Arts & Humanities | Sonja Brentjes

1001 Inventions

1001 Distortions of Islamic history of sciences

Professor Sonja Brentjes, a retired historian of science and researcher at the Max Planck Institute for the History of Science, Berlin, is particularly interested in Islamic societies between ca. 800 and 1700. Her work involves the examination of historical narratives on scholarly activities in non-Western societies of the past and their distortions. Among her many publications is the book “1001 Distortions. How (not) to Narrate History of Science, Medicine and Technology in Non-Western Cultures” that she published together with Professor Taner Edis and Professor Lutz Richter-Bernburg in response to the many misrepresentations of history and science in the 2012 catalogue of the 1001 Inventions exhibition.

1001 INVENTIONS

The travelling exhibition 1001 Inventions was launched by the Foundation of Science, Technology and Civilisation, Manchester, in 2006. It aimed to provide a historiography of sciences in Islamic societies, highlight scientific achievements in Islamic history and their influence on Western scientific developments. The book 1001 Inventions: The Enduring Legacy of Muslim Civilization accompanied the exhibition 1001 Inventions: Discover the Golden Age of Muslim Civilization that ran from the 3rd August 2012 to 3rd February 2013, with the support of the National Geographic Society. Where the exhibition’s focus was on the past, the book centres on the relevance of this past to the sciences and technologies of today. While the popularisation of historical events requires some simplification in order to be accessible to the broader audience, this book has been the subject of much criticism by and frustration for Professor Brentjes and other scholars.

1001 DISTORTIONS

To examine the erroneous concept and claims made by the 1001 Inventions project, Sonja Brentjes invited a group of historians of science, medicine, and non-Western cultures, together with scientists and curators, to reflect on the misrepresentation of the sciences and their histories in various political and historical contexts. They discussed particular errors in both the book and the exhibition, together with the challenges faced by scholars, curators and museum directors when translating academic research into popular presentations. Professor Brentjes describes how the exhibition organisers and contributors, who are not historians, have extracted portions of academic narratives, effectively removed their richness in detail and rearranged them as outmoded tales of glory, success, priority and progress. This fuelled debates among historians of science, mathematicians, medicine and technology on how to narrate the past fairly and appropriately. The book 1001 Distortions brings together their reflections from how we think and write about the intellectual and technological past of cultures that we were not part of. These historical debates are also embedded in experiences with Islamophobic antagonists in northern Europe and political confrontation in the Gulf States.

INVENTING NARRATIVES

1001 Distortions is divided into three sections. In the first one, “Inventing Narratives of Intellectual Identities and Their Modern Relevance”, contributors describe how academics created accounts of the sciences, medicine and technology with regards to groups of people, nations and entire civilisations. These texts demonstrate how historians understood that history writing is made up of many different and contradictory means to produce historical ‘facts’ and interpretations of how people lived in previous centuries. Conversely, Sonja Brentjes observes that, in their misperception of the historian’s craft, amateurs often think that there is only one true way of presenting stories about the past. This often results in the construction of misleading, supposedly new narratives. In the second part of the book, seven historians and one physicist examine what is wrong with the narrative in the book 1001 Inventions. They discuss and correct some of the misleading stories, comment on the illustrations and analyse the scientific, medical and technical claims.

SCIENCE, RELIGION AND EDUCATION

Professor Brentjes’ chapter “Science, Religion, and Education” forms part of this second section where she describes how Muslims in British India were confronted with the new educational institutions of the colonial power. Among them experienced a culture shock with the contrast between this educational system and their traditional learning. She rejects the notion put forward by the makers of 1001 Inventions that Islam and science were always in close communion, taught together at mosques and instilled a zeal for the investigation of nature in Muslim students. She emphasises the multiplicity of cases in which such mutual inspiration as well as conflicts took place, where they shared common features and where they differed.

Sonja Brentjes goes on to challenge 1001 Inventions’ simplifications of multi-cultural and multi-religious societies as one unified civilisation, which is defined as Muslim. She explains how this destroys the diverse religious, cultural, social and economic differences between the members of what is normally referred to as the Islamic World. Furthermore, it lessens the contributions made by many non-Islamic communities and their scholars within these different societies. She describes the cultural innovation that took place with the creation of an institution for advanced education, where salaries were provided for its teachers and administrators and stipends for its students. She also draws attention to “the long and unequal march of the mathematical sciences into this institution”, as well as the institution’s limitations and shortcomings. Moreover, Sonja Brentjes highlights the fundamental error in the assumption made in 1001 Inventions that the sciences and education of medieval times are in principle the same as the sciences, technologies and education of today.

DELIGHTS AND DANGERS

In the third section of the book, the contributors, including curators and a museum director, address problems of popularising historical and scientific knowledge and the impact of 1001 Inventions in some circles. In the book’s
Behind the Research

Associate Professor a.D. Sonja Brentjes

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Research Objectives

Associate Professor (a.D.) Sonja Brentjes examines historical narratives on scholarly activities in non-Western societies of the past and their distortions.

Detail

Bio
Sonja Brentjes is a retired historian of science with a particular focus on Islamic societies between ca. 850 and 1700. Her main fields of research are the history of mathematics, mapmaking, educational institutions, patronage, early modern travel reports, and cross-cultural encounters.

Funding
MPIWG Berlin

Collaborators
• Lutz Richter-Bernburg
• Rainer Brömer
• Jeffrey Oaks
• Peter Adamson

References


Personal Response

What initially sparked your interest in medieval Islamic societies?

My parents were academics who specialised in their university training in the fields the ancient Near East (Mesopotamia) and classical Islam (Theology). In their professional careers, their paths multiplied and diversified including the arts, modern History, politics, and many other topics. Refugees from Arabic countries and Iran were often guests at home. Hence, my desire to learn more about their countries and their histories was sparked early. Over the years, my interests first focused on the mathematical sciences and then grew to include the many other themes on which I have done research.

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Associate Professor (a.D.) Sonja Brentjes

What is the goal of bringing together this group of scholars was to inform readers of the academically unacceptable interpretation offered by 1001 Inventions of the history of science, medicine and technology in past Muslim societies and its relevance for the sciences, medicine, technologies and cultural customs in today's societies. Sonja Brentjes explains how "criticising academically false stories about such topics needs to be undertaken for all such cases...". Sonja Brentjes strongly rebuts this depiction of her as adhering to Eurocentric stereotypes, defending colonialism, and a historian who belittles the contributions of Muslim scholars. She stresses that although certain scholars claim otherwise, throughout her academic career, she has strived to deliver a fair portrayal of the contributions of Muslim societies to scholarly advancements. The editors included other case studies, such as "it does not merely alert us to the political and ideological struggles about who created and who owns the sciences, medicine, and technology in the past and present, but requires us to think about ways into the future.”

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MISSED OPPORTUNITY

Once the book was completed and ready for print, Sonja Brentjes recollects how her parents influenced their children early on about their countries and their histories. Hence, my desire to learn more about them. Over the years, my interests first focused first on the mathematical sciences and then grew to include the many other themes on which I have done research.

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