Summary in English

The Jewish Diasporascape in the Straits. An Ethnographic Study of Jewish Businesses Across Borders.

A first exploration for this study on the businesses of Jewish entrepreneurs in the Jewish Diaspora in Southeast Asia, and more particularly in Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore, revealed that a conventional business anthropological approach would not be a fruitful way to proceed. A research population in Indonesia and Malaysia appeared practically absent, while, on the other hand, in Singapore there is relatively prospering community. This scattering, with Singapore as the central node, is not coincidental. The business practices in this study, the fashion business of FJ Benjamin (FJB), the coffee chain Coffee Bean & Tea Leaf (CBTL) and that of diamond dealers, show that Singapore is used as a central node in their businesses from where also Indonesia and Malaysia are served. Jewish presence in Singapore and their absence in Indonesia and Malaysia cohere.

Another insight which forced itself upon was that, despite the physical absence of Jews in Malaysia and Indonesia, according to popular and blatant anti-Semitic publications, a non-physical Jewish business presence is very much felt there. Due to the physical absence of Jews in the region, the scientific world has labeled this discourse as an ‘anti-Semitism without Jews discourse’. In this discourse the quality of Jews to function as the Other and as a framing model to analyze thorny societal developments is worked out allegorically. Anti-Semitism points to the contested dominance of the Overseas Chinese who control much of the economy in the region. However, in this allegorizing, it is left unnoticed how Jews themselves are dealing with the transforming capacity which the allegory as a trope might have on for instance Jewish business presence or absence. In this ‘anti-Semitism without Jews’ discourse Jews are allegorized away.

This ambivalent position of the Jewish community and their businesses in this region points to an exceptional and complex situation. On first thoughts, the in Diaspora studies popular multi-sited approach, to accommodate research on frequent border crossing in the classic Diaspora triangle (the relation between the three nodes; the Diaspora group, the guestland and the homeland) seemed appropriate. But, second thoughts pointed towards an alternative approach which is inspired by complexity thinking. This line of thought seemed better equipped to deal with the multi-dimensional complexities in time and space of the fluid oscillations between Jewish presence and absence in the research area.

Thinking in complexities is built on network theory. In complexity studies complex human systems are investigated. In this study Complexity and Diaspora studies intersect with an extensive empirical study. In the thesis, in chapter two and three, it is investigated how theoretically and methodologically the insights that Complexity studies offer, are applied in this study on Jewish Diaspora business networks.

This resulted in the design of the Straits Jewish Diasporascape which offers a multi-spatial and multi-temporal framework for investigation. The spatial regional topology, the Straits, signifies the water-ways area that provides transoceanic access between the Indian Ocean and the South Chinese Sea, and the adjacent port cities in the Malay World like Singapore,
Melaka, Penang, Surabaya en Jakarta. The Straits, as a regional metaphor and culture area, offers for the understanding of Jewish mobilities an appropriate regional delineation which is better equipped to understand the complex patterns of their mobilities in these parts of the world. Better than when this is done using spatial delineations like, the colonial empires or the nation state.

It was important from a methodological point of view not only to find ways to study the present Jewish networks, but also to find ways to study their absence or presumed elusiveness of their networks. For that, the - by semiotics inspired - idea of method assemblage has been put forward. With method assemblage hidden realities are detected, which by this detection are automatically reinforced. This implies a critical realist approach which put forward that reality lives by the grace of the denial, negation, suppression or the forgetting of possible other realities. This puts Derrida’s notion of difference into the thinking of networks. It supposes a critical position towards the reality in an existing network and urges to detect hidden realities. At the same time it offers the possibility to ‘distort into clarity’ a different, more clear or more just reality. Like the one which is generated in this dissertation with the description and delineation of what is coined the Straits Jewish Diasporascape, and which is more precise laid down by three business network case studies..

In chapter four a hinterland for this Straits Jewish Diasporascape is depicted with which, bye historising, as many as possible tracks and traces of – once – Jewish presence are investigated to catch the sight of the most relevant fluids. Fluids are the shaky fundaments on which networked realities are built. Fluids, after region and networks, is a third topology that spatially designates the Straits Jewish Diasporascape. The hinterland offers in time and space a network view as to how the primary objects in this study become interconnected, but it is explicitly not meant to be a structure from where, dialectically or in other ways, it is possible to isolate matters of cause and effect to explain actors individual dealings. A hinterland is never complete. The same is true for the – never complete - allegorical tales that are told in this hinterland chapter, like those of the family Fontein, or the Penang Jewish Cemetery. This hinterland chapter offers a wide and diverse range of tales and histories which depict the time and spatial dimensions in the Straits Jewish Diasporascape. It is important to acknowledge that this depiction is colored. These acknowledgements divert the attention from the necessity to create a complete hinterland to the task to produce an as much as possible informative hinterland, one in which it is obvious that the author has an important voice to put forward the for him relevant – moral - issues, of which the advocacy of value pluralism is an important one.

The first and second part of the research question urges to investigate how Jewish businesses in the Straits operate and how Jewish ethno-religious affiliations (the J-factor) hamper or facilitate their businesses. The theoretical and methodological perspective implicates an alternative approach. In the case-studies special attention is given to the most important actants (relational materialities) in the business practices; the diamond for the diamond dealers, coffee for CBTL and fashion apparels for FJB. This is to investigate the restrictions or possibilities that the actant imposes on networks. Especially the diamond trade provides in this respect an interesting perspective. It appears that because of the limited commoditization of the diamond in the trade, organizational variations have remained limited. The value of the diamond is still assessed through a limited and orderly series of variables; the four C’s (carat, cut, colour, clarity). By shutting out possible network
disturbances (from fluids that let their presence felt through network interventions) the trade has remained rather insular. That is also how in this trade the Jewish dominance has been enduring. Disturbances in the CBTL network have been kept limited as well through the organisational formula of franchising. The influence of a Jewish factor can be found in the spatial organisational bifurcated pattern of CBTL’s management. That pattern mirrors the global spread of members of the family Sassoon, the owners of CBTL. Control at a distance in their franchise business is made easier because the CEO’s of the company, two brothers, are able to operate relatively independent from each other, each in their own region. The franchising concept guarantees a relatively disturbance free operation of their networked organisation. The network patterns of the FJB organisation are the most vulnerable. The fashion business is very dynamic, and therefore the organisation of the fashion business is vulnerable to network interventions. For FJB there have been options to intervene via the J-factor. The CEO in the company also has a central position in the small Singapore Jewish community. Via trust funds which are established by deceased rich members of the community, there is a possibility, via stock portfolio’s of the trust funds, to veil and manipulate the interest in companies that are quoted on the stock exchange.

The fourth spatial topology, which is dealt with in this thesis, is the topology of ‘fire’. Fire points to the unexpected, the small and faraway causes that might have big effect on the business organizations in the selected case-studies. A system reality in an ‘outside’ region might diverge or might contest with a networked reality in the research space. When these systems come together, or when in one single system a relatively isolated part asserts its force, the result might be a change of the networked organisation. Internet is important here. For the Jewish businesses, the internet is a possible source of trouble, especially when these businesses operate in nation states like Malaysia and Indonesia, and when there is a link with the Jewish Diaspora’s homeland, Israel. Anti-Semitism, Anti-Zionism and an Anti-Israel stance might conflate and reactions might be disruptive. Jewish entrepreneurs like the Benjamins and the Sassoons, who already for generations operate in this region, are better equipped to operate in this difficult business arena than newly arrived expatriates and Israelis. In their businesses they don’t deny their Jewish background, but they also do not pronounce it. They keep their Jewish identity low-profile. In all three cases there is a direct or indirect link with Israel. Together with the other Jewish groups the Israelis play a role in the organisation of Jewish life in Singapore. As a young nation state Israel is, notwithstanding the Zionist ideal, which urges the dispersed in the Diaspora to return home, very active in establishing important and meaningful relations outside Israel. This is also true for the Straits, and contradictory to the idea how Jews in the Diaspora are supposed to pronounce their diasporic identity. Nevertheless, as anthropological concepts, Diaspora and the diaspora triangle – the relationship between the Diaspora group, the home- and motherland – are still meaningful. At least these concepts refer to multiple and more complex relations which a migrant group has to face when trying to anchor in a new land. Complexity principles pushes the way to investigate Diaspora further to its limits. They urge to look beyond the in diaspora research common three nodal multi-sitedness as the way to proceed when investigating diasporic relationships. This Diasporascape study, and more particularly the way the fourth spatial topology of ‘fire’ is applied, is helpful to re-direct the investigation to a more complex multi-nodal research space, which for this study has been labeled the Straits Jewish Diasporascape.
The spatial topology of ‘fire’ points to the grazing of systems and to conflicting networked realities in a system. It offers the space to re-think the position of Jews as middlemen, brokers or pariah entrepreneurs and reformulate their position in networks in ‘open systems’. Jewish businessmen in the Straits operate at the rims and rift of systems that overlap, collide or bifurcate and in which realities are created that ignore, reject or suppress other reality possibilities. A company like FJB is participating fully in the Singapore business arena. They have introduced fashion items that introduce the European and American taste to an Eastern audience. The same applies to CBTL. Before Starbucks gained a foothold in the region, CBTL introduced the Americanized speciality coffee-concept to the region. The diamond trade delivers next to glamorous, glittering and pricey objects also easy transportable exchange and store value which facilitates the anonymous mobility of capital.

These businesses require special resources and abilities. ‘Fire’ is the topological space where business opportunities may emerge. The notion of ‘fire’ rejects a singular reality and indicates the possibility of a rich connectivity mesh. It is essential to possess the awareness and knowledge of this mesh to sense opportunities. A sensitivity to the fluids which might ‘wash down’ networked realities is needed in order to create and replace them by new ones. For the Jewish businessmen in the Straits it is easier to connect within and in-between the for them relevant systems, and to make connections where others were not able to make them (yet). Certainly, in this connectivity the ethno-religious factor (the J-factor) does play a role. The same for the third space in the Diaspora triangle, the motherland Israel. But it would be reductionist to narrow this down to essentialist, culturalist, religious, institutionalist, political historical or diasporic, habitus-like discursive levels in order to become explanatory. With the design and enactment of the Straits Jewish Diasporascape, as an ever changing and volatile dissipative open system, endless possible variations are put forward which de-frost the icy undertows in reductionist explanatory formulas. Rather than providing easy answers for complex matters, this study provides with extensive descriptions of its business practices, a thorough insight in the routes and anchorages of a small Diaspora community.