The Image sans Orientalism
Local Histories of Photography in the Middle East*

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A rich vernacular photographic culture has thrived in the Middle East for well over the past century. Yet until recently, the only way in which ‘photography’ and the ‘Middle East’ have been brought together in most scholarly writing is through the analysis of a fraction of this production, and one that eschews, rather than addresses, the variety of local photographic traditions in the region. Middle Eastern photography remains largely synonymous with what is known as an Orientalist aesthetic, coined by visiting foreigners photographing ‘holy land’ landscapes, studio-staged ‘local types’ and, most famously perhaps, the lure of its women (cf. Perez 1988; Gavin 1982; Çizgen 1987; Özendes 1998, 1999; Alloula 1986; Jacobson 2007). The subject remains firmly in the hands of art historians who, while partially abandoning their focus on great artists and works, continue approaching local photography in the region through a diffusionist model characteristic of colonial knowledge production. Despite more recent attention to ‘problematising’ Orientalism by ‘decentering’ it, photographic culture in the Middle East is still thought of in terms of ‘adoption’, ‘adaptation’, ‘response’ or at best as ‘shared production’ (Beaulieu and Roberts 2002; Roberts 2007). According to this logic, agency (whether as technology or as cultural forms or expertise) emanates primarily from the West, and local production remains cast as a derivative of western models or reactive to them. Even the most recent writing on the subject (Behdad and Gartlan 2013) largely ignores local archives and local photographic practices that emerged and thrived autonomously from western photographic production, its epistemologies and its markets. With the exception of a few articles,1 the current field

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1 These include Micklewright (2000; 2003), Nassar (2005; 2006), Sheehi (2007; 2015) and Graham-Brown’s monograph dedicated to locally produced images of women (1988). Mid-
of the history of photography in the Middle East—with the important exception of Iran—therefore has very little to do with the myriad ways in which people in the region engaged with photographs for the better part of the past century.\(^2\)

The situation is very different in the scholarship of cognate areas. Over the past decade, anthropologists (and to a lesser degree, historians) have paid increasing attention to non-western photographic histories and practices. Following in the pioneering footsteps of Christopher Pinney’s 1997 *Camera Indica*, a growing number of monographs and edited volumes has appeared that examines photographic histories and practices in Africa, Southeast Asia and the Pacific (Pinney and Peterson 2003; Edwards and Bhaumik 2008; Morris 2009; Strassler 2010; Wright 2013; Behrend 2013; Morton and Newbury 2015). They not only draw on the increasing attention to ‘the visual’ and ‘the material’ across humanities’ disciplines, but also, importantly, respond to the growing concern to unseat the diffusionist model of western modernity by exploring local, alternative or autogenetic modernities around the world. This emerging scholarly interest in non-western photographic traditions is thus not merely a new kind of *photographic* history; rather, photographs are used across the humanities as a lens to examine formations of modernity. Looking at ethnographically informed histories (or historically informed ethnographies) of photography thus signals a particular methodological framework that engages not only with debates on visuality, but rather, and more widely, on the production of the social—on historically constituted forms of personhood, identity and community—and on the relationship between persons, objects and practices.

Building on the material turn in the humanities, and in dialogue with the above-mentioned recent histories of vernacular photography around the world, this volume leaves aside the colonial archive and the question of the ‘western origin’ of photography and focuses instead on how vernacular photographs worked (Edwards and Hart 2004), or how they mattered (Miller 1998)—and continue working and mattering—in specific local contexts over the past century. This collection does not understand photographs as mere

\(^2\) The history of photography in Iran has recently started receiving serious attention; see, for instance Pérez González (2012), all the articles in Sheikh and Pérez González (2013), Damandan (2004), Behdad (2001), Bohrer (1999) and Brusius (2015).