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Chat with Goethe. Recitation of *Divan* in social media

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<https://geelvinckfestival.nl/en/the-bashkiers-ship-bridge/#>
www.geelvinck.nl

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WHEN IN WINTER 2020/21 ALL ACADEMIC ACTIVITIES WERE BROUGHT TO A „PANDEMIC LOCKDOWN“, the question how to reach an educated auditory became essential for scholars, students and authors. Healthily chilling in my personal book-room and hanging around my desk with bad mood after I was forced to cancel all travel plans, I suddenly got bored by all mass-media, so I switched them off and I decided to create my own media in order to find a way towards a distant space and far time away. How to do? Which method? What kind of technical realization? Who could be the auditors?

I took Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s West-östlicher Divan¹ from the bookshelf, and after so many years after my first reading I started re-reading the text, but now with more understanding, imagination and experience after thirteen years of teaching in Cairo and in Arkhangelsk/Russia as well as being engaged in intercultural and interreligious dialogue in the city where I live. And suddenly I understood that this text could open a great channel for intercultural dialogue, modern

¹ Goethe West-östlicher Divan, ed. by Hans-J. Weitz. (insel taschenbuch, printed by Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft, Baden-Baden 1974, 1. ed. (based on Suhrkamp edition 1958. (cited below: Divan).

debate on European imagination of world of Islam and of interpretation as a source of historic events during the period of Goethe's lifetime and working interests. So, why not to get in a talk about the poet and his time and chatting about him?

1) Method

In case to perform the text, it was clear that I would refuse to be focused only to the philological methods of interpretation from field of German language studies. This is not so my field, because I am a historian. However, I decided to take the poems as snapshots of their time, messages about their author's desires, wishes, feelings, interpretations. I looked out for text claims that could become the big stones building a bridge between German auditors/readers and such from Muslim cultural background as well as for a group of students from Northern Arctic Federal University in Arkhangelsk/Russia (www.narfu.ru).

I remembered that similar attempt exactly was the methodic idea that was published in several articles by Efim Rezvan in Saint Petersburg.² So I brought Goethe's text in neighborhood to Efim Rezvan's Ijma-publications. With his *ijma-concord* project — an idea that we both discussed some years ago from point of translating the word into Latin — he described the form to become acquainted with individuals from other cultures on an *equal eye level*. The last-mentioned term "equal-eye-level" became my key-topic. It became pinpointed in the headline of my idea. Now on my desk a great tool-box was filled by publications, teaching experience and in the same way by many years of practical experience in co-operation with Muslim persons from several communities and home-countries. Finally, I brought my technical equipment on an acceptable modern standard.

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2) Realization

I started reading every poem from Divan in mp4 format with my smartphone. Next, I wrote friendly sounding SMS-style commentaries for historic introduction and interpretation to every poem expressing its impact in its time *and* for today. After that I arranged objects from my personal collection to take small photos of them in mobile format. Finally, I managed picture+information+mp4 in smartphone format. After that I contacted a great number of addresses in my phone inviting them to meet for an everyday audio event. Reaction was overwhelming. They

² <http://www.kunstkamera.ru/info/projects/idzhma/> and publications <http://journal.60parallel.org/ru/topics/t/29>.
http://www.kunstkamera.ru/en/temporary_exhibitions/virtual/the_land_of_incense/ijma_concord/

<http://journal.60parallel.org/en/topics/t/29>

<http://www.ijma.ru/eng/print/224.html>

Pluralism et reconnaissance. Pluralism and recognition. Congress Unesco Paris, 2006, 22-24/06:

http://www.spbric.org/PDF/Paris_sb.pdf

Intercultural and interreligious dialogue for sustainable development (2008)

http://www.unesco.org/new/fileadmin/MULTIMEDIA/FIELD/Moscow/pdf/Lay-out_RAGS_UNESCO-Konf_Fin.pdf

– Efim A. Rezvan, Introductory word, in: Christianity and Islam in the context of contemporary culture. Perspectives of Interfaith Dialogue from Russia and the Middle East, ed. by D. Spivak and N. Tabbara (Sankt Petersburg, Beirut) 22-24. – id., Qur'an and power in Russia, in: Christianity and Islam in the context of contemporary culture. Perspectives of Interfaith Dialogue from Russia and the Middle East, ed. by D. Spivak and N. Tabbara (Sankt Petersburg, Beirut) 41-56. – Online version <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0018/001852/185275m.pdf>

appeared in the Divan-group from Croatia, Egypt, Germany, Morocco, Pakistan, Tunisia, Turkey, Russia, some of them living abroad, some of them living in Germany, but they all were joined by their knowledge of German language. Auditors came from several professions: scholars and colleagues, from field of language studies, historians, human and social sciences, medical science, natural science, from field of education, two Muslim theologians, hand- and-art crafts, entrepreneurs et.al. Finally, from December 2020 until May 2021 a group of about 60 participants started listening every early morning their unit without any day of a brake. After some time, the members of the group started to chat with each other. In order to keep the home-rule in the group we agreed to special written chat-appointments in WhatsApp and video meeting on Zoom by formal invitation. Although the debates became lively, the formal rules in a very friendly level were kept in order to recognize every question, proposal and explanation. Especially the Muslim auditory was interested in keeping the formal rules. And this was very helpful to develop the “equal-eye-level” in our method. Finally, the chat was framed by friendly greetings to all kind of Christian and Islamic Holidays.

We decided to performance every poem by a special frame: We started with the Muslim Bismillah formula *bismillah ar-rahman ar-rahim* followed by Goethe’s name, the title of the poem, the poem itself and closed by the wish “*Liebe Freunde, kommt gut in Tag*” / you, dear friends, may enter this day well.

All auditors accepted this way of introduction that finally opened a mode of wide dialogue about all impressions, feelings, critics and what else was touching every single auditor. It opens a good channel to get in dialogue with the scholars and the two imams. In result, a real unexpected input of special information and detailed knowledge enriched the chat.

Formal Example:

Timur Nameh/Book of Timur.

History: With the example of Timur Khan’s (1355-1405) unfinished war against China, Goethe involved his critics against Napoléon’s war against the Tsar’s Russia. Troops collapsed under the natural factors of the wide land, they surrendered because of the harsh climate – as it was then, so it happened once more during the Second World War. All events of that kind touched the European part of the Eurasian Continent. This is a warning symbol for the following generations. Goethe wrote about his historic conclusion and he asked for further historic study:

Buch des Timur. Sollte eigentlich erst gegründet werden, und vielleicht müßten ein paar Jahre hingehen, damit uns die allzu nah liegende Deutung ein erhöhtes Anschauen ungeheurer Weltereignisse nicht mehr verkümmerte ...³

The poem, Jena, Dec. 11th, 1814⁴: Timur sitting in his jurt; heating becomes less and less, and in addition bad cosmic constellations (like in Winter 2020/21 when the world was covered by too many wars) shutter the Khan. Disguised as an old man winter appears in this dump atmosphere before the mighty Khan. A dialogue of unequal positions starts between man and nature.

³ Divan (ann. 1) 204.

⁴ Divan (ann. 1) 63.

Cf. also example/ chat-commentary on Rendsch Nameh⁵, Der Prophet spricht (printed 1827)⁶ : Words of vision and power. None can ignore Muhamad's way. Even Timur Khan grasps for a place of relevance in history. So, it is better that even Christian authorities should not ignore them. Goethe's vision from the years 1815 and 1826 became of a special relevance in the present time of the year 2021. The 21st century will become a Eurasian/Asiatic one, because Europe's mind seems too much focused on itself.

Goethe got the opportunity to be in touch with mounted troopers from far destinations: the Bashkir mounted unit took quarter in Weimar⁷ on their way to the Netherlands⁸, and these horse riders⁹ caused a vivid interest in their behavior, religion and personal customs not only concerning the year 1812/13, but may be also in later time when Russian soldiers were settled down in Potsdam near Berlin in 1826 by Friedrich Wilhelm III.¹⁰ This information was added to the chat by one of the German members and brought an extended impression to the auditory.

3) Impact

In conclusion the auditory agreed that Goethe's Divan still is of relevance for intercultural dialogue, and to get in touch for friendly relations giving an imagination of "equal-eye-level" exchange without professional and social limits.

From point of academic debate, we discussed about the positions of Katharina Mommsen¹¹ and of Karl-Josef Kuschel¹², esp. after the last-mentioned claims in his new book titled *Goethe und der Koran* Goethe's Divan from a specific Christian perspective. His commentaries about the Goethe-Hafiz memorial in Weimar and about publications from Muslim authors on Divan remained an irritating impression we cannot agree with after our results in the chat. In addition, and finally for further

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⁵ Divan 201 (commentary).

⁶ Loc.cit. 54 (text), 313 (commentary).

⁷ <https://www.eckermann.weblit.de/gespraech12.htm>. - Karl-Josef Kuschel/Shahid Alam, *Goethe und der Koran* (Ostfildern 2021) 199ff.; cf. Yavuz Özoguz, *Der Islam gehört zu Deutschland. Historische Spuren der Muslime in Deutschland und Österreich* (Bremen 2019, ISBN 978-3-946179-15-3) 18f. concerning the grave of Jussuf near Kleinbeucha (D-04651 Bad Lausick), mentioned in earlier publications as „Tatarenggrab“. – In addition the city partnership between City of Halle and Ufa refers to that historic events : www.freundebaschkortostans.de.

⁸ Beatrice de Graaf, *Fighting terror after Napoleon. How Europe became secure after 1815* (Cambridge UP 2020), online: <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108895873> and <https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/fighting-terror-after-napoleon/D1167BDE10A23C749B0490D6D9A7B6C7>

⁹ On horse-metaphoric in Goethe's poems see Katharina Mommsen, „Orient und Okzident sind nicht mehr zu trennen“. *Goethe und die Weltkulturen. Schriften der Goethe-Gesellschaft* 75, ed. by Jochen Golz (Göttingen 2012) 223-240.

¹⁰ Alexandrowka settlement near Potsdam: Jochen Müssig, *Wer singen will, muss heiraten*. In: *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* no. 104, 06.05.2021, R2. – Museum Alexandrowka: www.alexandrowka.de

¹¹ Katharina Mommsen, *Goethe und der Islam* (Frankfurt am Main/Leipzig 2015, 4. Aufl.). – id. „Orient und Okzident (ann. 9).

¹² Karl-Josef Kuschel/Shahid Alam loc. cit. (ann. 7) 359sqq., 389-393; 417-419. – Review: Stefan Weidner, *Goethe für die Gegenwart. Abkehr vom rabiatischen Voltaire: Ein Theologe zeigt die Bedeutung des Islambildes im „Divan“ auf*. In: *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* no. 155, 08.07.2021, p. 12.

discussion a broader use of Russian¹³ and Oriental¹⁴ voices about Divan should be part of the dialogue and research in our time and in future.

Now our publication, titled *Update Divan – mit Goethe im West-östlichen Chat. Eine Lesung mit Bildern*, on this event is still in progress and I decided for layout to add the chats to the single units in order to show the vivid creativity of the group. Up to now the group keeps on the place, and just now we started a new literary session.

Locking back in February 2022 and facing the recent continental events, the literary experience between now and Goethe's time unveils us the relevance of space and time.



Bashkir horseman at Ijssel River in high waters,
Veessen 17 - 18h. PM, 23 Feb 2022 | Photo: Dunya Verwey,
Museum Geelvinck, Amsterdam/Heerde, NL)

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www.gabrieleziethen.de

¹³ Cf. Efim Rezvan, «Introduction to the Qur'anic studies»: (1) <https://lib.kunstkamera.ru/rubrikator/02/978-5-00019-244-3>, Chapter 6 (The Qur'an in Western Europe)

(2) https://lib.kunstkamera.ru/files/lib/978-5-00019-244-3/978-5-00019-244-3_06.pdf

(cf. «Talisman in Karneol» and the poem of Pushkin)

Chapter 7 «The Qur'an in Russia»

(3) https://lib.kunstkamera.ru/files/lib/978-5-00019-244-3/978-5-00019-244-3_07.pdf

Id., The Qur'an and its World (2012)/English version

(4) <https://lib.kunstkamera.ru/rubrikator/02/978-5-88431-178-7/>

¹⁴ World Religions in the Contexts of the contemporary Culture: New Perspectives of Dialogue and mutual understanding (2011): <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0021/002140/214008e.pdf>

Christianity and Islam in the Context of Contemporary Culture (2009):
<http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0018/001852/185275m.pdf>