argue that these narratives draw on the tradition of the 18th and 19th century German-speaking and other European travel literature. By historically contextualizing these narratives, I wish to explore whether these narratives project an identical unchanging “spiritual Arabia/Mecca” or whether these narratives reveal a changing and evolving image of this space. In addition, I explore how these portrayals of Mecca also represent an occasion to reflect on the way German-speaking converts project themselves onto this sacred space and understand their relation to their home country. In fact, in a European context where governments see with suspicion those who convert to Islam and at times link converts to terrorism, in these pilgrimage narratives the space of Mecca is used only as a way to reflect on Euro-Islam relations. These pilgrimage accounts differ from the travelogues of non-Muslim travelers, but many similarities still strike the reader. I argue that, even though the city of Mecca has changed dramatically from an infrastructural point of view, its literary representation in German-speaking pilgrim narratives has remained constant over the past centuries, without undergoing the representational change that other non-sacred Saudi Arabian cities such as Jeddah have witnessed throughout the years.

According to the sociologist Khaldoun Samman (2007), Mecca, as well as other sacred cities like Jerusalem and Rome, transcends the local space and binds individuals together transnationally and transculturally. Benedict Anderson’s conceptual framework of “imagined communities” may be applied to this context. The city of Mecca and the Ka’aba lead to the creation of imagined communities bound together by the common denominator of Islam.
Anderson coined his conceptual framework in connection with the notion of nation. According to him, a nation is a socially constructed community, imagined by the people who perceive themselves as part of that specific group (1991, 224). Mecca transcends the popular consciousness of a given nation-state and serves as a sort of “anchor” for the entire Islamic civilization. A Muslim from any part of the world may claim Mecca as his/her sacred city no matter whether he/she is born Muslim or is a convert. From a literary point of view, the journey to Mecca has represented a central theme in Islamic travel writing in the same manner as the journey to Jerusalem has been the focus of most Christian writing since the Crusades.\(^{46}\) In the 20\(^{th}\) century the journey to Mecca reemerges as an exclusively Islamic subject, and in the European context it becomes the topic of accounts of European converts to Islam who seek to narrate their pilgrimage (Wolfe 321-322).

**Conversion to Islam in the European context**

The number of German-speaking converts to Islam has increased in the past twenty years. In particular, a study financed by the German Interior Ministry and carried out by the Soest-based Zentralinstitut Islam-Archiv Deutschland Stiftung e.V., reveals that every year around 4000 Germans convert to Islam.\(^{47}\) The number of born Muslims and converts to Islam living in Europe has resulted in an increase not only in the publication of pilgrimage narratives but also in the rate of European tour operators specializing in the organization of the *Hajj* and the *Umrah*, the short pilgrimage to Mecca. The pilgrimage is rarely organized anymore on an

\(^{46}\) See previous chapter for an extensive discussion of European travelers to Saudi Arabia.

\(^{47}\) See the website www.euro-islam.info for more information about the current number of European converts. The study was financed by the Interior Ministry and carried out by the Muslim Institute Islam Archive Germany. This reveals that until the year 2004 the annual number of converts remained constant at about 300 per year (DIK). In Germany four thousand people converted to Islam in the year 2004/2005 and in 2005 the number of German converts to Islam has quadrupled in comparison to previous years.
individual basis as it used to be in the past, but the organization of the Hajj, in particular for pilgrims coming from Europe and the United States, has become a multi-million dollar business. In Germany, even though the pilgrimage is usually organized by religious organizations such as the Turkish-Islamic Union, the Organization for Religion (DITIB), Milli Görüs or local mosques, many pilgrims prefer to organize the Hajj with tour operators specializing in tourism to the religious centers of Islam.48

In Germany, almost thirty travel agents are approved by the Ministry of Hajj to apply for Hajj and ‘Umrah visas (Ministry of Hajj, 2009). These tour operators usually organize pre-departure information sessions, better known as “Hajj-classes,” where an Imam offers advice on how pilgrims should dress and behave during the pilgrimage. In the past, the Hajj was almost exclusively undertaken by an elderly population, while today the age of most pilgrims ranges between thirty and forty years old. Since the Hajj is quite strenuous, most Muslims prefer to undertake it as early as possible even though it is still quite expensive.49 Every year the Hajj is usually fully booked. The request has been increasing considerably, but the ever-growing demand from German converts cannot be satisfied because the Saudi Arabian Hajj Ministry provides Germany with only 15,000 visas each year. Despite the growing demand from Germany, the number of visas has not increased because of the restricted hotel capacity in Mecca and the constant risk of overcrowding. Most of the tour

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48 The main tour operators organizing the Hajj in Germany are: ATC Air Travel Center, Frankfurt am Main; Al-Muhajirin Moschee, Bonn; Muslimereise, Hamburg; Vuslat Tours and Travels, Augsburg; Haus des Islam, Lützelbach; BMB Bund der Muslime, Berlin; Islamische Gemeinschaft Milli Görüs e.V.; Verein der Kulturfreunde Dortmund e.V.; Dar-El Salam Hajj & Umra e. K., Freiburg im Breisgau; ATIB, Köln; Islamistische Verein e. V, Frankfurt am Main; Türk Federasyon Avrupa, Frankfurt am Main; Reisebüro Aziz, Düsseldorf; ATS Almadina Travel Service.

49 In 2013, the price was noted as at least 3,000 Euros and takes three to four weeks. For a “VIP-Hajj” with business class flight, accommodation in a luxury hotel and a “personalized religious guide” the price may be up to 25,000 Euro.
operators want to highlight their independence from any specific congregation. This shows that the *Hajj* is intended to be a communal spiritual journey and a ritual that does not distinguish the believer by class, race and gender. With the recent growing interest in Islam in Germany, the body of literature on conversion has flourished. In the last few years alone, writing about the pilgrimage to Mecca has even become a popular form of creative nonfiction. In particular, pilgrimage narratives differ from conversion narratives because they are written after the conversion has occurred and they no longer take into account the motivations that led to conversion. In the pilgrimage accounts analyzed in this chapter, the description of Saudi Arabia and its cities is somehow marginal to the narrative, while the description of the personal spiritual journey accompanied by the critique of the non-Muslim world as well as the critique of certain aspects of the Muslim world remain the main focus of the narratives.

**Pilgrimage narratives**

Pilgrimage narratives represent an opportunity to share a collective experience and develop a Muslim identity without any distinction of nationality, gender and race. Similar to travel narratives, pilgrimage narratives have a starting point and a destination. However, the destination in pilgrimage narratives is not only a physical one, but rather a journey that aims for a deeper understanding of Islam. The journey usually begins with the spiritual preparations for the travel. Along the path, the pilgrim participates in a series of events that impact his/her spiritual journey and provide new insights.
The *Hajj* in itself follows a rigid structure that takes place in fourteen stages and most *Hajj* accounts are structured according to these stages. These narratives are usually recounted retrospectively after the completion of the *Hajj* and they result in a retrospective representation of experiences. This reconstructing process takes place not only on an individual level but also on a collective level. In the process of telling and retelling conversion experiences, a common narrative emerges (Hofmann 1997; van Niewkerk) so that *Hajj* accounts end up inspiring each other. In this sense, they resemble conversion accounts. Both pilgrimage and conversion narratives are autobiographical accounts and as such are often influenced by the meaning and emotions the individuals have assigned to the specific event.

Contemporary pilgrimage accounts reflect the issues Western Muslims face living in their home countries, and they pave new paths toward what it means to be or to become Muslim. A common thread among these pilgrimage accounts is that they all draw on the 18th and 19th century travel literature tradition discussed in the previous chapter. Even though they avoid the excesses of their precursors, they are still not completely free from what Marcia Hermansen calls “the colonial gaze and attitudes.” In the body of conversion and pilgrimage accounts, British authors have always been at the forefront with the exception of the Austrian

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50 The *Hajj* includes 14 stages: Wearing *Ihram*, Staying at Arafat, Staying at Muzdalifah, Stoning the Aqabah Pillar, Sacrificing an animal, *Haq* or *Taqsir*, Staying in Mina *Tawaf of Hajj*, Prayer of *Tawaf of Hajj*, *Sa'i*, *Tawafun Nisa*, Prayer of *Tawafun Nisa*, Stoning the three pillars on the 11th and 12th of the month. At the beginning the pilgrims stop at one of the designated areas to shower and change clothing, entering into a state of purity called *Ihram*. On the first day of the pilgrimage, the pilgrims travel from Mecca to Mina, a small village east of the city. On the second day the pilgrims leave Mina just after dawn to travel to the Plain of Arafat where the pilgrims spend their entire day near the Mount of Mercy, asking Allah for forgiveness. After sunset on the Day of Arafat, the pilgrims travel to a nearby plain called Muzdalifah, located between Arafat and Mina. There they spend the night praying and collecting small pebbles for the following day. On the third day, the pilgrims move before sunrise, this time back to Mina. Here they throw their stone pebbles at pillars that represent the temptations of Satan. The stones represent Abraham’s rejection of Satan and after that most pilgrims slaughter an animal and give the meat to the poor. Throughout the world, Muslims celebrate *Eid al-Adha*, the fest of the sacrifice on this day. The pilgrims then return to Mecca and perform seven *tawaf*, or turns around the *Ka’aba*, and drink from the spring of Zamzam. (www.Islam.com)
Muhammad Asad in the German-speaking context. Muhammad Asad’s (1900-1993) *The Road to Mecca* (1954), published in English and translated into the major European and non-European languages, is one of the first pilgrimage accounts written by a German-speaking Muslim convert. Asad is one of the most well-known converts to Islam of his generation and his account strikingly has become a template for many authors, including contemporary female converts to Islam such as Hagar Spohr, Kristiane Backer and Michaela Özelsel.⁵¹

**Muhammad Asad, Bedouin “Naturkind” and Western decadence**

Muhammad Asad was born Leopold Weiss in the city of Lvov, which is now in the Ukraine but belonged to the Austrian Empire in the 20ᵗʰ century. In his essay about Asad, Nawaab writes that Asad was the descendant of a long line of rabbis whose family moved to Vienna. For the young Asad this move represented the possibility to escape from the provinciality of Lvov. At the age of fourteen, Asad tried unsuccessfully to join the Austrian army to fight in the First World War. After the war, he studied philosophy and art history at the University of Vienna and in 1920, he moved to Berlin without completing his studies. In Berlin he spent time with artists and writers associated with Expressionism and in 1922, Asad travelled to Jerusalem to visit his maternal uncle, Dorian Feigenbaum, a psychoanalyst and follower of Freud. Asad became a correspondent for the *Frankfurter Zeitung*, and as a journalist, he traveled extensively throughout the Middle East. While in Jerusalem, Asad met several leaders of the Zionist movement such as Menahem Ussishkin (1863-1941) and Chaim

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⁵¹ In her book *New Muslims in the European Context: The Experience of Scandinavian Converts* (2004), the scholar Anne Sofie Roald claims that Muhammad Asad’s writings became very popular among converts. In particular she mentions a female Scandinavian convert who felt that *The Road to Mecca* conveyed to her both a religious message as well as the mysterious atmosphere of the “Orient.” The convert reported that even though she was feeling alienated as a convert in the Scandinavian society, she felt that Asad made her proud of her decision.
Weizmann (1874-1952), but also the anti-Zionist Dutch poet and journalist Jacob Israël de Haan (1881-1924). Travelling to the Middle East and meeting with Muslim intellectuals piqued Asad’s interest in Islam and upon his return to Berlin he converted to Islam. Asad married the Berlin painter Elsa Schiemann, who later converted to Islam as well. After leaving his job in Berlin with the Frankfurter Zeitung, Asad set off on the pilgrimage to Mecca with his wife who, died suddenly of malaria nine days after arriving there. Asad remained in Mecca and after meeting the son of the King ‘Abd al-‘Aziz Al Sa’ud, he was invited to meet with the King, the founder of modern Saudi Arabia.

In his writings on the Middle East in Islam at the Crossroad and Das unromantische Orient, Asad regards Islam not as a religion in the conventional way but as a way of life (Nawab, 2002). In his writings, Asad highlights the topic of spirituality and anticipates the contemporary discourse around the political and cultural conflict between the West and Islam. In 1924, he published Das unromantische Orient, a small book on his initial impressions of the Middle East in the years 1922-1923. This travelogue first appeared in installments in German newspapers and was later published by the Frankfurter Society. It starts at the train station in Jerusalem. It describes not only his journey to Egypt, Jordan, Syria and Turkey, but also provides insights into Asad’s spiritual transformation. In this travelogue, Asad describes his initial exposure to the new world of Islam and the Orient. He describes his departure from the European world that was left scarred by World War I and its profound impact on the European emotional landscape. It was a time when a whole “lost” generation of Europeans was looking for spirituality. In this historical framework, Asad criticizes the corrupt world of European society. At the beginning of his writing, Asad states that he is stepping out of Europe into a territory whose differences with Europe cannot be overlooked (6). Asad wrote
Das unromantische Orient with the purpose not to continue spreading the romantic and exotic picture of the Muslim East but rather to inform readers about its daily realities, malaise, political problems and its reformist movements as an alternative to Europe. During his stay in Cairo, he met Shaykh Mustafa al-Maraghi (1881-1945), a reformist theologian who later became rector of the al-Azhar University in Cairo. Asad reflects in his later work, Islam at the Crossroads (1934), that this first contact with Islamic reformism left a profound impression upon him. Asad concludes in Islam at the Crossroads that, when properly interpreted, Islam could lead Muslims forward by offering a spiritual sustenance that Judaism and Christianity had ceased to provide (Kramer, 1999). Asad spent most of the time between 1922 and 1923 traveling through Syria, Iraq, Kurdistan, Iran, Afghanistan, and Central Asia, growing ever more fascinated by Islam. He spent almost six years between 1926 and 1932 in the holy cities of Mecca and Medina, where he studied Arabic, the Qur'an, the hadith (the traditions of the Prophet), and Islamic history.

Asad's The Road to Mecca may be viewed as a bridge between the 18th century tradition of travel literature and the accounts of contemporary converts. In the introduction of The Road to Mecca, he traces European hostility towards Islam back to European memories of the Crusades. According to Asad, the traumatic experience of the Crusades provided Europe with a sense of unity and cultural awareness against the Middle East and Islam. In the meantime, the experience of the Crusades created false images of Islam that continued to inform Western perspectives. Later on, according to Asad, the damage caused by the Crusades became “an intellectual damage, the poisoning of the Western minds against the Muslim world through a deliberate misrepresentation of the teachings and ideals of Islam”(7).
According to Asad, this idea became so deeply embedded in European minds and public discourses that most Europeans did not question it.

Günther Windhager, the author of a biographical work on Muhammad Asad, and Murad Hoffmann, another Western convert to Islam,\(^52\) assert that Asad’s early infatuation with the Orient had nothing to do with Islam, but rather with his refusal of everything European and Jewish in the interwar period. In particular, Asad criticized Zionism and its manifestations in Europe as well as in the Middle East. Windhager’s descriptive biography offers a detailed account of Asad’s life and origins as well as the extensive Georg Misch documentary Der Weg Nach Mekka: Die Reise des Muhammad Asad (2010) that not only narrates the biography of Asad but also his legacy in the Muslim world and his partly unsuccessful efforts to establish a bridge between Western and Eastern worlds.

From Asad’s own account, his roots in Judaism were deeper on his father’s side than on the side of his mother Malka, who was the daughter of a wealthy local banker, Menahem Mendel Feigenbaum. His paternal grandfather, Benjamin Weiss, belonged to a family of Orthodox rabbis from Czernovitz in Bukovina. Asad remembered his grandfather in The Road to Mecca as a man who loved the sciences but who at the same time still followed Judaism. Asad’s father, Akiva, in contrast, distanced himself from the rabbinical tradition. Asad developed an ambivalent feeling towards Judaism, as it seemed to him that Judaism was more concerned with following rituals than with spirituality. Certainly it helped Asad to understand

\(^{52}\) Murad Wilfried Hofmann was born on July 6, 1931, with the name of Wilfred Hoffman. In 1957 he obtained his Doctorate degree in German Law from the University of Munich and in 1960, he earned a Master’s degree from Harvard University in the field of U.S. law. He worked at the German foreign ministry between 1961 and 1994. He was the director of NATO in Brussels, the German Ambassador in Algeria and until 1994 the German Ambassador in Morocco. Hoffman considers Muhammad Asad a gift from Europe to Islam.
the fundamental purpose of religion, but he later abandoned Judaism while searching for a different spiritual path. As previously mentioned, it was during his trip to Jerusalem to visit his maternal uncle that Asad came into contact with Islam, and he started objecting to the politics of Zionism. In the *Road to Mecca*, Asad expressed how unacceptable it was that immigrants would come from other parts of the world and settle in Palestine while displacing its native people who had been living there for thousands of years. In *Das unromantische Orient*, Asad describes how his experience near the Jaffa Gate confirmed his perspective when he observed a Bedouin Arab, “silhouetted against the silver-grey sky like a figure from an old legend” (Asad, 91). Contrary to the title of his work, this romanticized vision fostered his political position and his view of the Arabs as the indigenous inhabitants of Palestine and lent an aura to this figure of the Bedouin.

Asad continues by stating that “David and David’s time, like Abraham and Abraham’s time, were closer to their Arabian roots—and so to the Bedouin of today—than to the Jew of today, who claims to be their descendant” (91). With this statement, Asad claims that Arabs were the real descendants of Abraham. He places himself in opposition to what he considers to be the commonly-held and widespread belief of European Jews who claim to be exclusive descendants of Abraham. Asad also argued that Islam was closer to being the purest religion. *Das Unromantische Orient* introduces the Bedouins as a central trope, which I will discuss in depth later in this chapter.

In his later work, *The Road to Mecca* (1954), Asad simultaneously produces a pilgrimage and travel narrative, an account of spiritual transformation and an autobiographical self-exploration that summarizes the author’s ideas about Islam and the Arabs. *The Road to Mecca* covers the six years he spent in Arabia and the 23-day journey to Mecca in the summer
of 1932. It is a memoir, a recollection of the story of his initial attraction to Islam that led to his final conversion. The scholar Ismail Ibrahim Nawwab explains in “A Matter of Love: Muhammad Asad and Islam” (2002) that the *Road to Mecca* “explores both the vast geographical distances and the deep interior recesses of Asad’s mind” (155-231). If on the one hand, I agree that the *The Road to Mecca* cannot be read as a document of historical truth about Arabia and even of Asad’s life, *The Road to Mecca*, on the other hand, reveals interesting aspects about the author’s interior journey towards Islam. Windhager defines Asad’s work as a “fictional” autobiography because certain aspects of Asad’s life remain vague and some details seem to be confused.

In fact, there are a number of inconsistencies in Asad's narrative, like the fact that his first wife, Elsa Schiemann was not 15 but 22 years older than Asad. Windhager also points out that their son accompanied them on both journeys in the Middle East (1922-23 and 1924-26) while in Asad's account this is mentioned only once. Moreover, his Arab companion, Zayd, might be a literary invention much like the Bedouin companion featured in the adventures novels by Karl May. Also, Harry St. John Bridger Philby (1885-1960), a convert to Islam, known as Sheikh Abdullah, states that Asad’s account lacks any ethnographic analysis and does not provide any in-depth analysis of Arabia. He criticizes Asad’s “vagueness and unusual naiveté” in representation of the bazaars, religious festivals, desert sunsets, and local color (Philby, 1955). For Philby, Asad’s account is not only superficial but he believes that it is a missed opportunity to describe Saudi Arabia through a different lens than the other historical sources already published about the country (Philby, 1955).

In reality, Asad does not try to provide a detailed and taxonomic description of Saudi Arabia or a Middle Eastern country as can be seen in the travelogues of the 18th and 19th
centuries in authors like Burckhardt, who pretended to provide objective accounts. Asad is subjective in his description but he is also aware of this literary tradition: Asad’s narrative is built upon the imaginative representation of a country that represents the opposite of a war-torn Europe that he has left behind. *The Road To Mecca* maps out the cities of Mecca and Medina but also portrays sketches of the nights in the desert, oases, bazaars, and the Bedouins. In addition, Asad provides a glimpse into the history of the house of Saud, the founder of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and describes what he perceives as the decay of Muslim societies, which, he, as a convert, attributes to a loss of faith.

In my analysis of Asad’s work, I focus mainly on two aspects: the oppositional representation of the city of Mecca and the non-sacred cities, and the constant opposition between the West and the East that emerges from Asad’s descriptions of the Bedouins in the Arabian space.

**The Bedouins**

After visiting Arabia a number of times, Asad mentions in several passages his disappointment with an Arabia whose moral values have been replaced by the values of oil and money, a world that no longer exists and whose integrity he nostalgically praises has “crumbled under a strong gush of oil and the gold that the oil has brought. Its great simplicity has vanished and, with it, much that was humanly unique. It is with the pain one feels for something precious, now irretrievably lost, that I remember that last, long desert trek, when we rode, rode, two men on two dromedaries, through swimming light…” (Asad, 9).

Muhammad Asad in particular believes that the life of the Bedouins in the desert is what best represents an authentic Arabian life and he juxtaposes it with the European life he left behind. When Asad mentions the Bedouin as belonging to an “old legend” he returns to
the images represented in the *Arabian Nights*. The desert and the Bedouins are at the center of his own language in *The Road to Mecca*. Asad describes the customs and traditions of the Bedouins in a romantic way, in that they stand for the pure “essence” of Arabia. The opening scene of “two men on two dromedaries” riding lazily across barren land where the sun flames are all “shimmer and glimmer and swimming light” (9), introduces the reader into the Arabian landscape, but also serves as a striking contraposition to Europe. However, already in the introduction of his journey he mentions that this Arabia described in *The Road to Mecca* no longer exists and it is irretrievably lost.

This passage reveals the longing that many travelers to Saudi Arabia projected onto the desert landscape, the “open space” on the world map that became a projection for European fantasies of purity and innocence, which had been crushed by the realities of a war-torn Europe after the First World War. It also reveals the disappointment with the loss of innocence in a world that much more had come to resemble Europe.

In the eyes of Europeans who saw a decadent, despairing, despiritualized West, the Bedouins are seen as the only ones who still protect and cherish long lost values such as honor and hospitality. The Bedouin character Zayd in Asad’s travelogue becomes the embodiment of these values that Asad sought and that according to him Europe had lost. This view of Western culture echoes what Oswald Spengler’s describes in his 1918-1922 book *Untergang des Abendlandes* [*Decline of the West*] about the failure of the West at the end of the First World War. According to Spengler, the western world had transformed from a time of culture to a soulless civilization. Asad describes the same time in the European world as similarly suffering from an “emptiness of the soul,” from “moral instability,” and dominated by chaos and “a wave of intoxication.” Asad’s work is filled with a sense of melancholia and he tries to
escape in Arabia where he seeks to retrieve what he has lost in Europe, a Europe that “behind the Occident’s façade of order and organization” is dominated by chaos and “a wave of intoxication [that] swept over the Continent” (6). Asad mourns Europe and in 1922 he writes, “I am beginning a journey. I am stepping out of Europe into a world that is insurmountably different from our own.” Through the image of the Bedouin, Asad attempts to retrieve what has been lost through modernity and the war. For this reason, Heinrich Schiemann, the son of Asad and his first wife, Elsa Schiemann, believes that the Bedouin Zayd, one of the most recurrent characters appearing in *The Road to Mecca*, is actually a fictionalized character that serves as a narrative device.

Asad describes that in Arabia he is no longer a stranger and that this has become his home. However, his “Western past is like a distant dream – not unreal enough to be forgotten, and not real enough to be part of my present” (24). Asad never forgot his European origins but he looked at them with melancholia. In this I refer to Freud who in *Trauer und Melancholie* (1917) defines mourning and melancholia whereby mourning is intended as the loss of something abstract, such as one’s country, liberty, an ideal. For Asad, an ideal western civilization never really existed, but instead it was the product of a sense of longing. In other words, Western culture had become as Asad wrote, “spurious,” while non-Western cultures such as those of Samoa, the Native American Southwest, and the Bedouins were considered “genuine” and authentic (Bunzl, 2005).

Paradoxically, Eastern civilization and its image were also the product of his fantasy fueled by *The Arabian Nights*, similar to other European travelers. His son, Talal Asad, recalls in Misch's documentary how his father used to tell him stories that were modeled on *The Arabian Nights*, like the story of the Kalif Storch that sparked his interest in the Middle East.
In Asad’s political critique of Europe, the Bedouin offers a counter image to perceptions of the Bedouin in the Western imagination as uncultured barbarians. Instead Asad subscribes to the notion of the Bedouin as the genuine embodiment of pure traditional life. Different from previous Christian travelers like Burckhardt, Asad does not describe Bedouins from an ethnographic and distanced perspective, but rather he attempts to identify with the Bedouins and assimilate their practices by expressing the desire to belong to their culture and their way of life by putting aside the European culture he comes from and that he felt never belonged to him.

During his journey within Arabia, Asad encounters Bedouins who belong mostly to the Shammar tribe, and he offers an image different from the prevailing European and Middle Eastern stereotype since the Middle Ages of Bedouins as violent robbers. Instead he draws on a different stereotypical image, that of the noble savage who has remained uncorrupted by materialism and the vices of more “civilized” Europeans. The Bedouins in Asad's work embody the essence of life in the desert and are the projection of an authentic, uncontaminated “Arabian life.” As a tribe, they adhere to a code of values and to morals that distinguish them as “civilized” and more cultured than other tribes and civilizations he encountered. While Asad adapts to the lifestyle of the Bedouins, he remains an outsider in many respects, since his writings betray the colonialist European perspective on the “other” civilization.

53 The Bedouin tribe of the Shammar is one of the largest tribes of Arabia, with an estimated 1 million in Iraq, over 2.5 million in Saudi Arabia, a Kuwaiti population of around 100,000, a Syrian population thought to exceed 1 million, an unknown number in Jordan.

54 An idealized indigenous who has not been corrupted by civilization and symbolizes the innate goodness of a human being. During the 16th and 17th centuries, the figure of the indigene or “savage” and later “the good savage” became a literary device used to reproach the European civilization. In English, the phrase “Noble savage” first appeared in the poet Dryden’s heroic play The Conquest of Granada (1672). In France, the stock figure that in English is called the noble savage has always been simply “le bon sauvage.”
He writes: “It was the Bedouin Arabia that became the soil and matrix of a way of life which was destined to express itself, in the course of time in a great spiritual movement and thereafter in a civilization which extended its influence” (Asad, 178).

In addition to representing the essence of Arabia, the Bedouins also embody the essence of Islam for Asad. He portrays Bedouins as the holders of a civilization that is not framed as a primitive phase of a civilization destined to evolve, but as a culture already complete in itself. It is a culture formed and influenced by climate and geography, but also infused to a certain extent with traditions that may be described as “barbaric” (Asad 179-181). Ultimately, Asad describes the Bedouins as honest and naïve people living in their premodern and idyllic environment, the desert is represented in opposition to the city.

Thus Asad mentions the Bedouin as “silhouetted against the silver-grey sky like a figure from an old legend” (92). As cited earlier, he defines the Bedouins as a projection whose features are not defined in the present and in modernity, but as a mirage coming from the past that locates itself in the present as a figure of a longed for past. Asad’s notion of the Bedouin as “Naturkind” is not much different from the fictional representation of the Bedouins prevalent in Karl May’s novel, Orientzyklus (1881-88). Karl May's Bedouin Hadschi Halef Omar bears a particularly, uncanny resemblance to Asad’s Zayd, a figure that becomes Asad's guide and companion. The Bedouin’s culture is reduced to the same images of Oriental cultures that, as Edward Said states in his analysis of orientalist discourses, are meant to define the West, whereby the West is the negative mirror image of the innocent and pure East. However, these images can be interpreted in their duplicity. On one hand, Asad projects his desires for nature, innocence and for the simplicity of life and the authenticity of existence onto the image of the Bedouin. On the other hand, he employs a generally positive
image of the Bedouin that allows Asad to deploy his own representation of Bedouins to represent his own Arabia as an idyllic place, in contrast to a decadent Europe.

Asad is certainly not a neutral observer, nor an exclusive insider in his depiction of Bedouin culture. He draws on European clichés about Bedouins and uses them as a vehicle to critique the decline of Western civilization. By choosing a fictional companion, Zayd, Asad creates a “guide” who accompanies him in the journey through the desert, which stands as a metaphor for Islam. Asad states he has “crossed” the desert many times in many directions and he admits that he “would not trust myself to find my way through it unaided, and therefore I am glad to have Zayd with me”. Asad struggles to gain knowledge about the world of Zayd in order to become part of that world. The imaginary Zayd provides access to this world since Asad recognizes that Saudi Arabia belongs to the Bedouin. “This country here is his homeland: he belongs to the tribe of the Shammar, who live in the southern and Eastern fringes of the Great Nufud. [...] The moods of the desert are in Zayd’s blood.”

Asad perceives a symbiosis between the Bedouins, Islam and the space that the Bedouins inhabit. Close to nature, Asad’s romantic impulse is to read “pure” nature as spiritual and its intrinsic knowledge in proximity to spirituality. In this description, Asad reveals a desire for belonging that he expresses through his relationship with the Bedouins. In fact, he portrays the Bedouins as the legitimate owners of the desert. He describes Bedouins’ physical features and

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traits as both sensual and strong, not only Zayd’s, but also those of the other Bedouins he encounters during his journey. For Asad, the idealized physical appearance of the Bedouins expresses their moral qualities. This emerges in the description of Zayd and other Bedouins that Asad meets.

Zayd is probably the handsomest man I have ever known: broad of forehead and slim of body, middle-sized, fine-boned, full of wiry strength. Over the narrow wheat-coloured face with its strongly molded cheekbones and severe and at the same time sensual mouth lies that expectant gravity which is so characteristic of the desert Arab—dignity and self-composure weeded to intimate sweetness (11).

Asad’s description of Zayd reveals that it is not only Arab women who have been eroticized and exoticised for the pleasure of the European male gaze; men, as well, are described as objects of esthetic pleasure.

In a following passage Asad describes Zayd as

a felicitous combination of pure Bedouin stock and Najdi town life, having preserved within himself the Bedouin’s sureness of instinct without the Bedouin’s emotional lability, and acquired the practical wisdom of the townsman without falling prey to his worldly sophistication. He, like myself, enjoys adventure without running after it (11).
Zayd becomes a desired alter ego, the projection of what Asad would like to be or achieve. At the same time, Asad maintains the double standard of the European ambivalence towards “native” cultures: on one hand the “primitive,” but on the other hand the naïve native. The fictionalized Zayd is a projection of purity and essential moral values of humanity, a figure of the desert that allows the author to restore a balance between the European world he has left behind and an imagined Arabia. This synthesis creates a third space whereby, according to Homi Bhabha, the problem of identity returns as a persistent questioning of the frame and of the space of representation, where the projected image is constantly confronted with its difference, its “other” (Bhabha, 46).

This third space does not express itself exclusively as an ambivalence between Europe and Arabia, but also between two conflicting images of Arabia. These two contrasting images of Arabia are exemplified in Asad’s description of Mansur, another Bedouin whom Asad encounters during his stay in Arabia, is portrayed almost as the opposite of Zayd:

Mansur is so handsome that if he were to appear on the streets of a Western city all the women would turn to look after him. He is very tall, with a strong, virile face and amazingly even features. His skin is whitish-brown, an infallible good mark among Arabs, and a pair of black eyes survey the world keenly from beneath well-shaped brows. There is nothing in him of Zayd’s delicacy, of Zayd’s quiet detachment; the lines of his face speak of violent, if controlled passions and lend to his appearance an aura of somberness quite unlike the serene
gravity of my Shamar friend. But Mansur, like Zayd, has seen a
lot of the world and makes a pleasant companion (Asad, 183).

Asad differentiates between these two types of Bedouins. He describes Zayd as more
“delicate” than Mansur. However, both are handsome, virile, and fit neatly into traditional
stereotypes of masculinity. When describing Mansur, Asad emphasizes his skin color. His
skin is whitish-brown and he describes it as a positive quality among the Arabs. As stated by
Homi Bhabha in *The Other Question: The Stereotype and the Colonial Discourse* (1983),
“skin” is a key signifier of cultural and racial difference in the stereotype, and it is the most
visible of fetishes recognized as common knowledge in a range of cultural, political and
historical discourse. In this way Asad adheres to what he believes to be the “Arab” way of
appreciating the light brown skin color, but by doing so he brings up his own western
perspective in his racialization of the other, and even if he describes the skin as brown,
describing it as a “light” brown carries a positive connotation. This shows also that this is not
exclusively a European perception. In each culture, the skin assumes different connotations.

In his lecture, “Race-The Floating Signifier,” (1997) Stuart Hall argues that the
meaning of skin color is not fixed. Its significance and social viewpoint change according to
different cultures and different times. Not unlike many cultures, in the Arab world the pale
Zayd

(Mansour, 1954)
skin color is viewed as having a higher social status. In the Middle East, fair skin continues to be associated with the ideal of beauty that Asad reproduces in his phantasmatic description of both the Bedouins Zayd and Mansour. Asad includes in his narrative two full size photographs of Zayd and Mansour. The two Bedouins look straight into the camera while the camera seems fascinated with a power that goes beyond time, as if Asad would like to provide two solid and timeless examples of what Bedouins look like. A photograph necessarily shows us and fixes something in a certain point in time.

While photography seeks to record with the highest degree of realism through the individuality of its subject, it also emphasizes the distance between the viewer of the photograph and the time in which the photograph was taken (Barthes, 1981:71). By taking these large portrait photographs of Zayd and Mansour, Asad fixes them in time while making them timeless. Zayd and Mansour become souvenirs of a specific time that later is no longer possible to retrieve and serve as fetishes. Asad is conscious that this time no longer exists. As Peter Wollen points out in “Fire and Ice,” Photographies, 4 (1984) thanks to the possibility of an extended look, photography becomes a fetish because it is used mostly as a souvenir to keep. Photography by its nature is timeless and characterized by silence and stillness, which facilitates the emergence of a fetish since it is in the eyes of the viewer to reconstruct the frame around the photograph, as well as the relationship between the elements in the picture. Philippe Dubois remarks in L'Act photographique (1983) that with each photograph, a tiny piece of time escapes its fate of being lost. In all photographs, a piece of time remains unchanged, while the world around it changes. The photograph thus becomes a fetish; it

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56 This believe is derived by the fact that traditionally people from higher social classes were spending more time indoors, while the poorer classes had to work mostly outside and therefore had a tanned skin because of the sun.
replaces the absence by its presence. The images of Zayd and Mansour serve to exemplify those values.

Asad's *Road to Mecca*, similar to other stories of colonial encounter by the travelers’s accounts from the 18th and 19th centuries, represents a divide between Bedouin time and westernized modern time. “Bedouin time” is portrayed as premodern, traditional, and static. It is frozen in time over the centuries as “an old legend from the past,” while Western time is portrayed as modern. In the course of the 19th and 20th centuries, modernizing processes endangered the traditional lifestyle of nomads by forcing nomad communities to abandon traditional nomadism. Traditional nomadism is not based on the separation of time and space, which, according to Anthony Giddens, is one of the defining features of modernity and one that leads to modern mobility. Asad’s need for a guide to help him enter Arabian life is fulfilled through the creation of a companion to guide him through the process of conversion and afterwards. It is not only the way in which Asad describes the Bedouins that makes him a Western “traveler,” who romanticizes the Orient, but the way in which he also fetishizes the Bedouin guide to access the mystery of the desert.

According to Freud, the fetish is a substitute for a loss. In the case of Asad, it is the loss of his home country and culture. The Bedouin that Mohammed Asad depicts is in many respects a fetish, a simulacrum of an original one that no longer exists, a substitute for the real Bedouin whom Asad read about in Orientalist books and could not find during his travels throughout Arabia. The realization that the real Bedouin is not the same one he expected to encounter intensifies his sense of loss, which he overcomes by substituting a simulacrum of the Bedouin for the real one. The representation of a “pure” and an “uncontaminated” Arabia is realized through the fetishization of the Bedouin. The objectification of the Bedouin
becomes a way to compensate for the lack of what Asad perceives as the human values of Western Europe.

This search for cultural human values in the desert is not new. Since Lawrence of Arabia at the beginning of the 20th century captivated the West with his romantic image of the noble Bedouin of the desert, there has been growing interest in the Bedouin culture that has produced many clichés. In From Camel to Truck: the Bedouin in the modern world (2013), the anthropologist Dawn Chatty claims that even though nomadic pastoral productions still exist, they have actually changed in recent years after adopting many technological innovations. However, the romantic images of the Bedouins still persist in European travel accounts. The romanticized image of the Bedouin is not only a product of a Western perspective and desire, but according to Eickelman (39), the Bedouin stereotype is used in both the Western and Middle Eastern traditions.57 For many Arabic countries, Bedouinism provides a trope around which a collective national identity can be assembled and presented to outsiders as a clear image of who Arabs are. The Bedouin’s identity continues to suggest “a secure point of identification” for constructing a collective self (Bhabha, 69) and defining citizenship. While it is also common in Arab society to use the Bedouin trope to anchor a past, what is different in Asad is his need to identify with a romanticized nomadic tradition as an antidote to the destruction of the values in European society in the period after the First World

57 Several Arabic countries use the trope of the Bedouin heritage to create an Arabian past, especially in the Gulf Peninsula. For instance, Hawker (2002) explores the way the United Arab Emirates have used the Bedouin’s trope to provide a representation of the past. Asad reconstructs in his narrative a Bedouin identity in order to preserve the values of Arabia which according to him have gone lost. Preserving these values entraps the past in a fictive space characterized by bedouin camps, desert and sand (Khalaf,102). Certain characteristics of a collective identity are repeated until they become facts.
War. He no longer feels “at home” in Europe, and as time passes the Arabian Bedouin life no longer becomes a response to European uncertainty.

The desert

The opening image in *The Road to Mecca* of “two men on two dromedaries riding lazily across barren land where the sun flames are all shimmer and glimmer and swimming light” introduces the reader into the “enlightened” Arabian landscape. The landscape plays a crucial role in Asad’s narrative and represents its author’s spiritual world: the landscape becomes a projection of his frame of mind. Asad’s search for inner equilibrium is reflected in his perception of the outside world. The sand of the desert has the power to erase the past and contributes to Asad’s rebirth as a Muslim. But it also embodies the limits of his knowledge prior to his conversion. The thirst and water represent the knowledge he wishes to achieve during his new life as a Muslim and a desire that he no longer will be considered a stranger among the people of Arabia. Asad describes this inner transformation as a dramatic journey that has led him to an unmarked space. He writes that the “storm finally […] shakes myself free of the sand that has been heaped around me” […] All the dunes around me have changed their outlines. My own tracks and those of the missing camel have been blown away. I am standing on virgin ground” (24). This journey, according to Asad, has the power to erase his past and signifies a new beginning, on “virgin ground.”

Asad describes the arduous route and his profound, painful thirst to master Islamic knowledge that still opens up to uncertainty about the attainability of that knowledge and his integration into a community of born Muslims.
Another night comes. Thirst has grown to be torment, and the desire for water the one, the overpowering thought in a mind that can no longer hold orderly thoughts. [...] Sand dunes and heat. Dunes behind dunes, and no end. Or is this perhaps the end – the end of all my roads, of all my seeking and finding? Or my coming to the people, among whom I would never again be a stranger...? (26)

Asad turns the desert into a tabula rasa. It is an unwritten place where life can be appreciated in its “majesty,” and it always reveals surprises, “even though you may have known it for years.” It is a space that inspires self-transformation. Asad’s rendition of the desert is a promising idyllic space that is both untouched yet traversed by travelers. He describes the desert as a Paradise whose contours are not static but ever-changing, like a mirage. The topography that captures his imagination is described in detail in the following passage.

Life in its majesty: majesty of sparseness, always surprising:
herein lies the whole nameless scent of Arabia, of sand is like this one, and of the many other changing landscapes. Sometimes it is lava ground, black and jagged; sometimes dunes without end; sometimes a wadi between rocky hills, covered with thornbushes out of which a startled hare jumps across your way; sometimes loose sand with tracks of gazelles and few fire-blackened stones over which long-forgotten wayfarers cooked their food in long-forgotten days; sometimes a village beneath
palm trees, and the wooden wheels over the wells make music
and sing to you without stopping (12-14).

Asad’s description of the desert is different than the traditional Islamic view of the
desert, especially its representation in the Qur’an. According to the Muslim tradition, desert
and hell are strictly correlated. The scholar Christina Dykgraaf (2001) debates the
metaphorical and literal depictions of the desert in the Qur’an as an unstated opposite to the
descriptions of heaven. Heaven in the Qur’an is depicted according to what it represents for
those inhabiting the Arabian Peninsula: heaven is imagined as a splendid garden of lush
vegetation, while hell is all fire and torture that is comparable to the hot and dry desert. Still,
at one point in the Qur’an the desert is admired for its vastness.

Asad’s personal journey is reflected in the surrounding nature and his imaginative
venture into a landscape of myth and emptiness. While Asad’s narrative mirrors the
ambivalent depiction of the desert in the Qu’ran, his vision is clearly romanticized and
conforms to a tradition of European depictions of the desert in travel literature.

Asad’s fantasy of the desert landscape resonates with Annemarie Schwarzenbach’s
(1908 - 1942) descriptions in her travelogue Alle Wege sind offen. Die Reise nach Afghanistan
1939/1940. Schwarzenbach describes her journey to Afghanistan and the act of travelling
itself as “Abbild unserer Existenz”\textsuperscript{58} (31) and the act of writing as the “Spiegelbild unseres
Dasein”\textsuperscript{59} (116). Travel and writing are subjective and each one is a product of individual
experience and subjectivity. Much like in Schwarzenbach, the desert is the space for self-

\textsuperscript{58} Image of our existence
\textsuperscript{59} A mirror image of our being
invention, for spiritual renewal for Asad. He is inspired by its openness that allows for the cleansing of the spirit. Asad writes:

There are many more beautiful landscapes in the world, but none, I think, that can shape man’s spirit in so sovereign a way. In its hardness and sparseness, the desert strips our desire to comprehend life of all subterfuges, of all the manifold delusions with which a more bountiful nature may entrap man’s mind and cause him to project his own imageries into the world around him. The desert is bare and clean and knows no compromise. It sweeps out of the heart of man all the lovely fantasies that could be used as a masquerade for wishful thinking, and thus makes him free to surrender himself to an Absolute that has no image: the farthest of all that is far and yet the nearest of all that is near (Asad, 145).

This passage shows that Asad’s journey to Mecca is very similar in many respects to the one Schwarzenbach embarked on to the Middle East; the desert achieves a special status in the mind of the traveler because it reveals qualities that do not belong to other landscapes. The landscape mirrors his interior world and his process of understanding Islam. Asad projects his own imaginaries onto the desert landscape. He enters the landscape with his own language to “surround himself to an absolute.” This occurs through all his senses. In the following quote, Asad brings together the multi-sensoriality of his experience.
And as I stand on the hillcrest and gaze down toward the invisible Plain of Arafat, the moonlit blueness of the landscape before me, so dead a moment ago, suddenly comes to life with the currents of all the human lives that have passed through it and is filled with the eerie voices of the millions of men and women who have walked or ridden between Mecca and Arafat in over thirteen hundred pilgrimages for over thirteen hundred years. Their voices and their steps and the voices and the steps of their animals reawaken and resound anew; I see them walking and riding and assembling—all those myriads of white-garbed pilgrims of thirteen hundred years; I hear the sounds of their passed-away days; (...)—a tiny particle of that roaring, earth-shaking, irresistible wave of countless galloping dromedaries and men [...] And all the tribal detachments take up this one cry. [...] Their [the Bedouins] cry grows into a roar of triumph: 'Allahu Akbar!' The smell of the dromedaries' bodies, their panting and snorting, the thundering of their innumerable feet; the shouting of the men, the clanking of the rifles slung on saddle-peggs, the dust and the sweat and the wildly excited faces around me; and a sudden, glad stillness within me (368).

In this description, the whole experience that Asad is relates is imagined and partly remembered through sounds and smells. The vocabulary expresses the sensorial experience,
a very visceral experience, of his journey that has imprinted itself into his memory. Asad imagines, like a scene from a movie, a long history of the pilgrimages of Bedouins. He romanticizes the scenery and populates it with caravans of men and women fulfilling their spiritual calling.

**The Cities**

Asad’s writing is located between literary essay, travel account, memoir and personal search. The act of writing becomes an act of exploration. His accounts of the desert and the cities are perceived through all sensorial means. In Asad’s description of the cities, what strikes the reader is the difference between the portrayal of Mecca and other Saudi Arabian cities. The city of the Prophet is for Asad his own home that he is able to reach only after a long wandering. Still, he recalls a series of impressions of an Arabia that appears to be experienced almost as though in a dream. It is a world permeated by a familiar quiet environment with sleepy, empty streets, where “a dog rises lazily before the feet of the camels, a man walks by singing a soft rhythm fading away, […] carved balconies […] of the houses hang black and silent and the moonlit air is lukewarm like fresh milk” (248). Mecca remains frozen in time and defined only through its rituals and spirituality. Even the architecture of the city is structured as continuing a traditional Islamic architecture without European interference or influence. The city of Mecca represents a mandatory and ultimate step for the practicing Muslim in his/her journey towards the knowledge of Islam. In addition, Mecca not only seeks to attract pilgrims, but offers the possibility for pilgrims to encounter other pilgrims from other countries and share experiences. Even though Asad has visited the Holy City several times, his account reveals expectations to begin a new life and to enter a
new world that will be much better than the European world that he describes as having confined him.

But now I have begun to feel what I have never felt before in my years in Arabia: an impatience to reach the end of the road. What end? To see Mecca? […] Or is it perhaps a new kind of discovery that I am anticipating? It must be so – for I am being drawn to Mecca by a strange, personal expectancy, as if this spiritual center of the Muslim world, with its multi-national congregation of people from all corners of the earth, were a kind of promise, a gateway to a wider world than the one in which I am now living (135).

It is the Hajj and the experience of the pilgrimage that becomes the final goal of his journey. The fascination with Mecca goes beyond any temporary desire associated with the journey so that Mecca becomes another way of defining what the final stage of belonging to Islam represents. Retrospectively, Asad writes in *The Road to Mecca*, that all his life has led him towards Mecca even when he was not aware of it.

There has never been any other road […] Mecca has always been my goal. It called to me, long before my mind became aware of it, with a powerful voice […] I knew where I belonged: I knew that the brotherhood of Islam had been waiting for me ever since I was born; and I embraced Islam. The desire of my early youth, to belong to a definite orbit of ideas, to
be part of a community of brethren, had at last been fulfilled

(346).

Within the framework of a journey by camel across the Arabian Desert, from Tayma to Mecca, Muhammad Asad reflects upon the events of his former life and how these events led ineluctably to his own pilgrimage to the Holy City: “It was during those twenty-three days that the pattern of my life became fully apparent to myself.”

Asad’s journey continues through Jeddah and Hail and his description of these cities is different than that of Mecca. His account delivers images of the bazaar, camel traders and traditional houses without the spiritual significance associated with the city of Mecca. These Arabian places remind Asad of Europe, in particular regions along the Mediterranean. This is revealed through a detailed description of bazaars and the coffee shops. Although he recognizes striking similarities with Southern Europe, this city is not quite Arabia nor the Mediterranean. The author appears to be disappointed by this hybridity, in contrast to the purity of the desert or the spirituality of Mecca.

Coffee shops with burnished brass utensils and settees made of palm fronds; meaningless shops full of European and Eastern junk. Everywhere sultriness and smell of fish and coral dust. All this belonged, as it were, not yet so much to the mainland as to the sea: the sounds and smells of the port, to the ships riding at anchor beyond the pale coral streaks, to the fishing boats with white triangular sails – to a world not much unlike the Mediterranean. The houses, though, were already a little
different, open to the breeze with richly moulded façades,  
carved wooden window frames and covered balconies, thinnest  
screens of wood that permitted the inmates to look out without  
hindrance into the open but prevented the passerby from seeing  
the interior (...). This was no longer the Mediterranean and not  
yet quite Arabia; it was the coastal world of the Red Sea, which  
produces similar architecture on both its sides (361).  

Coastal cities become a liminal space that is neither European nor Arabian but a  
product of commerce and intercultural relations. However, these intercultural relations have  
brought only dirt and “sultriness.” This reflects one of the main points of Asad’s critique of  
the West. Throughout his writings, Asad mentions several times how Arabia needs to resist  
Western colonization in order to preserve its purity and traditional values.  

Asad perceives other cities, too, in a sensorial way. In the description of Saudi Arabian  
cities, sounds, landscapes and scents become part of the picture he produces. The cities of  
Haïl and Al-Maala are also described in detail, but instead of attributing any spiritual  
significance to them like in his view of the city of Mecca, the focus of the narration is on the  
orientalist images of the bazaar, camel traders and traditional houses with their Mashrabiya,  
the typical Arabian latticed windows. By connecting Saudi Arabia to Europe, Asad constructs  
a parallel to the decadence of European cities in his encounters with other Arabian cities, in  
which the ideal Arabia has disappeared from the non-sacred cities. Asad creates a contrast to  
the “true” Arabia in the representation, whereby cities like Haïl and Al-Maala become the  
stage of this decadence in opposition to the desert that still holds to the pre-modern imaginary  
embodied in the world of “sultriness” where merchants sell European and Eastern “junk.”
These mixed exotic and negative depictions hark back to the travelogue of Baron Heinrich von Maltzan (1865) who described Arabia as a world of “extravagant” Arabs, where women are considered only as erotic objects. This description represents the Saidian Orientalist perspective, where the Orient had become a European construct portrayed as a fantastic, adventurous, and erotic world of exotic spices, bazaars, veiled women, and harems.

Asad’s descriptions embody pre-existing ideas of what makes a city “Arabian,” and according to him, the coastal regions are the ones most influenced by the European capitalism and corrupted into a hybrid space in which Arabia loses part of its identity and “authenticity.”

The noise and scent of Western ports were still about them; they were still living in the afterglow of the days when their brown hands had shoveled coal in the stokeholds of English, American or Dutch steamers; they were still speaking of foreign cities: New York, Buenos Aires, Hamburg (347).

Asad questions the Westernization of Arabia and he reinforces his notion of Europe as an agent of colonial power. He also passes judgment while referring to the Yemeni people who inhabit the coastal cities of Arabia. These foreign workers once, caught by a sudden longing for the shining unknown, had let themselves be hired in the port of Aden as stokers and coal trimmers; they had gone out of their familiar world and thought that they were growing beyond themselves in the embrace of the world’s incomprehensible strangeness: but soon the boat would reach Aden and those times would recede into the past. They would
exchange the Western hat for a turban or a kufiya,\textsuperscript{60} retain the
yesterday only as a memory and, each man for himself, return to
their village homes in Yemen. Would they return the same men as
they had set out – or as changed men? (347)

Asad questions whether the West captured the souls of these workers and intoxicated them
“or only brushed their senses?” (347) At the same time, he describes “cleanliness” and other
“positive” aspects of these cities as typical Western traits, even though he is still fascinated
by the Oriental bazaars, the animal markets and the coppersmiths. When referring to
Western influence in the Middle East, Asad uses the idea of “Westoxification”\textsuperscript{61} that was
already widespread in the Iranian literary panorama of the twentieth century. Opposition and
resistance to modernization, and in particular to westernization, had already been constants
in the history of Iran, and I argue that Asad was probably influenced by these movements.
Both secular intellectuals and clerics have had widespread and reinforced grievances
towards the West. In particular during the forties, following a period of intense interest for
everything Western, a strong anti-Western movement developed among intellectuals. This
movement emerged as a consequence of the indiscriminate acceptance and emulation of the
West, and depicted the West as a threat to Islamic culture (Milani 155). Later, in the sixties,
the hostility towards the West attained a level of collective and political expression, and
feelings of rejection replaced admiration and imitation. Many writers and social critics

\textsuperscript{60} A traditional headcover for men.

\textsuperscript{61} Al-Ahmad proposed that the main cause of contemporary social and cultural maladies was the abandonment
of the traditional heritage and the imitation of Western ways of life. He termed the condition as a whole
gharbzadegi, which can be translated into English as “Weststruckness,” “Westoxication,” “Occidentitis,”
“Westamination,” and “Euromania” (Gheissari 89).
began to focus on the degeneration of the Islamic culture as result of Western influences, and the rejection of the West took on disproportionate force.

But it is Asad's own expectation of what an Arabian city should be that provides a framework for the loss he perceives. He highlights the “contamination” of the Western cities in the Arabian landscape. His description of Ha'il, a city in northwestern Saudi Arabia, is suggestive of the Arabia that Asad desires. Words like “pure and unadulterated” reveal his position concerning the decay of regions subjected to the European colonial power.

This town [Ha'il] is far more Arabian than, say, Baghdad or Medina; it does not contain any elements from non-Arab countries and peoples; it is pure and unadulterated like a bowl of freshly drawn milk. No foreign dress is visible in the bazaar, only loose Arabian abayas, kuftyaas and igals. The streets are much cleaner than those in any other town in Najd, which is noted for its un-Eastern cleanliness (149).

In contrast to Mecca, Asad describes the city of Medina as the most westernized and therefore the least exotic city in Arabia. His listing of what he defines as “non-Arabian” features further reveals his disillusionment and his intention to analyze the surrounding reality as well as his expectations.

But what might appear even more strange is that despite the great variety of human types and costumes that fill them, there is nothing of an “exotic” medley in the streets of Medina: the

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62 Islamic coverings used in the Gulf countries.
variety of appearances reveals itself only to the eye that is
determined to analyze (250-251).

When it comes to describing people living in Medina, he emphasizes a sense of
belonging whereby individuality surrenders to communality and this relates not only to the
common rituals of the pilgrimage but also to those who live there. Asad defines this as a
“community of mood” by which Medina retains an aura of sacrality that influences everybody
either visiting or living there. As the birthplace of the Prophet Mohamed, Asad identifies an
undeniable bond with the past.

It seems to me that all the people who live in this city, or even
sojourn in it temporarily, very soon fall into what one might call
a community of mood and thus also of behave fallen under the
spell of the Prophet, whose city it once was and whose guests
they now are (…) Although life in Medina today has only a
formal relationship with what the Prophet aimed at; although the
spiritual awareness of Islam has been cheapened here, as in
many other parts of the Muslim world: an indescribable
emotional link with its great spiritual past has remained alive
(250-251).

This passage shows that the city is connected to the people who have been there before
and who have left part of themselves there. In the plain of Arafat, he explains, pilgrims
assemble one day of the year as a reminder of the last assembly when God will question what
a person has done throughout his/her life. Asad mentions his own experience, where his
journey becomes an acoustic experience in which the “silent” desert is depicted in opposition to the cities. Terms used are mostly acoustic, characterized by “voices,” “sounds,” “roars,” “echoes,” “cries,” “shouts,” “clanking,” and “cheerful” songs, but also a sensorial experience including smell and vision. Asad’s relationship to Arabia is a multi-sensorial one. In Movement, Memory and The Senses in Soundscape Studies (2010) the sensory studies scholar Jennifer Schine states that sounds associated with physical movement influence the way we perceive the environment in which we are immersed as subjects, and they also affect our sense of time, our memories and our relationship to the space. This is true for Asad's recollection of the space. The way he walks through the bazaars and the way he listens and smells helps him map the place he is crossing and at the same time helps him to reconnect with that portion of himself that remained outside, frozen in time. While writing his memoirs during his stay in New York City, years after his journey, the sensorial memory re-enacts the experience by creating nostalgia for the space he has journeyed through.

Asad's description of Saudi Arabian cities is characteristic of what I call the third phase in the portrayal of Saudi Arabian cities. The representation of other Saudi Arabian cities in German travel narrative discourse is quite different than the one of Mecca. Although Mecca has developed structurally in recent years, its literary representation remains focused on its spiritual significance while the literary representation of the non-sacred cities mirrors their development throughout history.

In my analysis of the representation of non-sacred Saudi Arabian cities in the previous chapter, I refer to three main phases that I call “the Islamic Oriental City,” the “de-romanticized Orient,” and the “modern emerging city.” At the beginning of the 19th century, what today is called Saudi Arabia is represented in the travel literature as an example of
“Islamic Oriental Cities” as, for instance, in the description of Baron Heinrich von Maltzan. With the urban development in the 1930s, cities are often described as a space of a “de-romanticized Orient,” where economic interests gain importance over tradition, and the “petrodollar triumphs over romance” (Jung 1958: 84). The bazaars of the old downtown also lose much of their charm, and terms such as “Middle Ages” and “Modernity” are used repeatedly as binary constructs. Saudi Arabia is depicted as caught in a struggle between these two opposite poles. The “orientalist” exoticism and fascination disappear and are replaced by a narrative of disappointment. The Orient is viewed as having disappeared, and modernization is viewed as the negative effect of an intoxication with the West.

In the third phase of the “emerging modern city,” the disappointment in the destruction of the fabulous Orient is no longer mentioned. Western influence and modernity are portrayed in a positive way. Elements such as traditional Saudi clothing and traditional architecture are often referred to as “pre-modern,” especially in 1980s and 1990s narratives that embrace the notion of “modernization.” I argue that Asad's descriptions of Saudi Arabian cities other than Mecca reflect a time of transition between the Islamic-Oriental city to the emerging-modern city and fluctuate between the first and the second phase. In particular, coastal regions are most influenced by European culture and have been understood as hybrid spaces, as in Asad's almost nostalgic account of Arabia that loses part of its unique identity and “authenticity.”

Even though the city of Mecca has changed dramatically from an infrastructural point of view, its literary representation in European travel accounts has remained constant over the centuries, without undergoing the representational change of other Saudi Arabian cities such as Jeddah. Representations of Mecca, as well as other sacred cities like Jerusalem and Rome, transcend the local space and are thought to bind individuals together transnationally and
transculturally (Samman, 2007). Asad exemplifies this in his writings, in particular in *The Road to Mecca*, and in this he represents a bridge between the 18\(^{th}\) century travelers and the contemporary pilgrimage accounts written mostly by female converts in the 21\(^{st}\) century.

**German Women in Mecca: Hagar Spohr, Michaela Özelsen and Kristiane Backer**

The discussion of travel and pilgrimage accounts shows that travel narratives until the 20th century were a male-dominated genre. With few exceptions, it was uncommon for European women to travel to the Middle East by themselves. Those who did, shared attitudes ranging from curiosity and adventure to ideas of Western superiority, while displaying also a sense of superiority toward other European women who were not brave enough or financially independent to travel alone. Many female travelers often sought a healthy change of climate, accompanied their husbands in missions abroad,\(^{63}\) or wanted to escape from the constraints of a bourgeois European life. Even though the majority of European women travelling to the Middle East were British,\(^{64}\) several German-speaking women explored both North Africa and the Middle East. Among them was Gräfin Ida von Hahn-Hahn (1805–1880)\(^{65}\) from Germany, who was the most successful novelist of her time, and the Viennese traveler, Ida Pfeiffer

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\(^{63}\) Isabel Burton (1831-1896), Isabelle Bird (1831-1904), Anne Blunt (1867-1917), Gertrude Bell (1868-1926) and Freya Stark (1893-1993) traveled through Arab countries. Lady Evelyn Cobbold is the only female among this one early group of European pilgrims. She performed the *Hajj* in 1933 and wrote a *Hajj* account that presents a brief history of the life of the Prophet and basic teachings of Islam. Lady Hester Stanhope (1776-1839) traveled through the Algerian Sahara dressed as a man and lived in Lebanon. In 1872, Lydie Paschkoff from Russia traveled to Palmyra with a huge caravan. Alexine Tinne (1835-1869), heiress of a Dutch sugar baron, embarked on a luxurious Nile expedition with her mother in 1862. Katharine Petherick accompanied her husband John to Sudan in 1861, and Agatha Christie (1890-1976) traveled with her husband, the archaeologist Max Mallowan (Hodgson, 2005).

\(^{64}\) According to Hodgson (2005), of the women who travelled to the Middle East between 1717 and 1930, 240 were British, 58 French, 28 German speaking, 23 were from other European countries and 100 were American.

\(^{65}\) Ida von Hahn Hahn, in her *Orientalischen Briefe* (1844), collected her correspondence from Jerusalem, Egypt and Constantinople. She is the author of novels, poems and travelogues. She led a liberal life; she divorced and had a child from Baron von Bystram, who accompanied her during her travels.
(1797-1858), who travelled extensively by herself.\textsuperscript{66} However, neither of them explored what is today called Saudi Arabia. The destinations of these and other female travelers were mostly Northern Africa, Palestine, and Yemen, and only a few were Muslim. While most 20\textsuperscript{th} century pilgrimage accounts were written by male converts, as far as convert narratives are concerned, female converts in the 21\textsuperscript{st} century such as Hagar Spohr and Kristiane Backer provide remarkable accounts of their pilgrimage experience.

From a diachronic point of view, German Muslim women who write pilgrimage accounts represent a new phenomenon in the literary landscape. The Western female converts I will discuss are specifically drawn to Sufism, in which both men and women establish a relationship to the divine. In Sufism, both men and women become producers of legitimate religious knowledge. Particular to the Nasqabandi\textsuperscript{67} order to which Hagar Spohr, Kristiane Backer and Michaela Özelsel belong,\textsuperscript{68} women and men are called to preach and teach about Islam. Through the religious engagement of Muslim women in Germany, women have contributed notably to the growing discourse on Islam (Jonker, 35-46). Remarkably, the narratives of German women converts subscribe to the tradition of the Hajj narratives of

\textsuperscript{66} Since her childhood, Ida Pfeiffer showed a strong interest in travelling, but because of a marriage and children she had to postpone her dreams. At the age of 45, she travelled to Jerusalem with the money she had saved for twenty years. She divorced her husband and travelled to Constantinople by boat along the Danube. Ida Pfeiffer was aware of the disadvantages of travelling by herself, and as soon as she arrived in Constantinople, she asked the barons Carl and Friedrich von Buseck as well as the artist Hubert Sattler, to join her on her way to Bursa. In 1842, she arrived to Izmir by boat and then went to Rhodes, Cyprus and Beirut. On the way, she met the artist William Henry Bartlett and they travelled together to Jerusalem (Hodgson, 2005).

\textsuperscript{67} Nasqabandi is one of the major Sufi orders of Islam. Formed in 1380, the order is considered by some to be a "sober" order known for its silent remembrance of God rather than the vocalized forms of dhikr (an Islamic devotional act involving recitation, mostly silent, of the names of God) common in other orders. The Nasqabandi order is also notable as it is the only Sufi order to trace its spiritual lineage to the Prophet.

\textsuperscript{68} Dr. Michaela Özelsel, author of Pilgerfahrt nach Mekka, belongs also to the Sufi Order. She was born in Germany in 1949 and raised mostly in Turkey. After graduating from the German School of Istanbul she studied Psychology at the University of North Carolina and received her Ph.D. in Clinical Psychology at the Goethe University of Frankfurt, Germany. Her Sufi master has designated her as a "bridge" that conveys some of the traditional wisdom of Sufism to the West.
previous male pilgrims such as Mohammed Asad, with a few differences. As previously discussed, the early European converts/pilgrims focused primarily on the spiritual experience of the pilgrimage and compared a “decadent” European society to the pure and genuine Arab society. While still emphasizing the spiritual process of conversion, the female pilgrims of the 21st century appear more “disenchanted” with Islam and more critical of the Saudi Arabian government’s exclusion policies in terms of gender. Their disenchantment comes from the restrictions of the Saudi Arabian government in terms of attire for women. For instance, during the Hajj, women are not allowed to wear either face-veils or hand-gloves during the Ihram, the sacred moment of the pilgrimage, and they also must not cover their faces while in the state of Ihram. Their accounts are based almost exclusively on the Hajj experience and the pilgrimage process.

In their accounts, references to famous travelers of the past, quotes from religious writings, books, histories, believers’ expectations, and the stressful experience of the pilgrimage are all mixed into one. Female converts see themselves in a continuity with the previous converts and they translate the previous narratives of pilgrimages into their new vernacular of conversion.

Hagar Spohr published her account in German in 1998. At the age of fifteen, she distanced herself from Christianity, and at the age of thirty, converted to Islam, following the Sufi order of Nasqabandi. Originally from the Ruhr region, she studied German and Romance languages and literature, and participated actively in feminist associations, working as a mentor for women at the University of Freiburg. This activity may at first appear contradictory to the rigidity of the Nasqabandi order that requires obedience, austerity, and discipline from its disciples, and Spohr acknowledges that this austerity may be seen as
challenging among Western non-Muslims. She writes: “Das ist auch der Grund, warum der Islam westlich Verwöhnten gelegentlich so bitter schmeckt.” The author’s search for knowledge, authority and orientation is found eventually in the Qur’an after searching for a singular and authoritative narrative. She writes

Hatten wir zur Zeit des Studiums alles mögliche mit konkurrierendem Anspruch gelesen, so war dabei doch die Sehnsucht gewachsen, einmal ein Buch zu finden, in dem alles drin war, das die wirklich wichtigen Dinge des Lebens und Sterbens enthielt.69 (19).

What Spohr suggests here is the need to have only one text to help negotiate the demands of the modern world. For Spohr, the Qur’an became that text. It not only conveyed religious teachings but also provided a guide to what Spohr considered the important things in life.

In 1990, Spohr went on a pilgrimage to Mecca with forty other German and Dutch Muslims to fulfill the fifth pillar of Islam. As in other contemporary pilgrimage accounts, the romantic image of the Bedouin “Naturkind,” which was pervasive in the earliest travel narratives, disappears. There is nothing of the romanticized journey and desert descriptions. In these contemporary female pilgrimage accounts, the Hajj is showcased as a radical life-changing event and the journey is itself deromanticized. Spohr describes the physically challenging pilgrimage that she shared with forty people, including a child. She writes about how the pilgrims had to remain together in an extremely tight space for several weeks, and

69 This is also the reason why sometimes Islam tastes bitter for the spoiled Westerners.
70 At the time of the study we read everything possible with competing claims, so a desire grew to find a comprehensive book that contained all the things really important in life and death.
describes the conflicts that arose during the Hajj with other pilgrims and even with the authorities: “Wir waren andauernd am Weinen”\textsuperscript{71} (25). She agrees that nowadays going to Mecca should be more comfortable, but it is common knowledge that for a Muslim, a trip full of difficulties may be more rewarding in terms of purification.

Spohr’s style is descriptive and touching. The Holy Cities as well as the Kaa’ba are painted vividly with particular attention to the architectural details and to their history, as in Burckhardt’s accounts. Spohr’s account is conceived both as a spatial and temporal travelogue, recalling in this way the primary sense of the Muslim journey. It is a diary about Islam, in which Islam is explained from the point of view of a converted German woman. It serves also as a window into the spiritual life of a Muslim woman, as stated in the preface by the German Orientalist Annemarie Schimmel: “Einen Einblick in das Seelenleben einer Muslimin” \textsuperscript{72} (9). In the narrative, Spohr includes a number of quotes from religious writings, including the Qur’an, as well as historical references. The author also includes references to famous earlier travelers of the past, such as Burckhardt, by showing that contemporary pilgrims follow a certain template, and demonstrate only a few differences distinguishing these modern pilgrims from the adventurers of the nineteenth century, who arrived in the forbidden cities following caravans. However, as opposed to earlier travel narratives, in which travelers are fascinated by the desert and the nomads, in these contemporary narratives it is the experience of the Hajji, the pilgrimage, that occupies the center of the narrative. The \textit{Reise nach Mekka} does not speak of the conversion experience, but it details the steps of the pilgrimage and Spohr’s experience as a pilgrim when encountering other pilgrims during her

\textsuperscript{71} We kept crying continuously.
\textsuperscript{72} An insight in the life of a Muslim woman.
journey. Spohr consciously places herself into a lineage of German converts, and in this way she establishes a continuum between past and present narratives.

Spohr criticizes what she sees as the discrepancies between her interpretation of Islam and the way it is interpreted by the Saudi authorities. In particular, she takes issue with the instructions and practices that the Saudi government imposes on pilgrims, especially on women. For instance, she sees a contradiction in the way women are forbidden to cover their faces during the *Ihram*, the state of purification required for the pilgrimage, while on other occasions, Wahabi women are required to cover their faces in the presence of other men. Since during the *Hajj* men and women are not separated and it is forbidden to cover their faces, the author questions in a polemic way those who determine these practices in this kind of texts (82).

Hagar Spohr describes being immersed in the crowd performing the *tawaf*. She begins by describing the first round: “Die erste Runde laufen wir entsprechend der Überlieferung sehr schnell und tun so, als wären wir besonders frisch und stark” (87-90). Spohr points out the way the Prophet Mohammed was performing the *tawaf*, the circuambulation of the *Kaa’ba*. She provides an example from the life of the Prophet Mohammed. After an exhausting trip, the Prophet had gathered his strength to engage in the circuit of the *Kaa’ba* and showed his enemies his triumphant return. During the seven rounds around *Kaa’ba*, it is

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73 In Islam following actions are forbidden during the pilgrimage: to wear sewn clothes; to cover the head (men), to cover the face (women), to comb one’s hair, to have one’s hair cut, to clip one’s nails, to use perfume, to use violence against someone, to contract marriage and have sexual intercourse. If one commits any of these, one should pay *fidyah*, a compensation for a missed or wrongly practiced religious rite. These practices are not established by the Saudi Arabian government as inferred by the author, but these are traditions have been conveyed through the Prophet’s *hadiths*, the collections of stories about the Prophet Muhammad.

74 The first round we run very fast according to the tradition, and we did so as if we were particularly rested and strong.
forbidden to bend down so that according to Spohr “was immer auch man verlieren mag, Geld, Tuch, eine Sandale” 75 (88) cannot be retrieved. One is required to continue and pilgrims are at risk of being run over by the crowd. The atmosphere around the Ka‘ba is full of “Lobpreisungen, Rufen, Weinen, ein ganz besonderer Tag wird geprobt: Der Tag des eigenen Todes.” 76 (94) All in all, she describes it as a chaotic but euphoric and perilous experience: “Jede Zelle des Körpers scheint zu jubilieren” 77 (92). However, the crowd of pilgrims makes it impossible for the author to fully enjoy the spirituality of the moment. It becomes dangerous and stressful as well: “In der Sekunde höchster spiritueller Verzückung tritt einem der nächste Nachbar wieder auf die Füße. Und dann der Stoß in den Rücken!” 78 (92)

Spohr describes the lack of organization and the resulting chaos that compromises the spiritual experience that she has long awaited. Spohr demystifies this experience of access to Mecca. In many ways, she disrupts the romanticized expectations of the spiritual experience that earlier travelers sought to uphold.

Besides her account of the grueling journey and the need to negotiate the crowds who have gathered in Mecca, Spohr turns her attention to gender and Islam. She is “mildly shocked” (21) when she is introduced to the Sheikh from Cyprus only as the wife of one of Salim’s disciples, and the Sheikh defines her as “very suitable” to him. She feels herself as an object that can be considered of worth only if “acceptable” for a man. Even though the author strives for discipline, she realizes that obedience has its own limits. On the way back from

75 Everything that one might lose, money, sandals, veil.
76 Praises, calling, crying, a very special day is rehearsed: the day of our own death.
77 Every cell of the body seems to rejoice.
78 In the second highest spiritual ecstasy one of the nearest neighbors comes to his feet again. And then, the hit in the back.
Mecca to Cyprus, the place where the Sheikh of the order lives, crossing at first Jordan and then Palestine, women in the pilgrims’ group stage a protest in front of the Mosque Al-Aqsa in Jerusalem. After a long and exhausting trip, and several stops at the shrines of the holy Sheikhs of their Sufi order, the German convert women just want to go back home. In contrast, male pilgrims plan further stops without taking into account both women’s needs and their obligations in the homeland. “Die müssen noch ganz schön üben, bis sie heilig sind,” the women of the group complain in a contentious tone. This criticism revolves around the way Western male converts treat their wives because of their fundamentalist interpretation of Islam. One of the Sheiks reminds them that the true nature of Islam is different, and he invites new converts to take care of their wives. Spohr quotes one of the Sheiks who directly addresses Western converts:

Sei Frauen gegenüber nicht grausam, sie haben ein leichtes, helles Herz, du hast sie zu respektieren. Neue Muslime aus westlichen Ländern tragen nicht genug Sorge um ihren Frauen und behandeln sie wie Tiere, und wenn sie genug haben von ihnen, gehen sie zur nächsten (161).

This statement is new to contemporary pilgrimage accounts if compared, for instance, to Asad’s narrative. Spohr, who grew up in Germany during the 1970s, takes a feminist position in her critique. Her background as a feminist provides a lens through which to read her

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79 They still need to practice until they become holy.
80 Don’t be cruel towards women, they have a light and bright heart, you have to respect them. New Muslims from western countries do not care enough for their wives and treat them like animals, and when they get tired of them, they move on to the next one.
account. In this respect, Spohr criticizes the behavior of Western men who convert to Islam and their disregard for women.

The issue of a German Muslim identity emerges as the main theme in Spohr’s narrative. She poignantly addresses the issues Western Muslims face while living in their native societies. Also, there is not the rejection of Europe that permeates Muhammad Asad’s account. In contrast, these converts are proud of being German and Muslim. The narration provides an occasion to reflect on the relationship between the Middle East and Germany, and the esteem that Germany generally enjoys in the Middle East. Spohr notes: “Man hat den Eindruck, jeder kenne Deutschland und schätze es”\(^81\) (70). Spohr states that Germans in the Middle East enjoy a favorable status, and in a couple of passages, she claims to encounter a certain Arab curiosity about everything Islamic in Germany and about Western Muslims. She writes “Neugierige Pilger gesellen sich zu uns, und ein Gespräch entsteht. Sie fragen die Männer nach dem Islam in Deutschland und wie viele Muslime es in Deutschland gäbe”\(^82\) (106).

Oftentimes the country of origin seems of secondary importance, and the group of pilgrims is identified more with their religion and their way of dressing when in their home country. The fact of wearing an Islamic head cover connects them automatically to “being Arab” without taking into account the fact that there are many Christians among Arabs or converts from Europe. Being Arab thus is considered a synonym for being Muslim, and she points out the fact that being a Muslim while not being Arab is considered a contradiction.

\(^81\) One has the impression that everybody knows Germany and cherishes it.
\(^82\) Curious pilgrims join us, and a conversation arises. They ask men about Islam in Germany and how many Muslims are in Germany.
with the fact of being European. During the visit in Jerusalem, the group of pilgrims encounters a group of Jewish children who do not distinguish among nationalities, but look at them only as characterized by their attire. Spohr states that “Über Treppen und durch Tore hindurch erreichen wir enge Gassen, in denen jüdische Kinder uns Araber, Araber!” hinterherschreien. Es berührt uns schon eigenartig, wenn wir Deutsche von Juden so gerufen werden.”\(^{83}\) (148)

In this passage it emerges that being Arab or wearing Arab clothing is automatically associated with the fact of being Muslim and that being Muslim is associated with being Arab.

The topic of Islam, the process of conversion, and the way converts follow Islamic teachings are recurrent in Spohr’s account. She states that “Wir sind die einzigen hier, die die Sunnagebete beten. Der Mehrheit ist’s mit zwei Raka\(^{84}\) genug, und sie verstreut sich in Windseile.”\(^{85}\) (75) Spohr places herself in the position of believing that her interpretation of Islam and her practice of Islam is more accurate in respect to the other pilgrims, and in this she is showing herself as being more “rightful” and “superior” than other Muslims. This reflects the common assumption of many converts who believe that they have a better understanding of Islam.

In these contemporary female accounts, the focus is no longer on the city of Mecca, as in previous accounts, but mostly on the rituals of the pilgrimage and on the government of Saudi Arabia, which is often described as politically corrupted, revealing, furthermore, that

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\(^{83}\) Through stairs and doors we drive to narrow streets where Jewish children shout to us, “Arabs, Arabs!” It touches us in a strange way when Germans are called in this way by the Jews.

\(^{84}\) The *rakat* is the single unit of the Islamic prayer and each one of the daily prayers has a different number of mandatory *rakats*.

\(^{85}\) We are the only ones here who pray the prescribed prayers. The majority finds that two *raka* are enough, and they finish it with the wind speed.
“decadence” and that “lost of innocence” which Asad notes concerning the cities without including the notion of the noble savage. In these accounts, contemporary pilgrims point out the divergences that exist in interpretations of Islam while showing themselves as holding a balance between what they consider the “true” Islamic practice and the influence of local traditions in the way Islam is interpreted. Religion stands for the space Saudi Arabia has become in the German imagination. It is modified to conform to a Western feminist consciousness that embraces a new religion.

**Kristiane Backer and the VIP pilgrims**

Among the female converts to Islam, Kristiane Backer is the most prominent recent German convert who has written about her experience during the *Hajj* in *Von MTV nach Mekka* (From MTV to Mecca). As a television personality, journalist, and author, she enjoys a strong presence in the German media. Backer belongs to the wave of publicly known people who converted to Islam and whose conversion has become a media event, much like the conversions of Michael Jackson, Malcolm X, Cat Stevens, or the boxer Muhammad Ali and Mike Tyson.

In an interview on the inter-faith television program, “Matters of Faith,” for the international channel Ebru TV, reported in the *Sunday Times* (February 22, 2004), Kristiane Backer talks about her life and how several encounters with Muslims led her towards Islam. In the early 1990s, Kristiane Backer was one of the very first presenters on MTV Europe, the popular music television channel. As she reached the height of her success, Backer realized that she was never truly satisfied with her life. Even though she did not come from a troubled

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86 There seem to be some real doubts about the veracity of the reports of Michael Jackson’s supposed conversion.
social background as is the case of many other converts, she felt that something deeper was missing in her life. After meeting the famous cricketer Imran Khan, she travelled to Pakistan where she encountered a completely different world in the religion and culture of Islam than her European background offered. She began to read the Qur'an and other books about Islam. In 1992, she travelled extensively, visiting Morocco, Egypt, Turkey, Pakistan, Syria, and Saudi Arabia. Throughout her travels in the Muslim world, Backer discovered Islam in a similar way as Muhammad Asad. In particular, the discovery of the works of Jalaluddin Rumi,\(^{87}\) who became her favorite author, introduced and opened her to Islamic spirituality. The interest of Backer as well as of other converts in Sufism reflects the revival of Sufism and Rumi in the Western world. A few years later, after travelling more extensively in the Islamic world, she embraced Islam in a London mosque. In her interview in “Matters of Faith,” she describes her experience in the Middle East, or what she calls the “Orient,” as a place characterized by “colors, spices and scents.” In *Von MTV nach Mekka*, Backer relates to a romanticized “Orient” that is much different from the one described by Hagar Spohr, but that in many respects is similar to the oriental space portrayed by the 19th century travelers, and especially resonates with Muhammad Asad’s account. As shown in the following quote, the scents and the incense of Arabia fascinate her and capture her imagination; certain scents become very distinctive of the Orient: “Im arabischen Wüstenstaat werden zudem die besten Parfümöle der Welt hergestellt. Ich verfolgte seit einiger Zeit die Idee, eine orientalisch

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87 Rumi (30 September 1207 – 17 December 1273) was a 13th-century Persian poet, jurist, theologian, and Sufi mystic. Rumi's importance is considered to transcend national and ethnic borders. His poems have been widely translated into many of the world's languages and transposed into various formats.
inspiriert Kosmetikserie herauszubringen, die den Namen Baraka (Segen) tragen sollte”\textsuperscript{88} (217).

While describing her idea of opening an oriental perfume store, she unconsciously connects the Orient to Islam by naming her store 

\textit{Baraka}, Arabic for “blessing.”

In Dschidda traf ich mit zwei Parfümeuren, um mich zu informieren und Kontakte aufzubauen. [...] Viele arabische Prinzen und Prinzessinnen lassen sich hier ihre persönlichen Düfte kreieren. Fasziniert beobachtete ich, wie der Parfümeur das wertvolle Öl aus einer großen Flasche ein Tropfen danebenging\textsuperscript{89} (217).

While referring to the perfume store, she employs the term “fascinated“ several times, marketing the romanticized Orient transporting oriental scents to a European market, and playing off of the romanticized notion that had been brought by travelers and writers. She plays off of the imaginary sensorial experience associated with the orient.

She later describes the cities she travels through. Even though Backer is not taking into account the desert and the Bedouins living in Saudi Arabia, as Asad did in his account, her descriptions of cities appear very similar to Asad’s renditions. From a structural point of view, Mecca serves as the final metaphorical and physical step of the journey to Islam as the title in both Asad and Backer’s accounts suggest. The account is not only about the \textit{Hajj} and its rituals, but it also represents the final and most important step in the process of learning about

\textsuperscript{88} In the Arabian desert state the best perfumes of the world are produced. I contemplated for some time the idea to bring out an oriental inspired line of cosmetics, that should carry the name \textit{Baraka} (blessing).

\textsuperscript{89} In Jeddah I met with two perfumers to learn more about it and to establish contacts. [...] Many Arab princes and princesses can create their own personal scents here. Fascinated, I watched as the perfumer took a drop from the precious oil from a large bottle nearby.
Islam. The account is structured so that the visit to Mecca appears in the last chapter, which corresponds to the last step in the spiritual path of the author.

Im Dezember 2000 erfüllte sich einer meiner Herzenswünsche, denn ich machte meine erste richtige Pilgerfahrt nach Mekka.

Zusammen mit den Freunden meiner Sufi-Gruppe und unserem Sheikh ging ich auf die Umrah, die einen Neubeginn für die Gläubigen symbolisiert. [...] Im Angesicht der Kaaba tritt der Gläubige betend vor Gott, ihn um Vergebung und hofft, von den Sünden der Vergangenheit gereinigt zu werden90 (214).

However, the journey is not easy, especially as an unmarried woman, and Backer reveals the difficulties she encountered, and several formalities she had to accept, such as joining a group of pilgrims to make easier the process of entering Saudi Arabia, which otherwise requires an invitation by a Saudi citizen. (216) However, while describing the bureaucratic steps she has to go through, she never complains and always finds positive aspects to draw on. For instance, when she describes the outfit she needs to wear in order to travel to Saudi Arabia, she talks about her light and long black Abbaya, and she describes it as comfortable and easy to wear when performing her prayers in the mosque in London. Backer employs adjectives such as “leicht” (light), “bequem” (comfortable) and “elegant” when referring to the Islamic attire she will be wearing. She tries to justify but also to adorn the practice of Islam. While referring to it, she makes a conscious effort to not offend anything related to it. Also, before travelling to

90 In December 2000, I fulfilled one of my dearest wishes because I made my first real pilgrimage to Mecca. Together with my friends from the Sufi group and our Sheikh, I went to do the Umrah, which symbolizes a new beginning for the believers. [...] In front of the Ka’aba, the believer enters praying to God for forgiveness and he hopes to get rid of the sins from the past (214).
Saudi Arabia, she mentions that the country is famous for its scarves and she “betrachtete [...] das Ganze als gute Investition”\(^91\) (217). Also, the local customs are observed without any particular critique, but mostly accepted and narrated in a neutral way, or partly justified. For instance, when describing the separate rooms in the restaurant, Backer states that women can feel safe. Backer implies a slight critique with her question, but she does not go into depth, which suggests a preference to avoid any controversial political and cultural arguments. 

In the previously analyzed account by Hagar Spohr, the author primarily describes the pilgrimage, including detailed descriptions of all the rites of the pilgrimage and her experiences as a pilgrim. In contrast, both Asad and Backer do not focus only on the Hajj; their writings are both conversion accounts and pilgrimage narratives. The similarities in the Asad and Backer accounts become clear in the way their content and chapters are organized. Similar to Asad and Spohr, Backer states that before she converted, she had spent a life between two worlds and never felt like she belonged to any of them. She writes: “Als Konvertin habe ich lange ein Leben zwischen zwei Welten geführt und mich keiner ganz zugehörig gefühlt”\(^92\) (26). The reasons behind her conversion reflect what most literature on conversion states: Islam becomes a way to escape from a troubled past or a way to give new meaning to a person’s life.

\begin{quote}
\end{quote}

\(^91\) She looked at the whole thing as a good investment. 
\(^92\) As a convert I have led for a long time a life between two worlds and I haven’t felt belonging anywhere.
positive Perspektive auf das Leben und den Tod einzunehmen.\textsuperscript{93}

(27)

Embracing the decision to go to Mecca is a way to confirm her intention to embrace Islam in a serious and committed way. This shows that Islam offers her a way to begin a new life, leaving the materialistic past she believed that she led prior her conversion. Islam attracts Backer because it provides the possibility to transcend differences among people, and to be equal at least in front of God. In “From MTV to Mecca” (2012), Backer describes how her prejudices towards Islam dissipated once she discovered mainstream Islam, found common values between religions, and explored what she considers the heart of Islam, Sufism.

\textit{Vor Gott sollen alle Pilger gleich aussehen, so wie am Tag des Jüngsten Gerichts an dem nur noch die Taten der Menschen und keine Äußerlichkeiten mehr zählen werden}\textsuperscript{94} (215).

She believes that Islam will give her the possibility to achieve spirituality and prepare for the day of judgment when everything connected to materiality will be left behind. She describes the rituals and the continuation of her journey in a very descriptive and ethnographic way without introducing any particular personal details. Similarly, her description of traveling to Mecca mentions no particular emotion, rather it is more like an instruction manual where all procedures and steps are listed one after another. The description of the rituals is formal; and it informs the reader about the details of fulfilling the ritual of the pilgrimage. For instance, she describes the rituals of purification and all the rules that pilgrims need to follow after they

\textsuperscript{93} Through my faith I have found a purpose in life. I feel lifted and secure in it. Religion is my personal way towards God. It helps me to have a positive outlook on life and death (27).

\textsuperscript{94} All pilgrims should look the same before God, as on the judgment day when only the deeds of people and no more external appearance will count (215).
enter the *Ihram*, the sacred spiritual state that each pilgrim needs to enter before performing the *Hajj* or the *Umrah*.

Kosmetika benutzen und sich keine Körperhaare entfernen, weshalb die Männer sich auch nicht rasieren dürfen (...) (220).  

In the end, only a few hints show some personal feelings and a sense of nostalgia toward the old landscape and the way the Ka’aba stood out before being surrounded by a number of hotels. She continues to describe her journey by mentioning that at the end of their trip, some of the pilgrims made a second trip to Mecca and an additional Umrah, the smaller version of the Hajj. 

This time the group stayed directly opposite the Holy Mosque in one of the large hotels. Martin Lings, a Sufi writer, told them of the time when the Mosque was still the largest building for miles and stood alone in the landscape. Backer shows mixed feelings. These times were sadly over. On the other hand, the visit to the Ka’aba whenever one wanted leaves a profound impression, and the view from the hotel room the circles of the pilgrims in orbit around the black cube is impressive. (225) 

After the Umrah, the last step to accomplish is the Hajj, as this embodies definitive acceptance of Islam and the beginning of a new life as a Muslim. Backer mentions that in December 2005, before the time of Hajj, with the arrival of her 40th birthday, she felt that this point in her life called for significant change. The Hajj represented a milestone not only in her life in general, but also in her life as a Muslim. In fact, she questions whether or not she needs

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95 When we left at sunset the next day, Mecca was about one hour's drive and a cool night was ahead of us. We decided to travel in the evening to escape the heat. Before we left, we made the big ritual ablution, also called ghusl, where one pilgrim at first cleanses the entire body, then rinses the mouth and nose three times, the face three times as well, then the arms up to the elbow, and refreshes the ears with water. Followed by washing the neck, the hair from the roots to the tips and in the end the feet. There is also the “small” ablution, wudu, which is carried out daily before the ritual prayer. Both serve as a spiritual protection. It purifies only the face, mouth and nose, hands, forearms and feet, and rubs a wet hand over his hair (219) (...). We felt that we looked very honest and with the fear of God, and decided to behave in the same way also in the upcoming days. During the spiritual state of Iḥram certain rules apply to all pilgrims: one may not have any sexual encounters, kill animals, use cosmetics or remove any body hair, which is why the men were not allowed to shave (220).
to change her lifestyle further after the *Hajj* by taking on more responsibilities. She writes that “*auch plagten mich Zweifel, ob ich nach der Hadsch den Neubeginn verantwortlich leben könnte, denn genau das ist ihr Sinn: der Beginn eines neuen Lebens*”\(^{96}\) (250). In the end, according to Backer, all that matters is the beginning of a new life, which resonates with the other pilgrimage accounts analyzed in this chapter.

**Conclusions**

In these pilgrimage accounts Saudi Arabia and the holy cities of Mecca and Medina serve only as a background. These accounts need to be analyzed under the lens of conversion and the way conversion to Islam is seen in Europe. In fact, as the narratives analyzed show, the description of physical space of Saudi Arabia becomes of secondary importance when compared with the travelogues of the 18\(^{\text{th}}\) and 19\(^{\text{th}}\) centuries and, as seen in the narratives of Muhammad Asad and more recent female authors, it is the place of the convert between the european and the muslim world that comes to the forefront. Although conversion is not a new phenomenon, the number of conversion and pilgrimage accounts has increased over the last decade. In the context of today’s geopolitical conflicts, these conversion narratives take on a

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\(^{96}\) The doubt plagues me whether I could live a new start after the Hajj, because that is its meaning: the beginning of a new life.
heightened political meaning.\textsuperscript{97} The experiences of German converts in Europe embody what the British cultural anthropologist Victor Turner (1920-1983) identifies as an anti-structural consciousness (1995). Turner uses the term “anti-structure” in reference to political and cultural change and their subsequent rituals. Turner claims that an anti-structure is manifest during historical periods when social hierarchies may be reversed or temporarily dismantled, and the continuation of foundational traditions may become uncertain. I argue that Turner’s notion of an anti-structure can be applied to this framework in which the relationship between Europe and Islam is perceived as a clash of cultures. The conversion experience leads to the formation of an anti-structure whereby the religious “hierarchy” gets dissolved. The way this hierarchy is eliminated is reflected in the condition of converts who do not feel that they belong to any specific group; but it also revolves around the central issue concerning

\textsuperscript{97} The participation of some converts in terror-related activities, however, has fostered a change of perception, shifting from one’s change of lifestyle to a threat to national and international security. In particular, following the events of September 11 2001 and the most recent ISIS forces recruitment among European Muslims and converts, several articles have appeared in European and German newspapers portraying the fear of European governments towards new Muslims. \textsuperscript{97} The practicing Muslim is seen as a threat to the foundations of German democracy and constitution. As articulated in Samuel Huntington’s vision of a “clash of civilizations,” today much of the Western world considers “Islamic civilization” as the only serious challenge to the hegemony of “Western values.” This brings current tensions back into an age-old struggle between Islam and the West dating back to the time of the Crusades, as Asad outlined in \textit{The Road to Mecca}. This fear was dramatically reinforced in the European public discourse by the events of September 11, 2001. But fear lies not only among non-Muslims, but also among Muslims. Muslims who live in diaspora communities in Europe and North America fear that they or some of their practicing Muslim neighbors, including converts, may be seen as the enemy within, a hidden threat to the basic values of democracy and freedom those values that most Muslims in Europe want to be associated with. This fear affects not only the way Muslims are treated every day but also the realm of what is an acceptable exercise of government power concerning the rights of individual Muslims. The recent publication by the expert on international terrorism, Guido W. Steinberg, \textit{German Jihad: On the Internationalization of Islamist Terrorism} (2013), is an accurate account of how the Islamic radical groups that developed in Germany through a combination of radicalized foreign-born Muslims and native German converts represent a threat not only to national security but to Islam itself. The fear of a global threat informs debates surrounding the integration of Muslims into German society and the place of converts to Islam in this integration process. In the recent refugee crisis that has involved Europe in 2015-2016, German officials and in particular the social democrat Thomas Oppermann stated that Wahhabism, predominant in Saudi Arabia, offered a ideology for ISIS insurgents and contributed to the radicalization of moderates. Therefore Germany warned Saudi Arabia that offered to build 200 mosques fearing that this might constitute funding for related terrorism.
the lack of a central authority in Islam.\textsuperscript{98 99}

Marcia Hermansen studies conversion narratives of European and American Muslims written between 1900 and 1980 and applies postcolonial theory to understand how converts’ views of Islam and the Muslim world change according to historical shifts, as well as in their self-representation (1999). Hermansen explains that in conversion narratives the authors do not completely regret their previous lives but there is a sense of returning to what one has always been. This explains why sometimes converts prefer to use the term “reversion.” This aspect is shown also in the pilgrimage accounts. Muhammad Asad who writes “Every time I learned something more about the teachings of Islam, I seemed to discover something that I

\textsuperscript{98} Islam developed three main divisions between them going back to the period between 651 and 656 and the fundamental issue that divides the three groups is the one of authority.

\textsuperscript{99} The construction of national identity also plays a crucial role. National identity is built on the notion of a common history in the same way as belonging to a religious community emphasizes common practices. Religion and nation are both created around myths, symbols and rituals. In the European public discourse, the fact of being a citizen of a European country and at the same time Muslim is seen as inconsistent with European values. A Muslim living in Europe is believed not to be able to reconcile two different sets of values, symbols and rituals. According to Lynn Hunt in Symbole der Macht (1989), national consciousness makes use of symbols. However, Islam is often deemed an “extra-European” religion, since Islamic rituals and symbols are considered incompatible with European history and value systems. In this framework, I argue that religion behaves in the same way as the notion of nationality by becoming a narrative produced and reproduced by social actors.

According to Stuart Hall (1994), when national identities, national cultures, and religious belonging are linked together, culture and state become identical (Hall, 1994: 205). In the case of Islam, religion and culture are not believed to be linked to European national belonging. Following this perspective, I believe that converts hold the special role of conveyors of this cultural hybridity by going beyond the connection of nation and religious belonging, where individuals are able to hold multiple ethnic, national or religious affiliations simultaneously. In this context, converts have the potential to function as cultural and political mediators between the German state and Muslim communities (Özyürek, 2010). However, this is not always the case. Oftentimes, “new Muslims” claim to be not fully accepted by the ones who are born Muslim. Oftentimes, converts tend to be pushed too hard by those who are born into Islam to follow rules and practices that most of the time are almost exclusively related to the culture of the immigrants’ country of origin and are not connected to Islam in itself. This oftentimes pushes converts away from Islam because of the many obligations and expectations. Sometimes, as it is shown in some of the narratives analyzed, converts tend to push themselves to follow rules that not even born Muslims follow, and they exercise peer pressure against other converts. Also, a number of studies about European converts shows that many converts struggle to cultivate new Muslim friends. During Ramadan, the month of fasting, converts find themselves alone. Ramadan is the holiest month of the Muslim year, when adherents fast from sunrise to sunset and eat a communal meal at night. Ramadan is a period of fellowship with family and friends. However, many converts to Islam break the daily fast without friends or relatives. The contributions of converts to the study of Islam should not be disregarded. Some of them are engaged in the interpretation of the Islamic sources (Allievi 1998; Wagendonk 1994, Gerholm 1988, El Houari Setta 1999, Roald 2006 volume). Among a number of studies on conversion, the sociologist and psychologist Koese (1996) explores conversion in the UK, and applies several psychological and religious theories with regard to pre-conversion life stories.
had always known without knowing it” (Road to Mecca, 184). Hermansen also explains a problem that emerges from these narratives. They maintain a relationship to the colonial discourse, and the Saidian orientalism that is perpetuated through the western discursive practice, because even European Muslims tend to exoticize the Orient, as I have shown, and are fascinated by the performance of the *Hajj*; according to her, it is hard to find a specific voice in the accounts because this shifts over time with the changing of the political situations (Hermansen, 1999). Most studies on conversions focus on the reasons behind the dramatic change of lifestyle. Monika Wohlrab-Sahr, a sociologist of religion, has studied converts in Germany and in the United States, and has identified personal crisis and the search for self as the main reasons behind conversions (1999). The motivation behind conversions are varied; most converts turn to Islam because of their desire to improve their lives and leave behind what they refer to as the “materialistic world” or a past of addiction and abuse, while other converts cite political motivation. For the majority of new Muslims, Islam gives them the opportunity to stand out from the crowd and to emerge from a Western society that they view as corrupt and beset by a decline in values.

But conversion can also be motivated by an interest in a philosophical and spiritual search. In particular, Sufism, the mystical branch of Islam, is the main agent for conversion to Islam in the West.\(^\text{100}\) In the initial phase of conversion, Sufism is usually not associated fully with Islam, but is seen more as a way of life and a way to connect with the spiritual self. In particular, a number of middle-class European women are drawn to Islam through the spiritual values of Sufism, even if this is not always made explicit. As discussed earlier the former

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\(^{100}\) Sufism is defined as the mystical branch of Islam. In Western society, Sufism became part of the “hippie” movement in the 1960s and it was not initially connected to Islam. In the 1990s, Sufism was reconnected to its original meaning and Islamic origins.
MTV presenter Kristiane Backer is one of these new converts from the middle class who came to Islam through Sufism.

Over the past years, Islam has become appealing among the educated elite. While a few years ago conversion was mostly the result of a personal relationship, nowadays the number of converts includes university graduates and middle-class citizens. Islam attracts not only those who are in search of spirituality, but also those who are critical of Western society (Allievi, Hoffman 1997, Wohlrab-Sahr 1999b) like Asad. Even though a few converts might be animated by anti-Western rhetoric, many try to integrate Western values and an Islamic identity (8). Integrating Western values has resulted in the creation of what in the European public discourse has been referred to as “European Islam.”

The definition of Western values and European Islam leave the question open regarding the definition of “Western values” and their (in)compatibility with the values of Islam. The definition of Islam as European by itself does not contribute to the interreligious dialogue. According to Kerem Öktem of the European Studies Centre at Oxford, the term European Islam is not helpful. The assumption that Islam is a foreign religion, extraneous from European values, implies the need for “domesticating” and "europeanizing" the other. In particular, public discourse on Islam, terror-related activities, and the condition of women have become focus areas of the criticism. Women have become the barometer according to which the compatibility of these values has to be decided. Female converts thus play a role in the development of new discourses on gender. Recent research explores Islamic feminism among female converts (Niewkerk, 5). This particular aspect opens up further considerations about the role of intellectual conversions and the role of German Muslim women in the dissemination of Islam. This aspect in particular emerges from most of the narratives analyzed.
for the purpose of this research. In common with other new forms of literature like autobiographies, *Hajj* accounts focus on individual experiences, perceptions and feelings. Some of these accounts may be similar to novels, while others follow the familiar pattern of a travelogue, beginning with a description of the departure and continuing up to the arrival at the holy place and the journey back home. The *Hajj*, however, remains both a personal and collective experience that becomes part of a shared understanding of religious symbols and traditions. The goal of these accounts is to make the *Hajj* a vivid experience for the readers, and also to provide a model for the spiritual achievements involved in being a convert. The accounts reveal the cultural world through which the convert filters what he/she sees. Some of these travelogues are shaped by a specific Islamic orientation: Hagar Spohr, for instance, describes her experience as a disciple of a Nasqabandi Sufi order. While earlier authors showed themselves to be part of a long historical tradition, modern authors acknowledge this tradition, but they provide new information concerning the special context where they come from. In this sense, the journey to Mecca becomes a metaphor for the entire spiritual path. By undertaking the *Hajj*, the pilgrims affirm their individual responsibility for obedience to religious mandates and claim their place among the community of Muslims (Eickelmann, 85-101).

Most of the earlier pilgrimage accounts describe the Saudi Arabian space through its landscapes, cities, exotic mores and people. They are mostly concerned with the act of travelling, which represents a challenge in itself. Pilgrimage accounts are no longer focused only on the journey or on the adventures and the dangers of crossing mountains and deserts. These contemporary narratives focus on the spiritual experience, while not leaving out some of the exotic descriptions of people and places. The result is a collage of individual images
and sketches that express desire to build bridges as Muslims living in Germany, using their national identity to improve understanding for their religion. This plays an important role in the intercultural and interfaith dialogue, especially through young people’s authentic and very subjective narrative style and the way in which they talk about themselves and their feelings. Converts remain between the two worlds, in a hybrid space, in particular during their daily practice. Oftentimes they face discrimination. Therefore, in order to access the Islamic world, they need a guide, a companion, or a Sheikh. Hermansen (1999) describes the converts as alienated, and the West as a site of alienation where only the act of travelling becomes a way to transcend what she calls the “cultural malaise” to find their own place in society. Conditions permitting, the Hajj represents the ultimate goal, the trip of a lifetime. It remains the most visible expression of a profession of belief.

Looking at these narratives from the perspective of “voice” and “space”, they represent a safe space where an exchange can take place among Muslims in Europe. Related to this frame, the theory of “diasporic consciousness” suggested by Gilroy (1997) defines those relationships of belonging that develop among communities and groups that experience social and cultural dislocation in their everyday life. In the case of German converts, this notion may be applied to describe the religious dislocation for people divided between Europe and Islam who find a way to share the common Hajj experience. Pilgrimages seem to be regarded by self-conscious pilgrims both as occasions on which community is experienced and as journey toward a sacred source of community, which is also seen as a source of healing and renewal that is associated with Mecca and the Saudi Arabian space.

Narratives of German Muslims help to create public images of what Anderson defines an “imagined community” by transforming the politics of representation of Muslims and
reducing the significance of geopolitical and spatial boundaries. The *Hajj* accounts become a space for cultural practice and identification, where the shared experiences of the *Hajj* do not establish any specific belonging, but function rather as a link among the transnational communities while maintaining ethnic cultural identities. This is where the transnational signifier, “Muslim,” binds all practitioners of Islam together.
CHAPTER III

REPRESENTATION OF CONTEMPORARY SAUDI ARABIA IN THE BLOGS OF GERMAN EXPATRIATES

Introduction

This chapter aims to analyze blog narratives by German expatriates living in Saudi Arabia. The research is based on a socio-constructive media discourse analysis and qualitative content analysis of a sample of blogs and texts that expatriates produced during their stay in Saudi Arabia. In this chapter I deal with three primary objectives. The first one is to explore how Saudi Arabia is represented in expatriate blogs and to trace their resonance and points of contact with the “traditional” travelogues of the 19th and 20th centuries. The second objective is to understand the discursive process through which German bloggers engage with the blogosphere to create an imagined community where the notions of “Germanness” and “Europeanness” are constructed within the space of Saudi Arabia. The third objective is to relate these blog narratives to the actual literary narratives and to look at the ways that the image of Saudi Arabia is produced for European consumption. Looking at the Internet from the perspective of “voice” and “space,” blogs create a discursive and rhetorical space where the politics of representation inevitably take place. Drawing on postcolonial and discursive perspectives, I argue that expatriate blogs produce a space for cultural representation, and they share similarities with the genre of
travel writing. German bloggers employ textual and visual strategies to articulate a coherent discourse about contemporary Saudi Arabia. In particular, online discourses inform our understanding of the historical continuity and the metamorphosis of German orientalism as well as its latest manifestation in the digital age. The blogosphere becomes a digital extension of the genre of travel writing, carrying with it, as I propose to show, all of the conventions of genre. I discuss how representations of Saudi Arabia in the blogosphere have provided a wider understanding of the contact between the German-speaking world and Saudi Arabia. German representations of contemporary Saudi Arabia have transformed the Saudi Arabian urban space into a transcultural configuration of practices and products, deciphered by German expatriates in the blogosphere, as previous travelers deciphered it in travel literature and in pilgrimage accounts. Both mediums claim immediacy and authenticity and become powerful vehicles for the production of a German imaginary of Saudi Arabia.

**The community of German expatriates**

When an organization or a company sends its employees on an international assignment, expatriates and their families are often faced with a different cultural environment and with the need to adapt to the changed circumstances. The term “expatriate” stems from the Latin expression “ex patria,” which can be translated as “away from home,” and refers to a person living abroad (Yeoh and Khoo 1998). Expatriates usually reside in a foreign country for one of the following reasons: work, research, leisure, or a preference to live in a country other than their own. An expatriate community

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101 For an analysis of the rhetorical conventions please see Chapter 1
represents an important network and support system for other expatriates and their families coming to a foreign country, as it provides support after the disruption of their old networks. Cohen (1977) describes the expatriate communities as “environmental bubbles” in countries like Saudi Arabia, that provide a shelter from the environment of the host country. In this environment, most expatriates tend to socialize more with people who come from similar cultural and social backgrounds. Access to the Internet allows expatriates to recreate social networks in the foreign country, reconnecting expatriates with each other, and their country of origin.

At present, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has 9.2 million expatriates on a population of 28,83 million people (2013), with around 42 percent employed in both the public and private sectors, according to a survey conducted by the International Al-Jazeera Academy in 2013 (www.arabnews.com/news/467423). The community of German-speaking expatriates in Saudi Arabia is relatively small, but despite its size, several institutions provide support to its members. For instance, there are two German schools, the German Saudi Arabian Liaison Offices in Riyadh and Jeddah, a Saudi German Hospitals Group and the Saudi German Business Group of Jeddah. Since most expatriates live in Jeddah, a Goethe Institut opened there in 2013. According to the websites of the foreign ministries (2013), there are also approximately 220 Austrians and 237 Swiss expatriates in Saudi Arabia (Federal Ministry for European and International Affairs 2008c, Swiss Federal Authority 2007). The German International School of Jeddah was founded in 1975, and currently enrolls 50 children. The school offers an official German curriculum from preparatory school to the 10th grade and a kindergarten, while English and Arabic classes begin in the preparatory school (Deutsche Schule Jeddah 2008). Besides the German
School, expatriates can choose between a number of international schools, such as The British International School of Jeddah, the American International School of Jeddah, the Al Waha International School, Jeddah International School, and the International British/Dutch School. Moreover, Jeddah has a number of universities and colleges, for example, the King Abdul Aziz University, the College of Business Administration and the Jeddah College of Technology. The Saudi German Business Group of Jeddah facilitates cultural exchanges between the local people and the expatriate community and regularly organizes meetings, workshops, social gatherings and cultural events (JISC 2004). The German expatriate community is quite small when compared to the larger American- and English-speaking expatriate community. However, even though the number of blogs created by German expatriates is limited, the information stored and shared in these expats’ blogs is abundant and informative. They are meant to provide a useful web resource for future travelers or expatriates to Saudi Arabia to prepare for their future journeys by reading the accounts from previous sojourners.

The Blogosphere

Research about blogging has blossomed in recent years. Because of its peculiarities as a social network, the blogosphere has become ideal for research in the field of immigrant communities, and as this dissertation shows, in the field of expatriates. First of all, communication carried on in the blogs is usually archived, and the flow of ideas and representations may be reconstructed. Moreover, the blogger typically provides links to other blogs to explicitly designate the social networks he/she intends to be part of. These links come mainly in two forms: a blogroll, which is a list of links provided at the side of the page to inform readers of useful and relevant work, and a list of links to other similar
blogs. Depending on the popularity of the blog, the information may or may not reach a larger audience. The growth of the blogosphere has shown that an increasing number of readers prefer blogs to mainstream news for several reasons. First of all a good blogger may summarize news for the reader, so that it is not necessary to access dozens of news sites. In this way, the reader has the impression of receiving first-hand news. Moreover, readers’ comments become a useful tool for feedback (Tremayne 3-20). Blogs often function as online diaries kept for a variety of purposes. The informal way of writing makes blogs a very particular form of communication.

Virtual communities (Howard Rheingold, 2000) create an invisible bond, bringing people together by creating the unique space of the Saudi Arabia blogs. A study of expat blogs highlights the way certain imageries of Saudi Arabia have emerged from the discursive activities of the expats community in Saudi Arabia, but also it highlights how certain images have perpetuated from the previous literature. The research focus here is on the discourses involved in this process of constructing Saudi Arabia, and not on the authenticity or the validity of the stories in the Saudi Arabia blogs. The personal blogs of German expatriates constitute a unique digital, transnational, and discursive space in which a German representation of the Saudi Arabian “cultural Otherness” takes place.

In particular, according to Sreberny (179-196), blogs function as a link among the transnational communities while they maintain ethnic cultural identities. At the same time, blogs create connections between their countries of origin and new homes. The condition of the expatriates can be associated with those who live in the diaspora. In particular, the notion of diasporic consciousness suggested by Gilroy and Gillespie (166-169) defines those relationships of belonging that develop among communities and groups.
experiencing social and cultural dislocations in their daily lives. In this process, media undertake a primary role by intensifying globalization within the emerging diasporic transnational networks (Tsagarousianou 158-159). While media and cultural consumption play a key role in reconstructing ethnic identities, blogs also produce images of the new host country in which the expatriates are living, and contribute to the formation of a collective experience. Media help to create public images of what Anderson defines as an “imagined community” that is meant to reduce the significance of geopolitical and spatial boundaries. The web becomes a third space for cultural practice and identification where shared and common experiences show the multiplicity of ties that are produced and maintained by immigrant communities (Leung 49).

The blogosphere becomes a space created by, and shared among, the expatriates who have crossed into Saudi Arabian national and cultural spaces for career reasons. With a focus on Saudi Arabia-related issues, those weblogs provide meaningful social and cultural spaces, in which German expatriates share with the world and with their communities their views and observations of Saudi Arabia in the 21st century.

An investigation of the representation of contemporary Saudi Arabia in the discursive space of these blogs is informed by several factors that play equally important roles in shaping the German expatriates’ interpretations and portrayals of Saudi Arabia. The blogs often reveal what may be considered traditional European views and perceptions of Saudi Arabia, that is, views that first circulated as we saw through the travelogues and through the accounts of first European encounters with Saudi Arabia in the past centuries. Understanding all these forces and the interplay among them is vital to finding answers to the following research questions.
• What aspects of contemporary Saudi Arabia are highlighted in the blogs of German expatriates?
• What tropes used to portray Saudi Arabia in previous travelogues of German sojourners, have been recycled or transformed in the digital discourse under investigation?
• How do travel accounts become templates for the blogosphere?
• How do these blogs differ from the literary accounts? And what role does the “immediacy” of these accounts play in terms of truth, value and authenticity?

Through these questions, I wish to explore the processes through which German expatriates use blogs as a new platform to share their observations of and experiences with Saudi Arabian people and society with the German and the transnational communities living overseas. With this framework in mind, I start by recognizing the expat blogs produce a unique technological and discursive space of cultural representation. Then I go on to argue that not only do these blogs constitute a space where representation takes place, but they also attempt to create dialogic zones of cultural encounter because of the peculiar interactive nature of blogging technologies. In addition to that, I point out the similarities between the Saudi Arabian blogs and conventional German travel writing in terms of writing tropes and subject matter. This shows how the expat blogs benefit from and are somehow influenced by the genre of travel writing. According to Duncan and Gregory (1999), there are “continuities between a colonial past and a supposedly post-colonial present.” This theoretical framework allows for a look at the discursive processes through which certain images of contemporary Saudi Arabia are constructed in the blogs of German expatriates. In these blogs I trace this continuity that connects the blogs with the
travel literature of the 19th and 20th centuries. For this purpose, I compare recurring tropes and representational strategies employed in the accounts of the 19th and 20th century travelers that I have analyzed in the first chapter with the content of the blogosphere.

The selected blogs are analyzed with special attention to the processes through which discourses about today’s Saudi Arabia are accessed to produce a representation of a national space for foreign consumption which is not restricted only to a German-speaking audience but it connects transnationally with the larger expatriate community also because most of the blogs are written in English and not only in German.

It is impossible to estimate the number of expat blogs. In fact, it is likely that some of these German expatriates blogs will never be known: oftentimes the nationality of the author is not provided, and the blogs are written in English in order to be internationally accessible. The digital portal, http://www.expat-blog.com, was launched with the purpose of being “held by expatriates for expatriates.” This is the source I used to find most of the blogs discussed in this chapter.

Also, some of the blogs analyzed for the purpose of this research have been discovered through links provided by blogs found through the http://www.expat-blog.com portal. One of these blogs, www.cratoo.de, has been crucial in limiting the number of blogs analyzed, and understanding which blogs are most popular within the expatriate community.

The cratoo.de blog, maintained by Andreas Heinz, a German expatriate living in Riyadh, mentions several other blogs, and represents a point of departure for my research. For the purpose of this study, I have selected the blogs that in terms of content, readership and length, are appropriate for the purpose of a more detailed textual analysis. Besides
Andreas Heinz’s blog, other blogs that have been included in my analysis are blogs by Jochen Schalanda, “Ramblings, Rants and Rabid Speculations” (blog.schalanda.name); the blog “Der Arabien-Faktor” by an anonymous German IT consultant (der-arabien-faktor.blogspot.com); the blog by Karin Beringer “Saudi-Arabien: Wüste und Wolkenkratzer” who has lived in Saudi Arabia since 2008 and describes her life in Saudi Arabia from the perspective of a woman who has followed her husband to a foreign country (blog.brigitte.de/saudiarabien); the blog by Eva titled “Eva goes Riad” (evagoesriad.blogspot.com); and the blog by Kim titled “Kim in Riad Weblog: Abenteur in Saudi Arabien” (kiminriad.wordpress.com).

In the blog “Kim in Riad Weblog: Abenteur in Saudi Arabien,” the blogger, who writes between April 2008 and October 2008, provides information related to the bureaucratic steps he was required to take as soon as he arrived in Saudi Arabia to work on a project that remains unspecified throughout the blog. His “adventure” with bureaucracy aims to provide empirical information to future expats who will be establishing themselves in Saudi Arabia. He offers some general information, such as describing the steps toward attaining a driver’s license, a visa, and a work contract. He also includes his own experience during the month of Ramadan. Because of the many details provided, he receives positive feedback from his readers. For example, one reader from Munich whose name is Enrico, writes in a comment that he is happy to have finally found real insider information:

(...) deine Berichte haben mir schon mal viel von meinen Ängsten genommen […] leider konnte oder wollte mir niemand so recht sagen wie das Leben dort in den Compounds wirklich
so ist. Auf deine Fotos habe ich schon mal gesehen, daß man
nicht wirklich auf den Anblick von Frauen verzichten muss und
auch dass man Spass nicht ganz verbannt hat in diesem Land
(11 October 2008). 102

Enrico, in this case, is a clear example of a future expatriate to Saudi Arabia who is looking for real and concrete information about the country. His comment shows that his expectations have become clear; he fears a restricted lifestyle during his future stay in Saudi Arabia and in particular he fears having to experience loneliness due to gender separation that he might have heard of. Still, the author of the blog writes on his first post that he does not take any responsibility for the content and its authenticity “Keine Übernahme von Garantien auf Richtigkeit und Wahrheitsgehalt” 103 (April 2008). These bloggers perform the role of informants and experts on the Saudi space.

The demographic of the German bloggers is not particularly diverse. In fact, most bloggers are engineers, IT specialists, teachers or architects. Blogs written by German-speaking expatriates differ from one another in terms of topical focus, tone, and medium or format. Some of these blogs focus on one or two aspects of Saudi Arabia that the bloggers find particularly interesting. These aspects deal mostly with the experiences that a non-Muslim foreigner might have within the country, such as restrictions in terms of alcohol consumption, gender segregation, and Islam. These blogs are more like personal diaries in which the blogger describes his/her daily life.

102 Your reports have removed a lot of my fears [...] Unfortunately, no one wanted or could tell me what living there in the compounds is really like. From your photos I have already seen that one does not really need to avoid the sight of women and that fun is not completely banned in this country.
103 I am not making any guarantee regarding the accuracy and truthfulness.
Most of the expats strive to show the different sides of Saudi Arabia and their work experiences. Blogs come also in different formats. Some of the expatriate bloggers believe that a good picture is worth a thousands words. Therefore, photos become key elements and take the center stage of their blogs, with textual entries being kept to a minimum, such as in the blog by Jochen Schalanda written from 2005 to 2011. He works as an Information Technology consultant in Riyadh and his posts are extremely short, almost as short as tweets (140 characters), but they are accompanied by a number of pictures of the desert, the dust and dust storms. In my analysis of the blogs, I will not include the pictures posted by the bloggers since these pictures depict mostly sand and desert, without any reference to urbanity. This may be understood since in Saudi Arabia it is forbidden to take pictures of people and most of the bloggers engage during the weekends in desert safaris, or find a fascination with the desert. These pictures introduce the topic of travel photography that in these latest narratives becomes crucial. While photography was partly present in the pilgrimage narratives as in the case of the previously discussed pictures of the Bedouins Zayd and Mansour, in the expatriate blogs, oftentimes pictures of landscapes are included without any particular commentary. According to Mirzoeff, the visual offers immediacy that cannot be accomplished by print media (Mirzoeff, 8–9) and these pictures represent the simplicity of the observations of these expatriates.

The space of Saudi Arabia has been conveyed through texts, and later accompanied by or often substituted with images, in particular drawings and sketches included in travel literature of the 18th and 19th century, and later photography in the 20th and 21st centuries literature and blogs. In the case of geographical representation, the visual played a role in the construction of an imaginary world by fulfilling the European urge to travel and to find
whatever was imagined to have been lost (Deleuze, 1988). Walter Benjamin regarded photography as a way to extend the sphere of the market economy in limitless quantities, by using figures and landscaped events that had previously been utilized (Benjamin 1973). By the middle of the 19th century, photography became a standardized mechanism to fix sites and viewpoints, guide tourists and establish visual lexicons and grammars for particular sites and objectified memory. Images were purchased by those who were not able to leave their own country (Poole quoted in Van Haaften 1980). Through photography, the visual experience of places such as the Middle East, became a ready set of meanings. Travel photography provides a look into an impenetrable otherness that seems to reduce the distance between Europe and the Middle East (Mac Cannell 1976). It offers a model for interpreting and viewing the Middle East for the ones who cannot travel.

In his blog, Shalanda posts several pictures of the desert, and his commentaries about his daily life are mostly brief and weather-related, such as, “it’s dusty, 30C” (26 February

104 In the 16th century, Europe witnessed an explosion of the interest in geography involving a multiplication of images such as maps, topographical features and the countless images in which Europeans dreamed about the strangeness of distant regions and their peoples (Alpers 1989:14, Wittkower 1987). European artists reproduced maps and visual representation. Traveling belonged to the general project of European expansion.

105 For visitors of the 1850s and beyond places such as Egypt embodied Europe's colonizing impulses. Europeans transformed the otherness of the Middle East into picture and text (Greenblatt 1991:15–25), and places such as Egypt and other exotic places became places to be reduced by popular image to little more than the archaeology and mystique (Campbell 1987).

106 Places in the Middle East such as Jerusalem and Mecca were already established as sacred sites in the tradition before modern tourism and photography appeared. The journey to the Middle East and to the Holy sites became the occasion to generate a tangible product, photography, which was attractive for religious travelers and for those remaining in their home countries. Images were also used by colonial governments and functioned as tools of control over the public (1988 Perez). For instance, most early European photographers in India were British Army officers or individuals working for the East India company or the British colonial administration. Photographers fulfilled the desires of authorities to master space and was connected to the establishment of road, rail, and telegraphic networks (Dewan 1992). Photography was organized according to the same template of mapping, a mapping which helped establish the range of locations and experiences important to British visitors. Travel photography aimed to educate viewers and future visitors about how to see India. At the same time, it produced for them the India to see (Dewan, 1992: 40–42). Those Europeans who purchased photography received not neutral images of the country, but produced representations containing European attitudes towards the Middle East (Dewan, 1992: 44).
Schalanda also posts links to other blogs, such as the blog “Der Arabien Faktor,” which I will analyze later. The other posts in the Schalanda’s blog are mostly links to news items, such as “Why Men Get Fat in Saudi” (20 June 2010), or “Vanity fair, A Girls’ Guide to Saudi Arabia.” The only post that somehow refers more to his personal experience is the one about a technological fair he attends. In this post, “Messebegegnungen” (encounters at fairs), he mentions a Saudi asking him whether he likes Hitler or not, since he is German. The Schalanda blog pokes fun at the idea that “echte Deutsche finden Hitler toll, zumindest wenn es nach einigen Saudis geht”107 (29 April 2010). This post shows a reverse stereotyping that does not concern the foreign culture the expatriates are visiting, but it concerns the way Germans may be viewed abroad. It reveals the need for self-reinvention that is predominant in their narratives.

Many blogs resemble travelogues, proposing the same topics and the same rhetorical strategies and similar literary images as in the writings by Carsten Niebuhr, Heinrich von Maltzan, or Karl May, through a contemporary perspective. This is the case of blog posts by Karin Beringer (blog.brigitte.de/saudiarabien) and Eva (evagoesriad.blogspot.com) who describe the places they visit in Saudi Arabia as well as the places they visit in the Middle East while on vacation. Readers’ expectations are also animated by the previous literature, and sometimes they even mention it to the blogger, such as in the case of Behringer, where a female reader suggests that Behringer read an earlier travelogue, “ich lese zur Zeit Die Orientalin von Friedrich Burchkardt aus der Reihe Frauen fremder Völker von 1958! Sehr zu empfehlen. Ich hatte mich schon gefragt, wie es wohl heute sein mag, ob es einen Fortschritt gibt zu dem Beschriebenen, Ihr Bericht hat meine Frage schon beantwortet.” (1 December

107 “Real Germans” find Hitler nice, at least according to Saudis.
These commentaries show how readers are surprised that changes in the country might be possible.

Representation and Othering

In her book, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, Mary Louise Pratt (1992) defines the “contact zone” as “social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and intertwine with each other.” However, while blogs usually represent a social and digital space of cultural representation and a contact zone, in the case of Saudi Arabia they do not represent a contact zone where cultures encounter each other and clash. In fact, I argue that in the case of the expatriate blogs, there is no real contact zone with Saudi Arabian society. The contact zone takes place almost exclusively among those who belong to the same expatriate community or with their families and friends in Europe. The clash with Saudi Arabia if present is only communicated with other expatriates or with families living in the home countries.

My approach to the selected blogs is influenced by these assumptions about discourse, and I argue that these expatriate blogs are unique lenses through which online readers obtain glimpses of what contemporary Saudi Arabia is believed to be in the European imagination, but at the same time perpetuate the old cliché about the Middle East and its people. These blogs become a discursive body of cultural representation that cannot be isolated from the main discourse of the community that produces them. For instance, cross-referencing is a quite common practice within this community of bloggers, meant to establish a community supporting common ideas related to the “other culture.”

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108 I am currently reading *The Oriental* by Friedrich Burckhardt from the series Women of foreign nations from 1958! It needs to be recommended. I was wondering how it may be today, if there is an improvement to the one described, but your report has already answered my question."
Although the blogs aim to portray Saudi Arabia in a “truthful” fashion, their versions of Saudi Arabia are fragmented snapshots and impressions of the country. The bloggers, much like the early travelers, remain trapped in a world of biased perceptions and stories despite their desire to be truthful and accurate. Their use of photography, portrays desert and dunes or themselves during a camel ride, but also the short posts describes daily activities and the newspaper articles they post recycle common knowledge.

The expat blogs present an interesting case to look at the discourse of racial and cultural othering. Oftentimes, they try to show acceptance of the local customs, as in the case of the blogger Behringer, who mentions several times about how practical Islamic cover for women can be once they get used to it.

On the one hand, German expatriates use the blogosphere as a public forum to promote intercultural understanding and respect. On the other hand, they reinforce old stereotypes and prejudices. The blog, “Der Arabien Faktor,” the Arabian Factor, is a clear example of this division. The author, whose name remains unknown, and who began publishing in 2009, offers a number of posts all starting with “Zeichen der Zeit” (sign of the time), where he/she posts links to news articles dealing with topics that aim to provide an image of Saudi Arabia with a strict division of genders. For example the post “Einfluss von Satellitenfernsehen und Internet“109 (25 April 2011) deals with the Saudi perspective on homosexuality. In “Saudische Frauen erschließen neue Märkte“110 (16 October 2010) the blogger describes the paradoxes of gender separation when it comes to going to the mall and comments on Saudi Arabian laws that forbid women to go to the mall with

109 Influence of Satellite TV and Internet
110 Saudi women open up to new markets
unrelated men, and make it difficult for groups of men to go to a mall alone, so that many Saudi women accept money in exchange for testifying that they are related to them so that they can all go to the mall over the weekend. Other posts, like “Saudis, heiratet Saudis”111 (19 July 2010), are about the unwritten rule that it is forbidden for Saudis to marry foreigners. Another post informs about the morality police that stop parties from taking place, “Party in Saudi-Arabien, keine gute Idee”112 (23 June 2010). All these themes recur in the blogs and in the travel literature about Saudi Arabia, as well as in the news. Expatriates do not miss any opportunity to write about these themes that set them apart from Saudi Arabian culture. The experience of living in Saudi Arabia is described as so culturally different and challenging that it compels expats to write “Da muss man einfach drüben schreiben” (Der Arabien Faktor, 2011)113. There is a sense of ambivalence in these posts since their authors on the one hand, feel that their writing will be different from the accounts of previous travelers but on the other hand they capitalize on the uniqueness of first hand experience. Despite this ambivalence, they feel compelled to document their experiences and impart the knowledge that they have acquired “on the ground” in Saudi Arabia.

In these blogs, many personal details are left out, and no personal information about the author such as background or profession is available. Similar to their 19th century precursors, the main motivation for contemporary bloggers becomes informing fellow future travelers or those who could not travel about Saudi Arabia and the foreign spaces they encounter. The contemporary expatriates are concerned more with detailing the

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111 Saudis, marry other Saudis
112 Party in Saudi Arabia, not a good idea
113 One has to write about it.
bureaucratic procedures and providing general information than with introspective explorations or with spirituality. In these accounts, Saudi Arabia is seen within the parameters of a Self-Other binary construct that has historically influenced the formation of “European” view of the world and subjectivity. What makes these binaries even more poignant is the distance from which Saudi Arabia is narrated and the omission of any attempt to assimilate to the host country but to rather remain enclosed in the life of the compounds.

In the introduction to The language and politics of exclusion: Others in discourse, Stephan Harold Riggins (1997) argues that even though the politics of multiculturalism have led to a general decline of prejudice in today’s societies, this has not led to a complete eradication of ethnocentrism and cultural intolerance. The Other, in this case the Saudi Arabian society, is constructed discursively in a representation that emphasizes differences, not necessarily negative but presented as fearful or strangely exotic and attractive. As a result, stereotypes are created as fixed categories where the lexical choices distinguish “us” from “them.” These lexical choices of the dichotomy between us and them are clear in Karin Behringer’s blog, “Saudi Arabien: Wüste und Wolkenkratzer,” (Saudi Arabia, Desert and Skyscrapers), where already the title exemplifies how Saudi Arabia is split into two scenarios, the desert, i.e. nature and skyscrapers—one “authentically” Arabian and the other the product of western modernity.

In the blog, Behringer defines Saudi Arabia as a society defined by strict traditions and by modernity, reminiscent of the dichotomy previous authors remarked. Also, her book, published after her blog Aufbruch in ein unbekanntes Land, produces exactly the same images used in previous travel literature. Words such as “Aufbruch” (departure, break up)
reinforce the binary opposition between “us” and “them” previously mentioned in that she strikes out into an unknown that evokes both mystery and anxiety. While the title of her blog refers to the desert landscape and does not include any cultural assumption or judgement, as it is in the case of the other blogs where only pictures of the desert and sand are posted, as soon as the blog becomes a book, the title as well embodies the cultural dichotomy the author observes. The title of Behringer’s book is similar to the titles of those publications like *Ibn Saud - König zwischen Tradition und Fortschritt*¹¹⁴ (1999), *Taif: Entwicklung, Struktur und traditionelle Architektur einer arabischen Stadt im Umbruch*¹¹⁵ (1993), *Neuzeit und Tradition: das Beispiel Saudi-Arabien*¹¹⁶ (1992) that were discussed in the previous analysis chapters and that belong to the third phase of the representation of Saudi Arabia. In the third phase, western influence and modernity are portrayed in a positive way. Elements such as traditional Saudi clothing and the traditional architecture are often referred to as “pre-modern.” Even though her blog was less explicit in her intentions to criticize the Saudi Arabian government and the local traditions, a number of blog posts foreshadow what later appears in book form. In her polemic blog post, “Zurück ins Mittelalter,” she contends that because of the country’s modern edifices she at times forgets that Saudi Arabia is dominated by rules and laws that she views as belonging to the Middle Ages, a temporal reference that is unique to European history: “Manchmal vergesse ich, dass Saudi Arabien eine absolute Monarchie ist. Manchmal vergesse ich, dass es darüber hinaus ein streng religiöses Land ist, dessen grundlegendes Gesetz der Koran ist.

Manchmal vergesse ich, dass es hier Strafen gibt, die uns sehr mittelalterlich

¹¹⁴ *Ibn Saud - King between tradition and progress.*
¹¹⁵ *Taif: development, structure and traditional architecture in an Arabic city in transformation.*
¹¹⁶ *Modernity and Tradition: the example of Saudi Arabia.*
erscheinen.”

For the most part, she considers Saudi Arabia a “modern” country because of its infrastructure and cityscapes and compares it to Dubai, which has become an icon of Middle Eastern “modernity.” Behringer’s repetitive use of terms like “strict,” “religious” and tradition reinforces her perception of Saudi Arabia as an archaic space despite its “progress.” She recognizes that Saudi Arabia can be considered a modern country, only for what appears on the surface, i.e. the new architecture and the fast food chains that have slowly replaced traditional foods. Behringer also recognizes Saudi Arabia as a wealthy, modern country with “breathtaking” architecture that at times blind her to the traditions that govern the social space.

Behringer states that this idea of modernity on the surface is a “Trugbild,” both a delusion or illusion that sometimes lets the visitor forget about the political reality that constitute and control the country. In her book, she relates an unpleasant experience on her

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117 Sometimes I forget that Saudi Arabia is an absolut monarchy. Sometimes I forget that it is first of all a strict religious country, whose main law is the Qur’an. Sometimes I forget that here there are laws that seem to us medieval.

118 On the surface it looks like Saudi Arabia developed into a hyper-modern state. As in Dubai, there are the incredible breathtaking building projects. There are rapid developments in the technical area and the new media are everywhere. Shopping malls, advertising of Western brands and designer products dominate and one might think one lives here almost in a western country.
way to downtown Riyadh. While going shopping, she sees a huge crowd of civilians, police and military. Many stores are closed even though it is not the prayer time. It is impossible to ask anybody about the reason for the turmoil because, as she writes, it is better not to attract any attention. Once she returns to her compound, she asks about the crowd and recalls that a few days before, a group of young people were protesting the government during the Saudi national holiday and now those same young people were being whipped in public. ¹¹⁹

Based on this experience, the author concludes her account by saying that Saudi Arabia is still very far from being a modern country: “Es ist wohl doch noch ein weiter Weg zu einem modernen Staat.”¹²⁰ Inferred here is that Europe, or more specifically Germany, serves as the model of what she considers „modern.“ The institution of the death penalty in the country, as well as the constant presence of the religious police, the Mutawa - which continuously stops women and men to see whether they are complying with the country’s dresscode or whether men and women are separated- provides evidence for Behringer that Saudi Arabia’s modernity is only a veneer. Behringer notes that as a European she is fairly free to lead an unconstrained lifestyle except for wearing the Abaya (head covering) and being prohibited from driving a car. With pressure by the religious police to follow Islamic law, Behringer describes its increased enforcement for women in public places:

Es handelte sich tatsächlich um die Jugendlichen, die zuvor festgenommen worden waren. Sie wurden gestern Abend dort an der Corniche mit Peitschenhieben öffentlich bestraft. (1 December 2009)

¹²⁰ There is still a long path until it becomes a modern State.

Behringer’s accounts elicit empathy in readers who remark on how difficult it must be for her to abide by such laws that restrict women. Ushi responds: “puh, das stelle ich mir sehr schwer vor, dort ein alltäglich normales Leben führen zu können. Mutig es dennoch zu tun. Ja und das in unserer “freien Welt.”¹²² (1 December 2009) This brief response intimates the contrast between Saudi Arabia and Europe and reinforces the binary of self and other. Behringer’s portrayal of Saudi Arabia belongs to what I categorize as the third phase in the representation of Saudi Arabia, in which the traditional image has been substituted by a contemporary and modern one that still partly holds onto traditions rooted in Islam.

The themes and rhetorical strategies of Behringer’s blog resurface in her book with a heightened portion of what could be called cultural judgement. As the title Aufbruch in ein unbekanntes Land suggests, the book promises a “journey to an unknown country,” thereby mystifying Saudi Arabian as an orientalized space. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, which only

¹²¹ The new rules for proper behavior in the mall are now the following: no colorful, eye-catching abayas; the head must be covered with a scarf; women should not wear perfume; laughter is prohibited. In the restaurants and cafes women should sit in the sections that are separated by curtains or screens that hide them from the rest of the room.
¹²² Well, it seems really difficult to lead a normal daily life over there. One must be brave to do it. Yes and this in our “free” world.
recently opened it doors to western tourism, is characterized simultaneously by its desert inhabitants whose lives represent “tradition” and by modern lifestyles in a globalized world, in which oil has been a source of sudden wealth. Behringer’s intention is to produce unusual and entertaining stories of her stay in Saudi Arabia, and specifically of her experience in Al Khobar, where she lived because of her husband’s job. At the same time, she sought to narrate the experiences of a German family in a country that is both traditional and hypermodern. When Behringer recounts in her book her experience upon arrival, she engages the reader directly in the same way she does in her blog. For instance she starts her book like one of her posts by addressing the readers directly and playing on the common ideas about Saudi Arabia: “Woran denken Sie bei Saudi Arabien zuerst? Wüste, Kamele, billiges Öl, super reiche Scheichs und der Zauber von 1001 Nacht?” In fact, Aufbruch in ein unbekanntes Land has been published after her blog. Its publication has been discussed almost as a betrayal to readers who followed the blog. For some readers whose expectations had been disappointed, the blog she kept even lost its appeal since the book compromised the sense of immediacy and sincerity associated with blogging. Instead, Behringer was accused of using the blog as a means to advertise her upcoming book.

Behringer begins her book by asking her readers what comes to mind when they think about Saudi Arabia. She is conscious of the preconceived repertoire of images that she and her readers associate with Saudi Arabia. Therefore, she begins by acknowledging the Western misconception of associating Saudi Arabia only with Dubai.

123 At what do you think at first when thinking about Saudi Arabia? Desert, camels, cheap gas, super rich sheiks and the magic of the 1001 nights?

Acknowledging this image as constituting the compendium of knowledge on Saudi Arabia that has defined the German imagination of this space, Behringer hopes to expand on and even to replace this corpus of images.

In contrast to the blog, she expects the book to provide a more in-depth look at the inner working of every-day Saudi Arabia and subsequently a more informed representation of the country. Much different than for her blogs, she resorts for her book to sources such as the travel guides Dumont Richtig Arabische Halbinsel, (Gerhard and Manfred Wöbke); or Culture smart! Saudi Arabia, (Nicholas Buchele, Kuperad) for accuracy. A striking difference between the book and the blog is the fact that her opinions and views seem to be less spontaneous or less categorical than in the blog, as if she had time to revise and reflect on her impressions in light of her experiences.

Retrospectively, her representation of life in the compound of expats comes across as more relaxed and possibly very easy (15). Behringer explains that the compounds were

¹²⁴ What do you think of Saudi Arabia first? Desert, camels, cheap oil, super-rich sheikhs and the magic of 1001 Nights? These were the things that first came to my mind when I learned that we were moving to Saudi Arabia. I did not know more about this country. Some of my friends were just so uninformed that they exclaimed enthusiastically: “Oh great!” Because some of my friends were thinking about Dubai (7).
created at first to limit western influence on the Saudi population, but later they actually became a way to keep the Islamic influences outside (17). Behringer writes that it is easier to make friends with local expatriate women because the majority of them do not work, so there is more time to socialize, (19) but she also criticizes the life of the “trailing spouse,” who lives in the shadow of her working husband. (66)

In Aufbruch in ein unbekanntes Land, Behringer attempts to counter the common stereotypes about Saudi Arabia and about Muslim countries in general. She deals extensively with the topic of the hijab or head covering. According to Behringer the hijab represents more than the idea of modesty widespread by the media.

Für uns ist der Schleier gleichbedeutend mit Rückständigkeit, Unfreiheit, Unterdrückung. Ich will gar nichts schön reden, und es stimmt natürlich, dass die saudische Frau durch Religion und noch mehr durch Tradition, von engen Grenzen umgeben ist, die ihr öffentliches Auftreten bestimmen (35).

In addition to her recognition of the role that religion and tradition play in the daily lifes of Saudi women, Behringer draws attention to the economic power of women and their ability to manage their own patrimony (41). She starts connecting with local women and is drawn into their community. In particular the feeling of being called “sister” by the Saudi Arabian women is very special to her since it suggests a sense of acceptance and

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125 Sie wurden ursprünglich erstellt, um den westlichen Einfluss auf die saudische Bevölkerung einzugenzen. Inzwischen dienen sie aber eher dazu, den muslimischen Einfluss draußen zu halten (17).
126 For us, the veil is synonymous with backwardness, lack of freedom and oppression. I don’t want to speak nice about it, and it is true that the Saudi woman is even more surrounded by religion through tradition, by narrow limits which determine their public appearance.
belonging. In contrast to the veil that makes these women so distant, the experience of being called sister brings closeness (58). This is especially meaningful since living in the compound at times separates expats from the Saudi nationals as do other practices like Ramadan and ist fasting rules (61). In fact, it is forbidden for non Muslims to eat or drink in public during the holy month of Ramadan, and so Behringer is grateful that the compound offers expats the opportunity to continue living their western life within its walls.

While Behringer intends to present a more nuanced representation of Saudi life, she is not reticent in her critique of traditional ways of life. She expresses suspicion of the “modern young Saudis” participation in modernization, which the author sees expressed only in certain descriptions of their daily life, such as the drinking of a cappuccino or a café latte or Mocca and the loss of certain cultural knowledges and practices.

In den Städten wird das Wissen um dieses alte Naturmittel zunehmend von westlichen Produkten verdrängt. Die jungen modernen Saudis halten sich im Winter lieber mit Cappucino, Café Latte oder Mocca warm und wach. Kamelmilch gilt als veraltet und wird häufig wegen des Geschmacks abgelehnt.127

In the conclusion of her book she acknowledges that there would be so many other things to report on Saudi Arabia which she describes as a country vastly different than her own:

127 In the cities, the knowledge of ancient natural resources is increasingly replaced by Western products. Young modern Saudis prefer to stay warm and awake with cappuccino and café latte or mocha. They consider camel milk obsolete, and often reject it because of its taste.
Es gäbe noch eine Menge zu berichten, aus diesem unglaublich großen, heissen und so ganz anderen Land. [...] Neben all den schönen, erstaunlichen, absonderlichen und auch manchmal unangenehmen Erfahrungen bleibt auf jeden Fall festzuhalten, dass unser Leben in Saudi Arabien mit den vielen äusseren Einschränkungen uns ein sehr intensives Familienleben beschert hat, dass wir in dieser Form in unserem deutschen Alltag sicherlich nicht gehabt hätten. Für dieses kleine Büchlein sei es aber erst mal genug. Manches lässt sich gar nicht in schriftlicher Form ausdrücken, anderes klingt zu banal oder zu unglaublich, so dass ich es hier nicht aufschreiben möchte.128 (78)

Behringer makes sure that the reader is aware that her book is a subjective rendering of her experience and leaves open the possibilities for further narration and leaves up to the imagination of what the “banal” or “unglaublich” might be. Her personal account differs in part from the previous expatriates or travelers who claimed to provide objective accounts about the country and its culture as if they were “teaching” the reader about it.

The descriptions contained in this book, Behringer writes, are the result of her everyday life in Saudi Arabia. Her writing reflects her subjective view, which is sometimes based in fact but often also describes some of her adventures and experiences. In any case,

128 “Besides all the beautiful, amazing, strange and sometimes unpleasant experiences, it definitely should be noted that our lives in Saudi Arabia with its many external restrictions- gave us a very intense family life, which we use in our everyday life in Germany certainly not had in this form have. However this little book is not enough. A lot cannot be expressed in writing, other sounds too banal or too unbelievable so I do not want to write it down here” (78).
she claims that she does not want to represent or criticize Islam, the Saudi people or the Arab community in a disrespectful way\(^{129}\) (80). Behringer is aware of the possibility that any depiction of the Arab community and Islam might be considered a provocation and trigger Islamic reactions and she is obviously protecting herself from any possible misunderstanding.

**Blogs as Travel Narratives**

The analysis of the blogs and in particular the comparison between Behringer’s blog and her book by Behringer show that the accounts of German expatriates in Saudi Arabia are comparable to those of early travelers because even though they spend time in Saudi Arabia, they still “travel” to what they believe to be the “real” Saudi Arabia, mostly during the weekends, from the enclosed compounds, in which they live. Expatriates remain in their compounds most of the time attending activities and events designed almost exclusively for foreigners. Still once they exit their compounds, they go almost exclusively to the malls or on tours organized by the companies for which they work. They rarely interact with Saudi families. In addition to the common need of communicating with home, and sharing experiences with friends and relatives, there is a clear goal, sometimes specifically stated, to reveal the “essence” of the country. Of course, Saudi Arabia has been described numerous times in previous literature, but the assumption is that those who live a period of time in that country, are more credible than those who are perceived just passing through.

\(^{129}\) Die in diesem Buch enthaltenen Schilderungen sind entstanden aus unserem Alltag in Saudi Arabien. Sie spiegeln meine subjective Sichtweise, die manchmal sachlich oft aber auch mit einem Augenzwinkern unsere Erlebnisse und Erfahrungen wiedergibt. Auf keinen Fall will ich mit meinen Äußerungen des Islam, das saudische Volk oder die arabische Gemeinschaft respektlos darstellen oder kritisieren.
As can be seen, these descriptions do not really differentiate from the travelogues of the previous centuries and descriptions as well as judgements remain those of an outsider. This establishes the connection between Saudi Arabian expats blogs and what we generally know as the genre of travel writing. However there are differences between the two genres that can be noticed on at least two levels. First, the majority of writing in the blogs is much less literary or polished than in travel writing, which at times borders on fiction, and there is a component of interaction between the writer and the readers. Second, travel writing is often for purposes of publication and the component of interaction between the author and its readers is missing. Blogs about Saudi Arabia by Europeans are written with the purpose of gaining profit. That is why Karin Behringer’s transformation of her blog into a book elicited a discomfort among her readers. The readers felt that years of blogging had been an excuse for advertising the forthcoming book. The short account of the expatriate experience is in fact not different at all from the blog.

The expat blogs can be regarded as a set of informal travelogues about Saudi Arabia with individual writings devoted to aspects of local culture and life. Despite the minor differences, the affinity between the Saudi Arabia blogs and travel writing is striking. The desires and the motivations that drive Germans to write about Saudi Arabia are not different from the same curiosity towards other cultures that were described by travel writers of the past. In that sense, the expatriate blogs represent contemporary digital and online versions of past travelogues, and as in the past, their authors believe they are providing useful and unique information about the country they are visiting. In addition to that, their unique expatriate condition makes them look like experts because they are not just travelers or tourists passing through, even though these expatriates rarely come into
contact with the Saudi population and they live confined in their compound where only foreigners live.

The comparative analysis of the German-speaking travel literature discussed in the first chapter of this dissertation and the online discourse analysis about contemporary Saudi Arabia produced by German expatriates allow us to identify major themes and rhetorical conventions in both travel literature and blogosphere and to trace the historical continuity between the travel narratives of the past and the contemporary online anecdotes about Saudi Arabia. The blogosphere continues the narrative tradition of the third phase in the representation of Saudi Arabia, which defined the 1980s and 1990s where a belief in modernization becomes clear and contemporary Saudi Arabia is seen as “modern” because it is starting to align with the “modern” West. The travel literature of the 18th and 19th century played an important role in shaping the experience of the Saudi peninsula in the West for future travelers. It served as a template that German bloggers used to construct their own narratives about contemporary Saudi Arabia. Not only do the bloggers inherit the same vantage point from which to observe Saudi Arabia from their predecessors, they also incorporate many of the rhetorical and discursive strategies from the previous Western accounts of the country and its culture. Both travel writers and bloggers locate their work withing the social and historical context in which they live but they also share similar strategies of “othering” and projecting their cultural identity onto the space they visit. The use of sketches and drawings in the travel literature and later the use of photography is used as a device to catch the author’s gaze onto the society and culture they are visiting.
CONCLUSIONS

An analysis of travel narratives, pilgrimage accounts and blogs reveals major themes that shaped mainstream German thinking about Saudi Arabia. The first main motivation of early travelers was closely related to the colonial expansion. Archeology, geology, architecture, anthropology, and the ethnographic study of Bedouin tribes as well as the romantic appreciation and depiction of the Arabian landscape and cities were at the center of their narratives. The Otherness of Saudi Arabia in relation to the West, Bedouins traditions, and depictions of the desert as an impenetrable landscape represent the most persistent themes. German travelers from as early as the late eighteenth century kept pointing to the cultural differences of the Middle East and they kept projecting their own expectations and imaginaries onto the space they visited. Early authors employed general statements to describe the country and its people, and some of them such Arnold von Harff fabricated a fantastic and imaginary world that was meant to impress godfearing Europeans of that time whose knowledge of the world was mostly dictated by biblical stories. The locals were portrayed as primitive, “rough, blackish and hard people” (Harff, 136). Authors claimed to serve as trusty guide for future travelers and in one way or another this claim remained constant in all the narratives analyzed in this research. Later authors such as Johann Ludwig Burckhardt and Carsten Niebuhr shift between ambivalent position by evoking the image of the noble savage while pointing out what they perceive as their shortcomings and their tension between nature and culture and that the infatuation with the Bedouins is only an intellectual one that is not reflected in the reality. The inhabitants are “at once robbers and hospitable” (Niebuhr, 9) while the nomads command fascination, they are nonetheless described as inferior and savage people beyond the edges of the truly
civilized world. Still for authors such as Niebuhr and Burckhardt the Arab exemplified the “Noble savage” a relic of an ancient and ethical age incontaminated by civilization that Europeans perceived as lost. Even though the purpose of their journeys may be different, certain tropes dominate and are established.

Other times authors exemplified the notion of an archaic culture that remained frozen in time. The notion of the backwardness of the country, culture, and the Arabian lifestyle were highlighted in strong contrast to Western scientific progress and gender equality. Common themes of those travel narratives were accounts of what they considered the “barbaric” practice of polygamy, the segregation of women and tribal honor. European travelers in the nineteenth and twentieth century revealed in their writings a strong belief in the so called civilizing mission of the West, which was to guide the Middle East as well as Arabia toward Western ideas of democracy, science, and human rights. To quote Mary Louise Pratt (1992), those language of the civilizing mission rehearses a colonial gaze that sees “natives, as reductive, incomplete beings suffering from the inability to have become what Europeans already are, or to have made themselves into what Europeans intend them to be” (152). Like Pratt, David Spurr (1993) recognizes this particular colonial discourse in his reading of Western travel and journalistic writings about other non-Western cultures. He points out that Western travel narratives rely upon the same set of colonial rhetorical principles in representing cultures other than their own. Those self-proclaimed broad-minded German liberal travelers/writers infused in their writings the familiar colonial rhetoric and they perpetuated the same ideas and images throughout the centuries. Their portrays of Saudi Arabia switched back and forth from a nostalgic fascination for what their Western minds fantasized as the ancient and authentic Arabian wisdom to stereotypes.
of Saudi Arabia’s alleged backwardness and degeneration. The representation of this
dichotomy between modernity and tradition shows that even recent narratives are
entrenched in a Western-centered point of view. Walter Weiss points to the tensions that
defined contemporary Saudi Arabia:

Radikal-puritanische Geistliche kontra aufgeklärte, westlich
ausgebildete Intellektuelle, Beduinentum kontra Urbanität, feudale
Stammesgesellschaft kontra globalisierte Geschäftswelt – die
saudische Gesellschaft ist spürbar im Aufbruch (Weiss, 1977).  

Oftentimes, these differences were framed in a favorable light to invoke a sense of
exoticism and fascination and were carried throughout centuries up to twenty-first century
German converts as in the case of Muhammad Asad’s *Road to Mecca* who kept referring to
the Bedouins as the embodiment of the innocence and purity that had been lost in Europe
as a consequence of the WWI. In this case, in opposition to what stated by Pratt for early
travelers, I state that European converts such as Asad saw themselves as those “reductive,
incomplete beings suffering from the inability to have become what Bedouins already are”.
Bedouins’ customs and traditions are portrayed in a romanticized manner in that they stand
for the pure “essence” of Arabia.

Pilgrimage narratives of German converts draw on the tradition of the eighteenth and
nineteenth century German speaking and European travel literature tradition and the

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130 Radical Puritan clergymen opposing enlightened, western-trained intellectuals, Bedouin lifestyle against urbanity, feudal tribal society against globalized business world - Saudi society is palpable on the move (Weiss, 1977).
religious belonging of these European authors does not affect their Eurocentric perspective when entering into the Saudi Arabian space.

The notion of transition or departure, as many narratives reveal, is less suggestive of the representation of Mecca, which is associated with a Muslim spiritual journey and thus symbolically timeless. Saudi Arabia and the holy cities of Mecca and Medina become of secondary importance but it is the spiritual journey that becomes the focus of the narratives. Both Muslim and non-Muslim authors describe Mecca as a place of collective experience, in contrast to Jeddah, which is discussed in travel literature as the Saudi Arabian city that embodies both the Middle East and the West. In this sense, literature on Jeddah describes the city as dynamic and the product of the “Aufbruch in die Moderne” and at the same time rooted in the “Orient.” In spite of the architectural development, Saudi Arabia remains present in the imagination of authors before as now. What remains is that travel writings from the 18th through the 20th century played an important role in shaping the image of Saudi Arabia for western readers and they represented a template for each other. German bloggers continued in these traditions and provided their own narratives about contemporary Saudi Arabia. Not only have bloggers at times uncritically reproduced the same vantage point from which to observe Saudi Arabia as their predecessors, they also incorporate many of the rhetoric and discursive strategies from the previous Western accounts of the country and its culture. The descriptions provided by these bloggers do not really differentiate from the travelogues of their predecessors.

As stated by Hermansen even though contemporary pilgrims and bloggers avoid the excesses of their precursors, they are still not completely free from the colonial gaze and attitudes.
Throughout this investigation I have identified three different representations of the Arabian space and referred to them as: “the Islamic Oriental City”, the “de-romanticized Orient” and the “modern emerging city.” At the beginning of the nineteenth century cities that today are part of contemporary Saudi Arabia, are represented in the travel literature as examples of “Islamic Oriental Cities.” With the urban development in the 1930s, cities are often described as spaces of a “de-romanticized Orient,” where “economic interests gain importance over tradition and the Petrodollar triumphs over romance” (Jung 1958: 84). The bazaars of the old city also lose much of their charm. Again terms such as “Middle Ages” and “Modernity” are employed as binary constructs and Saudi Arabia is depicted as caught in a struggle between two opposite temporalities. The “orientalist” exoticism and fascination disappear and are replaced by a narrative of disappointment. The Orient is viewed as having disappeared and modernization is seen as the negative effect of the influence of the West.

In the third phase, the “emerging modern city” the disappointment in the destruction of the fabulous Orient is no longer mentioned. Western influence and modernity are portrayed in a positive way. Elements such as the traditional Saudi clothing and the traditional architecture are often referred to as “pre-modern,” especially in narratives from the 1980s and 1990s that embrace the notion of “modernization.”

All narratives reveal the cultural world through which travelers and converts filter what they see. By naming, describing, and representing the Orient in constrast to western ways, Western cultures dominate and exercise authority over the Orient. In my research I pointed out that the German expats in Saudi Arabia use blogs as a digital extension of the genre of travel writing. As Peter Bishop states (1989) travel writing may be considered “a sub-species of memoir, a form of romance, [the] art of collage [of] newspaper clippings,
public notices, letters, official documents, diary extracts, essays on current affairs…[and] it is not concerned only with the discovery of places but also with their creation” (3) because “the travel account masks a totally fictional and imagined journey”(4). To be sure, travelers, no matter their religious belonging, see and understand the visited cultures through the filter of their national belonging, personal desire and interest as my investigation of the diverse articulations of travel writing on Saudi Arabia has shown.
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