



Ronit Ricci, *Islam Translated: Literature, Conversion, and the Arabic Cosmopolis of South and Southeast Asia*

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DESPITE A GROWING literature on Islam beyond the Middle East, few comparative studies can be found that are truly trans-local in their scope while remaining strongly rooted in place. Ronit Ricci's detailed historical investigation of the role played by literary networks in the spread of Islam in the South and Southeast Asian archipelago not only fills this lacuna but also offers a new framework for comparative scholarship. It makes a valuable contribution to the literature on the relationships between South India and the Southeast Asian archipelago that have primarily focused on trade. Instead she shows us how literary networks are an important site of interaction between a trans-local/wider Islamic world and local communities. The book argues for understanding religious conversion and translation as deeply historically entwined processes; conversion provokes large translation projects whilst simultaneously gathering momentum through the dissemination of texts.

An examination of the translation of the book of *One Thousand Questions* into Javanese, Malay, and Tamil offers a paradigm for understanding the links between conversion and translation. It narrates the story of the conversion of an important Jewish leader, Abdullah Ibnu Salam, in seventh century Arabia, after being convinced by answers to one thousand questions posed to the Prophet as a challenge. Inspired by Sheldon POLLOCK's thesis on the Sanskrit cosmopolis (2009), the book makes a convincing case for the existence of an *Arabic cosmopolis* in the region. Ricci argues that Islamic, Arabicized texts such as the translations of *One Thousand Questions*, helped shape and maintain an Arabic cosmopolitan sphere in South and Southeast Asia. This is an important theoretical intervention for it decenters Arabic from the Middle East and Arabia, long considered the center of the Islamic world even though the majority of the world's Muslim population lives outside it. The book is divided into three broad

parts on translation, conversion, and a wider reflection of a new literary and religious repository in the region in the conclusion.

In the first part, "Translation," Ricci makes a strong case for studying translation as a set of culturally specific practices that vary over time and space rather than as a textual genealogy. She shows how the story of *One Thousand Questions* traveled and was understood in non-linear, roundabout ways. She also develops the idea of an *Arabicized* rather than Arabic language and literary cultures by referring to a wide range of instances in which Arabic influenced local languages, most often by combining rather than replacing them. Furthermore, the emphasis on the new language in which the text is being rendered anew rather than the source language foregrounds the stress on the local identity of the text. This break with emphasis on the genealogy of Islam is another important theoretical point that merits attention, evident in this study more in the Javanese case than the Malay *One Thousand Questions* texts. In these processes of translation, not only did Arabic inaugurate a new cosmopolitan age, but it was itself vernacularized. A fascinating, brief comparison with a European example throws into question the very concept of translation as it is widely understood, to be rooted in Eurocentric experience and theory in its privileging of the notion of the individual. Rather than the stress placed on the individual translator and on the fidelity of translation in Europe, the Tamil, Javanese, and Malay materials, in most cases, anonymize the translator and display greater creativity. Though not the primary focus of the book, I was left wanting more on this comparative axis.

In the second part, entitled "Conversion," Ricci takes the discussion of translation and conversion as being linked further by pointing to the important fact that Arabic impacted local languages through intermediary languages, of which the most prominent was Persian. She also dwells at some length on words and phrases that remain untranslated because they are already familiar to the community (for example, Qur'anic passages and scenes). This discussion is based on A. L. Becker's concept of "prior text," signaling the role played by translation in conversion and also post-conversion in the integration of the broader community. The important theoretical point to be gleaned from this discussion is that texts are not static entities. Translation editions of *One Thousand Questions* over time incorporate views and assumptions about conversion prevalent at the time of translation and transmission. Here again is a point of difference from the western paradigm of translation; instead of looking for exact meaning there is a "search for equivalence," opening windows into social and political worlds at different points of time. This reiterates the appreciation of the local. Ricci writes that retaining the scripts for Javanese and Tamil was an aspect of reverence for the local that did not diminish with the adoption of new beliefs and cosmopolitan literary forms (179). She also shows us, through fascinating examples, such as the importance of the controversial *wujudiya* doctrine in Java, how the balance between the frame story and doctrinal teachings shifts in the translations over time. Translations of the *One Thousand Questions* then demonstrate a shift in emphasis from two religions engaged in dialogue to a dialogue on two perspectives on Islam. This lends further insight into a dynamic reading of texts such that they can reveal social and religious change over time at the local level, and also the shifting relationships between the local and the global and Arabic and vernacular (156).

In the third part, “conclusion,” Ricci discusses the Book of *One Thousand Questions* as a prior text itself. Through examples of intertextuality she shows how this text too “connects past and present and the foreign and familiar” (253). She also summarily outlines the differences and similarities between the Sanskrit and Arabic cosmopolis, reiterating her emphasis on Arabicized cultures. Unlike Pollock, she is not comparing a strictly cosmopolitan age with a vernacular one but instead presents the world of Arabic and Arabicized literature as part of the same continuum.

As I ended the book, a question that I could not find a satisfactory answer to in my reading was, what does it mean to convert, especially if there is ongoing negotiation between the old and the new? As an anthropologist I would also have valued more space accorded to the local doctrinal texts into which the book of *One Thousand Questions* was transferred by way of translation. We get a glimpse of this in the discussion of *wali* (saintly) traditions in Java. This would strengthen the argument on translation being culturally specific and dynamic and that conversion is a gradual process, but nevertheless imbued with tensions. Brief forays into the local political contexts (for example, how the Portuguese conquest in Southeast India necessitated the need for a comprehensive work on Islamic teachings, 104) also merited greater attention to understand the particular historical impetus for translations and conversions. We also do not learn enough about patronage; who commissioned these works, for example? A hint of this comes only in the conclusion, while outlining the similarities with Pollock’s Sanskrit cosmopolis. Finally, just as with patronage, the people who moved along these networks—religious teachers, or Sufi networks—and were central to spreading, sustaining, and linking, find mention only in the conclusion (264, 265). Ultimately, networks of travel, trade, and literature are not mutually exclusive, but overlap and intersect. However, just the statement of this curiosity and my thirst for more on the subject is testimony to the book’s success as a significant piece of scholarship on the role of language and literary networks in the spread of Islam and the interplay between the vernacular and cosmopolitan.

REFERENCE

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