

AGYA Press Release 4/2016

Beirut, 04 May 2016

Insatiable Appetite: Food as a Cultural Signifier

International & Interdisciplinary Conference of the Arab-German Young Academy of Sciences and Humanities (AGYA)

12-14 May 2016

Auditorium B1/College Hall

American University of Beirut

Talking about food and food culture, Beirut seems to be the perfect choice of venue. The city is known since antiquity for its cultural richness and as a place of multicultural exchange. Until the present day, the Lebanese cuisine is considered one of the most flavorful and multifaceted regional cuisines in the Mediterranean. The AGYA conference *Insatiable Appetite: Food as a Cultural Signifier*, however, does not wish to uncritically celebrate the global phenomenon of Mediterranean food. In fact, the main focus is to deconstruct the various notions of food articulated in cultural and social processes of inclusion and exclusion. Food and consumption practices build bridges and at the same time serve as a powerful marker of social, religious, gendered as well as ethnic differences. Because of the biological imperative of daily consumption, food is an inherent part of both collective and individual identities. What one eats may tell us whether (s)he is young, female, of high social status or even Jewish, Muslim, French.

The consumption of wine and pork has often been described as a marker of regional, cultural, and religious distinctiveness. The **public keynote lecture by Prof Eric R. Dursteler** challenges the prevailing notion of a culinary “clash of civilizations” in the early modern Mediterranean. By looking back at the cultural and social functions of food it becomes obvious that normative assumptions about food in connection with identity, morality, religion and health are still prevalent today.

The conference will examine both past and present food consumption practices that seem to establish and confirm differences and similarities between supposedly homogeneous cultures. During the three-day conference program, AGYA members will discuss together with high-ranking experts a variety of topics such as the history of vegetarianism and its early global aspects;

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genetically modified food in contemporary Muslim juridical ethics or the meaning of halal food in Western Muslim communities. The different contributions are clustered along seven main themes: food and social status, prohibitions and prescriptions, body, intoxication, abstention, scarcity and humanitarianism, food and gender.

The participants will discuss questions such as: What is the function of food in shaping notions of the self and the “Other” around the Mediterranean? How does food historically contribute to hierarchies of power relations and to processes of inclusion and exclusion? How is food and consumption linked to issues of identity, status and symbolic meaning? What does food tell about history and political realities?

During the conference, the cultural significance of food is not just approached theoretically. Participants will also be given a chance of actively experiencing food as a vehicle to create local identity and to establish social status. One of the conference days will include an **excursion along the “Lebanese Food Trail”** which has been established by the *Food Heritage Foundation* with the aim of preserving, documenting, and reviving alimentary traditions in Lebanon. Along the trail participants will have the opportunity to get in direct contact with local farmers and enter into a conversation about local food culture. The Bekaa valley is known as the principal area of cultivation of wine in Lebanon and thus well suited to be the scene for one of the conference panels in which *Food, Wine and Authenticity in Lebanon* will be discussed.

Another chance to actively experience historical food culture is the dinner event ***Discovering Abbasid Food***, which will introduce more than 20 staple dishes and desserts including the *judhaba*, the *sikbaj*, the *madira*, and the *lauzinaj*, which often figure in premodern Arabic literature and poetry. The meal is cooked by Brigitte Caland who is a professional cook with an interest in the history and evolution of food. She was trained in France with Marc Meneau (L’Espérance), Philippe Legendre (le V) and the Pourcel Brothers (La Maison Blanche). From 2009 to 2011 she created a series of nine meals inspired by old recipes from Mesopotamia to the Ottoman Empire at *Melisse* in Santa Monica, CA. Charles Perry, a food historian, will comment on what Brigitte Caland serves.

The approach of the interdisciplinary conference brings in a wide range of aspects to the local and temporal references of food cultures. Disciplinary diversity also characterizes the **Arab-German Young Academy of Sciences and Humanities (AGYA)** which has been established in 2013 as the first bilateral young academy worldwide.

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The current 50 Arab and German AGYA members are distinguished researchers from various fields of the Natural Sciences, Life Sciences, Humanities, Social Sciences and Technical Sciences working in Arab countries and Germany. AGYA promotes interdisciplinary research projects and Arab-German cooperation based on the idea of scientific excellence and social commitment of early career scholars. In 2016, AGYA has received the massive funding of 4 million Euros for 4 years from the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF) in order to realize interdisciplinary research projects and initiatives at the interface of science and society.

The event is realized in close cooperation with the American University of Beirut, where AGYA maintains one of its contact offices in the Arab region. The conference is a project of the AGYA Working Group *Common Heritage & Common Challenges* and is organized by Kirill Dmitriev (Lecturer in Arabic, University of St Andrews), Julia Hauser (Assistant professor of global history, University of Kassel) and Bilal Orfali (Associate professor of Arabic, American University of Beirut).

For information on the complete conference program please refer to the AGYA website: www.agya.info

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The conference is a project of the AGYA Working Group "Common Heritage & Common Challenges". The conference is hosted by the American University Beirut (AUB) and the Orient-Institut Beirut (OIB) and is realized in cooperation with AUB, OIB, Brigitte Caland and with the kind support of Le Bristol and Chateau Kefraya.

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