

ROUND-TABLE CONVERSATIONS ON WORLD-CHANGING IDEAS

# TRAVEL + IDENTITY IN THE MIDDLE EAST



PHOTOS BY CHRIS TAGGART



**IN** In the modern era, our national identities tend to be fairly rigid. We might be French, or American, or Kenyan, or Mexican, but it is rare to be able to claim more than one nationality. It hasn't always been this way, though.

No one used to carry a passport when they traveled, the borders of countries such as Egypt or Yemen were far more porous, and loaded political ideas weren't attached to one's place of origin. For most of history, people interacted in all sorts of ways, moving very comfortably across continents, oceans, and vast deserts.

In Matthew Ellis' First Year Studies course, "Place, Landscape, and Identity in the Middle East," students explored shifting identities in the Middle East from the sixth century to the eve of modernity. In this session, they discussed trans-regional trade, specifically across the Indian Ocean and Sahara desert—both hot spots of commerce and cultural interchange. The fluidity of identity posed a challenge for merchants, whose business depended on trusting strangers, and Islam played an important role in enabling these cross-cultural exchanges and encounters. Ellis' students examined how different identities are constructed in this context, and wondered: Can this ability to travel and traverse borders become an identity of its own?

**UNDER DISCUSSION:**

*Invisible Cities* by Italo Calvino; Ralph Austen's "Caravan Commerce and African Economies" in *Trans-Saharan Africa in World History* pp. 23-48; Engseng Ho, "Preface" and "Geography: A Pathway through History," in *The Graves of Tarim: Genealogy and Mobility Across the Indian Ocean* pp. xix-xxvi; 27-62.

**MATTHEW ELLIS:** There's a paradox going on here. On one hand, [Calvino] is saying that everything that's going on in this merchant town is infinitely replicable. ... Some people come in with goods, you dump them down, you trade, you barter, you come away with some goods. But at the very same time, through this rote, mundane economic system and act, all these new identities are created. ... Why do you think [merchants and traders] are driven to keep leaving home for these kinds of experiences?

**ALEXANDRA POWELL BUGDEN '16:** They're more connected to the people that they're sharing these experiences with than the people at home, maybe? They're unified by sharing memories and experiences [as they travel].

**ALLISON SNYDER '16:** I think there's also a weird connection you innately feel with strangers. Sometimes knowing someone or a place really well can cause you to feel disconnected from it, where something that's fresh and new, there's almost more potential for relationship-building. I think that's why travel is appealing—to myself and these people. ...

[Ho's piece] reminded me of the map reading we did and how borders create a sense of boundary and distance, but also a sense of connectedness between the two places, because recognizing that you are touching inevitably creates a relationship. ...

**MATTHEW ELLIS:** So how do you do business in the Sahara desert? This is this great expanse, and we're talking about long-distance trade, not local trade. ... Caravan trips could be as long as 70 days. These were serious distances that were being traversed. Let's not take for granted that you can just do business with anyone.

**MAYA AHMED '16:** Gold was a very important commodity, and that's what they all desire and seek. ...

**MATTHEW ELLIS:** So a certain commodity that everyone can agree on—that's a common denominator. What else?

**CHRISTINA TANG '16:** Religion can be used for trade so that people trust each other more.

**ALLISON SNYDER:** It's sort of like an honor code.

**MATTHEW ELLIS:** Exactly! When you think about the word "bonds," when you're actually writing bonds or deeds, the fact that there was a common language of religion to undergird it was really significant. I think you guys are really right on here. Islam became the language of commerce. ... What we have going on in the Sahara are lots of different kinds of people with different languages—all these different tribes from east and west Africa, Muslim merchants from the Mediterranean, from Egypt. Do they necessarily speak the same language?

**CLASS:** No.

**MATTHEW ELLIS:** So what they share is religion. ...

**MAYA PARIS-SAPER '16:** ... Even the legal codes of Islam went into trading. ...

**ALEXANDRA POWELL BUGDEN:** [Religion] allowed everything to work more smoothly.

**NISA THOMPSON:** Before I read this book, I always thought, "Oh, well, there's no real problem with arresting all these people for drugs because they're probably guilty," but that's not it at all.

**MATTHEW ELLIS:** Absolutely. If you want to do business with someone, you need to trust your business partner, right? Now if you want to do business with someone who lives 70 days away across the Sahara, how are you going to establish trust? ... Islamic law. There are commonly accepted ways of transcribing trust. So bonds, deeds, contracts—*sharia* (the moral code and religious law of Islam) gives it a common language that can be accepted. That's not to say there weren't snags, but the language of Islam and *sharia* and business law, contract law, standardized the system across a vast expanse of space.

**MAYA AHMED:** On page 38 [of Austen's book], he says that [Islamic education] taught members of the same faith to read Arabic or at least the alphabet so they could make contracts [between traders]—so it creates a form of trust between the merchants and sellers.

**ALLISON SNYDER:** [Shared religion] creates a sense of familiarity amongst the unfamiliar and exotic, which allows for better relationships. ... It reminds me of maybe how stuff goes down on Wall Street, like [with] Yale and Harvard graduates—"Oh, he's a Yalie." Then you have this sense of camaraderie.

**MATTHEW ELLIS:** Yeah, it's a different kind of bond of trust, but a bond of trust nonetheless. ... There's something unique about the experience of merchants in history ... they're the ones moving, they're the ones forging all these linkages. ...

**EDUNN LEVY '16:** Yeah, it's a different kind of bond of trust, but a bond of trust nonetheless. ... There's something unique about the experience of merchants in history ... they're the ones moving, they're the ones forging all these linkages. ...

**MATTHEW ELLIS:** I think that's an awesome point and gets to the heart of the Ho piece—what does it mean for a new identity to be forged through diaspora, through mobility. ... [This all points to] the messiness and fuzziness of history and reality. Nationalist ideology likes to present an ideal of unity, especially post-colonial nationalism. To be

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Algerian is to be this; to be Indian is to be this. But the reality is—if you peek under the hood—all you see is mobility, fluidity, motion, people coming and going, new creole identities formed. ... Things used to be more fluid in a way, even if things were dangerous and fraught in other ways. Was it more dangerous to travel across the ocean in the 1500s? Absolutely. But could you do that and sort of change chameleon-like and adapt all these different identities? Absolutely. ☺

Condensed and edited by Katharine Reece MFA '12