



MECAM Fellows' Study Day:

Confronting Asymmetries in the Maghreb

Tunis, Tunisia

December 5, 2025



Universität
Marburg



UNIVERSITÄT
LEIPZIG



University of Sfax



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General Abstract:

Panel Abstracts and Objectives

I - Examining Songs, Rituals, and Musical Repertoires and their Asymmetric Representations in Africa and the Maghreb

This panel explores traditional singing, musical repertoires, instruments, and related rituals in Tunisia, Egypt, Nigeria, and other countries across the Maghreb and West Africa. With a focus on gender, ethno-musicological, and linguistic perspectives, the panel examines questions of social mobility as well as gender and social disparities. From Stambeli music to Amazigh/Berber traditions, the presenters address social and gender asymmetries through a variety of formats—including poster sessions and PowerPoint presentations—in an effort to document the evolution of these practices from past to present and across different geographic contexts.

- Demonstrate how the female community is built around the maternal figure of the female singer
- Build a bridge between past and present practices to document the evolution of weddings and other similar rituals
- Analyze gender and class vulnerabilities among women singers and other ritual performers
- Show how cultural practices can be adopted and adapted across time and space

II - Reckoning with Historical Asymmetries in the Maghreb: Cultural, Spiritual, and Political Discursive Interventions.

This panel explores how contemporary and historical asymmetries in the Maghreb are critiqued, narrated, contested, and aesthetically reconfigured across spiritual, cultural, and political discursive domains. Bringing together perspectives from socially engaged art, Sufi hermeneutics, border-migration representations, and psychiatric institutional interventions, the panel examines how these asymmetries—whether in relation to power, meaning making, governance, or mobility—shape and are shaped by interpretive and collective practices. By bringing these papers and their distinct yet interconnected subjects together, we highlight how crises of alienation in the Maghrib, shaped through various asymmetries, carry both disruptive forces and generative possibilities.

- Analyze how contemporary and historical crises in the Maghreb are articulated across spiritual, cultural, and political discursive fields
- Examine how asymmetries of power in governance, knowledge production, and mobility shape the representation of crises
- Bridge disciplinary perspectives to identify generative potential that crises unlock, including new forms of relation, interpretation, and critique

III - Historical Asymmetries and State-Building in the Maghreb.

This panel will explore the question of state-building in the Maghreb shedding light on asymmetries of power. The asymmetries explored will span from epistemological questions—what a Muslim state means—to questions concerning international asymmetries of power—how the international shifts shaped the state-building process in the Maghreb around the time of independence. The panel will also discuss legal imbalances during the colonial and post-independence periods in Morocco (1940s) and Algeria (1960s).

- Explore historical power imbalances in state-building processes
- Transform state-building processes in the colonial and post-colonial Maghreb
- Unravel epistemological hierarchies in state-building

IV. Publication Workshop

This joint publication presentation will discuss choosing and framing a journal article. It will also offer some quick perspective on the difference between a MECAM paper in terms of format and framing, and a peer-reviewed article.

- To guide fellows in selecting and framing an effective topic choice and argument development.
- To clarify the key differences in format and framing between a MECAM working paper and a peer-reviewed journal article.
- To provide practical insights and quick perspectives on how to adapt research for different publication contexts and audiences.

Program:

MECAM Fellows' Study Day Tunis, Tunisia – December 5th, 2025

Schedule	Activity	Location
09:00-09:15	<p><i>Welcome</i> Julius Dihstelhoff Emna Beltaief</p> <p><i>Opening remarks</i> Souhir Zekri</p>	<p>MECAM Center 27, rue Florian, Borj Zouara Tunis:</p> <p><i>Presentation of preliminary project results</i></p>
09:15-10:30	<p>Panel I –Examining Songs, Rituals, and Musical Repertoires and Their Asymmetric Representations in Africa and the Maghreb.</p> <p>Moderation: Imene Gannouni Khemiri</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Omotolani Ebenezer Ekpo: “Conceptualizing Sonic Bridges through the Musical Performances of Stambeli and Ajonkpa Ritual Music of Africa” Souhir Zekri: “A Poster Presentation of a Collage on Past and Present Traditional Wedding Trends in Mahdia and Kerkena” Valentina Schiattarella: “Musical Practices in Some Amazigh Languages” <p>(10 to 15 minutes per person) (different presentation format)</p> <p><i>Discussion with EC and IAB members</i></p>	
10:30-10:45	<p>Break</p>	
10:45-12:30	<p>Panel II – Reckoning with Historical Asymmetries in the Maghreb: Cultural, Spiritual, and Political Discursive Interventions.</p> <p>Moderation: Yazid Benhadda</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Saniya Taher: “Filiation and Alterity: Frantz Fanon and Essedik Jeddi” Justin Malachowski: “From Moral Geography to the Commons: Organizational Shifts in Tunisia’s Socially Engaged Art Scene” Cyrine Kortas: “Navigating Modernist Crisis Narrative with Sufi Hermeneutics” Imene Gannouni Khemiri: “Im/mobility and Power Asymmetries: Media Discourses on Sub-Saharan Migrants in Tunisia” <p>(10 to 15 minutes per person) (different presentation format)</p> <p><i>Discussion with EC and IAB members</i></p>	

12:30-13:30	Lunch break	
13:30-15:15	<p>Panel III – Historical Asymmetries and State-Building in the Maghreb</p> <p>Moderation: Saniya Taher</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Max Ajl: “Arab Nationalism, Counterinsurgency, and State Formation” • Imad Alsoos: “The Genesis of the First Muslim State in Medina and Ibn Khaldoun’s Methodology of Asabiyya” • Yazid Benhadda: “The passport in reading sovereignty and mobility in colonial Morocco” • Massenssen Cherbi: “Civil-military relations in Algerian law: between subordination and moderating power” <p>(10 to 15 minutes per person) (different presentation format)</p> <p>Discussion with EC and IAB members</p> <p>Closing remarks: Valentina Schiattarella</p>	
15:15-15:30	Break	
15:30-17:00	<p>Sharing Research Experience: Reflections on a Stay at MIASA, Accra, Ghana</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Valerie Hänsch: “Reflections on the research stay at MIASA, Accra, Ghana” <p>(10 minutes)</p> <p>Publication workshop Maria Josua and Max Ajl</p>	

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Participants' Bios

Emna Beltaief

Dr. Beltaief is a professor of French Language and Literature and a researcher at the Faculty of Social and Human Sciences in Tunis. She specializes in French literature and has held several key administrative roles, including department head and contributor to the development of university programs. Her career is marked by significant academic contributions that integrate teaching, research, and institutional leadership within the Tunisian university system. She also serves as Vice Rector of the University of Tunis and as the Tunisian Director of MECAM.

Cyrine Kortas

Dr. Kortas is an assistant professor of English Literature at the University of Gabes, Tunisia. She is also a member of the Research Unit LAD at the Faculty of Arts and Humanities, Sfax. Her current research focuses on the influence of modernist English authors such as D. H. Lawrence on the rise of the modernist novel in the Maghreb region; it explores the concept of the New Man in a selection of novels published in Tunisia and Morocco while introducing Sufism as a theory of analysis.

Imad Alsoos

Dr. Alsoos got a bachelor's degree in English language and literature and a master's degree in international studies from Birzeit University, Palestine, as well as a master's degree in public law and international relations from the University of the Basque Country. In 2017, he earned his PhD from the Free University of Berlin, focusing on Hamas's political discourse and organizational mobilization in Gaza. In 2018, he joined the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology. In 2023-24, he joined the Merian Centre for Advanced Studies in the Maghreb. Among his research interests is a comparative study of Muslim thoughts in Mashreq and Maghreb. He examines the way their interactions have influenced the development of the Ennahda party's political thought. Now, he is an affiliated fellow at MECAM, where he explores a genealogy of the concept of the state of Al-Madina

Imene Gannouni Khemiri

Dr. Khemiri is a short-term fellow at MECA for the 2025 cohort. She is an Assistant Professor in the English Department at the Faculty of Letters, Arts and Humanities, University of Manouba, Tunisia. She holds a Master's degree and a PhD in cultural studies from the University of Manouba. Her doctoral research focused on the representation of Tunis in British travel writing (1815-1910). Her research interests include travel writing, migration studies, media studies, and visual culture. She has recently published "The making of "migration crisis": Representing sub-Saharan migrants in Tunisian online media outlets," *Crossings: Journal of Migration & Culture, Special Issue: 'In Transit: Mapping Digital and Transnational Narratives across Tunisian Borderlands'* (2025). As a participant in the "Migrant in Transit" program for emerging migration scholars in Tunisia, she has recently developed a strong interest in migration studies.

Julius Dihstelhoff

From May 2020 to December 2024, Dr. Dihstelhoff was the Academic Coordinator for the international "Merian Centre for Advanced Studies in the Maghreb (MECAM)," based in Tunis. Now, he is MECAM's German Director. He is also a post-doctoral research fellow in the Department of Politics at the Centre for Near and Middle Eastern Studies (CNMS) at Philipps University Marburg. His research focuses on Political Islam and German foreign policy in the Arab world since the so-called Arab Spring, with a special focus on Tunisian transformation processes.

Justin Malachowski

Dr. Malachowski is a postdoctoral researcher at the Institute of Sociology and Cultural Organization at Leuphana University. He is a short-term fellow at MECAM for the 2025 cohort. He holds a PhD in social anthropology from the University of California at Davis. His research focuses on themes of art, media, urbanism, development, and family. For over ten years, Malachowski has conducted long-term ethnographic research in Tunisia on the transformation of contemporary art following the 2011 revolution. His current work examines cultural development in North Africa and the circulation of artistic discourses from the Global South in Europe. In addition to his academic research, Malachowski is also an artist and curator. Among his recent publications is "Staging Arts in the Historic City: Development Funding, Social Media Images, and Tunisia's

Contemporary Public Art Scene" (*Journal of City and Society*, 2022).

Luise Fischer

Dr. Fischer is MECAM's new academic coordinator. She specializes in Human and Historical Geography, with a focus on Education and Sustainability. Her expertise encompasses human geography, historical geography, the transfer and role of knowledge in societies, and sustainability. She was a member of Philipps-Universität Marburg and the Merian Centre for Advanced Studies in the Maghreb (MECAM) from 2018 to 2023.

Maria Josua

Dr. Josua is a Research Fellow and Publication Manager at the Merian Centre for Advanced Studies in the Maghreb (MECAM), part of the German Institute for Global and Area Studies (GIGA). She specializes in authoritarian politics in the Middle East and North Africa, focusing on legitimacy crises and state-society relations, especially in Tunisia, Algeria, Jordan, and Morocco. Holding an M.A. and a PhD from the University of Tübingen, her research explores political rule dynamics during the Arab uprisings. As MECAM's Publication Manager, she manages the centre's publications and outreach, enhancing the visibility of social science and humanities research on the Maghreb.

Massensen Cherbi

Dr. Cherbi is a long-term fellow at MECAM. He holds a doctorate in law from the University of Paris II Panthéon-Assas, where in 2019 he defended his thesis on "the limits of Algerian constitutionalism", which happened to coincide with the Algerian Hirak, which he experienced in situ during its first year in Algiers. He works more generally on authoritarianism in the Maghreb, from independence to the Hirak, through the prism of law, but also on issues of democratic transition and transitional justice in the region. His research focus on constituent processes, citizenship, relations between civilians and the militaries, the place of Islam, the status of women, and questions of identity, through a legal and more particularly constitutional prism. To this end, he works on case laws, preparatory works, parliamentary debates, alternative draft constitutions, and political speeches, particularly through archives. For several years, he taught general constitutional law, the Fifth Republic, and the Constitutions of the MENA region at the Ecole de Droit de la Sorbonne, the universities of Le Havre and Amiens, and Sciences Po Toulouse, Paris, and Grenoble.

Max Ajl

Dr. Ajl is a long-term fellow at MECAM/University of Tunis, a Senior Fellow at the Department of Conflict and Development Studies at Ghent University, and a researcher in the Tunisian Observatory for Food Sovereignty and the Environment. He is the author of a recent book titled *A People's Green New Deal*, as well as an editor at *Agrarian South* and *The Journal of Labor and Society*. A prolific writer, Max's work has appeared in *Agrarian South*, *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, *Globalizations*, *Review of African Political Economy*, *Middle East Report*, and many other scholarly and popular journals, including *The Guardian's Comment is Free*, *Boston Review*, and *Monthly Review*. He researches climate politics, Tunisian national liberation, agrarian politics in the Arab region, ecological planning, and Arab-North African intellectual history.

Omotolani Ekpo

Dr. Ekpo is a short-term fellow at MECAM for the 2025 cohort. She is an ethnomusicologist, composer, and innovative advocate for cultural sustainability, deeply passionate about preserving threatened African musical traditions. Originally from Nigeria, she has conducted pioneering research on the musical practices of the Jukun people, focusing on how indigenous music conveys social equity, environmental protection, public health messages, preserves cultural identity, and promotes peacebuilding. She is the lead author of "Documenting distinctive features of 'Keku' dance ensemble of the Jukun nation of sub-Saharan Africa" and has presented her works at leading academic forums, including global ICTMD conferences and symposiums, the ASAUK conference, and the Pandemic Sciences International conference at the University of Oxford in the UK. She is an active member of interdisciplinary research teams and professional organizations. Her creative works, ranging from musical compositions to visual narratives, serve as tools for advocacy, education, and empowerment, especially among underrepresented communities.

Saniya Taher

Dr. Taher is a short-term fellow at MECAM for the 2025 cohort. She earned a PhD in Fall 2024 from the Department of Comparative Literature with a Designated Emphasis in Critical Theory at the University of California, Berkeley. Her research situates Fanon within the archives of the Middle East and North Africa, establishing a South-South intervention that elaborates on the issues of coloniality and anti-colonialism, particularly in its national specificity and its global dimension. Saniya was a postdoctoral researcher affiliated with the Europe in the Middle East, Middle East in Europe (EUME) research program in Berlin during spring/summer 2025. She is currently affiliated with the research project Madness, Media, Milieus: Reconfiguring the Humanities in Postwar Europe (Volkswagen Stiftung/Bauhaus-University Weimar).

Souhir Zekri

Dr. Zekri is a short-term fellow at MECAM for the 2025 cohort. She earned a doctorate in English studies from the University of Strathclyde (Glasgow, Scotland) and currently teaches at the Higher Institute of Digital Engineering of Tunis (University of Tunis). Her main research areas are autobiographical writing theory, motherhood, and gender studies. She also specializes in the Italian diaspora in Scotland and spatial theory/geographical humanities. She produces literary creations and focuses on the form of testimony in relation to the theme of motherhood. Her doctoral thesis was published under the title *Mapping Metabiographical Heartlands in Marina Warner's Fiction* in 2019, and her upcoming book *Metaphors of Motherhood in Marina Warner's Fiction* will be published by Routledge in 2026.

Valentina Schiattarella

Dr. Schiattarella is a short-term fellow at MECAM for the 2025 cohort. She is a linguist specializing in the description and documentation of minority languages, particularly those of the Berber/Amazigh family. She earned her PhD from the École Pratique des Hautes Études (Paris) in 2015, with a dissertation on the Siwi Berber language. Since 2016, she has conducted postdoctoral research and teaching activities in Italy (University of Naples "L'Orientale"), Germany (Alexander von Humboldt Foundation, University of Hamburg), and France (ILARA, Paris), focusing on Siwi and other Amazigh languages of Libya. Her research combines linguistic analysis and documentation based on field data. She is the author of *Berber Texts from Siwa* (Köppe, 2017) and has recently submitted a comprehensive grammar of Siwi.

Valerie Hänsch

Valerie Hänsch holds a PhD from the Bayreuth International Graduate School of African Studies (BIGSAS). She has worked as a lecturer at the University of Bayreuth, LMU Munich, the University of Khartoum, the University of Sousse, and the University of Vienna. Her research has focused on technologies, large-scale infrastructures, socio-ecological changes, and displacement in Sudan. She has also worked in a collaborative research project on Sudanese audiovisual heritage and image restitution at the Ethnological Museum in Berlin. Her current research explores the links between activism, aesthetic practices, and affect in Sudan's revolutionary process. As a visual anthropologist, she has produced several collaborative ethnographic films. Her film *Sifinja – The Iron Bride* (2009) has received multiple awards. She is co-editor of the special journal issue "Temporalities of Waiting in Africa" (Critical African Studies, 2020) and author of the monograph *The Attempt to Stay: Dam Building, Displacement, and Resistance in the Nile Valley, Sudan* (Berghahn Books, 2024).

Yazid Benhadda

Dr. Benhadda is a short-term fellow at MECAM for the 2025 cohort. He holds a PhD in political science and international relations from the University of Exeter (United Kingdom). His research intersects critical security studies, colonial migration history, and North African studies. During his time at Exeter, he also worked as a teaching fellow at the same university. He has been a guest researcher at the University of Marburg within the CRC138 "Dynamics of Security" program. His work has been published in *International Political Sociology* and *Migration Studies*.