

Book Reviews

RONIT RICCI, *Islam Translated: Literature, Conversion, and the Arabic Cosmopolis of South and Southeast Asia* (Delhi: Permanent Black), 2011, pp. 336.

Ronit Ricci's *Islam Translated* argues for a consideration of conversion and translation as 'mutually constitutive processes' (p. 271) that operated in a 'literary network' linking Muslim cultural and sacral spaces across South India and Southeast Asia. This process, Ricci demonstrates through the examination of the corpus of a singular text, *The Book of One Thousand Questions*—going from an Arabic original source to Tamil, Malay and Javanese during the sixteenth through twentieth centuries. This tenth century Arabic work *Kitāb Masā'il 'Abdallāh Bin Salām* notes a conversation between a Jewish leader Ibnu Salam and the Prophet Muhammad and covers varied manners of questions about ritual and theology.

The book is divided into two substantive sections, 'Translation' and 'Conversion'. The three evidentiary chapters in 'Translation' focus on Javanese (*The Book of Samud*), Tamil (*Āyira Macalā*) and Malay (*Seribu Masalah*) localisations of the *Kitāb* highlighting the usage of citations, application to specific contexts, and the presence of untranslated technical phrases or scripts. These chapters are clear in their reading of a wide array of sources and do a laudatory job of demonstrating how a text is converted to, and converts itself to the social landscape. The first chapter of the 'Translation' section, begins with the question of 'what exactly translation meant in contexts distant in place and time' (p. 31) and makes the argument that translation into the Tamil, Javanese and Malay languages marks the effacement of the translator and the creative transcreation of the source material in the new context. Yet, as the subsequent chapters demonstrate, this insight comes via a strictly delimited slice and one can imagine other concrete examples of similar texts which do 'not' operate thus—such as, 'al-Hujwiri's eleventh century Persian *Kashf al-Mahjub* which undergoes rapid translations and maintains a very determined authorial voice (including a lament by Hujwiri that a previous work of his was claimed by an unethical translator!).

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The second section ‘Conversion’ examines in three chapters: the question of cosmopolitanism by presenting the centrality of Arabic script, Arabic corpus of texts, and their ‘aesthetic power’ (as Sheldon Pollock has argued for, in his explication of the Sanskrit Cosmopolis); the necessary link between Arabic and conversion to Islam in South and Southeast Asia; and the depiction of the central Jewish figure, giving us insights into Jewish–Muslim relations in the region. The first two chapters are in close conversation with Pollock’s thesis. The centrality given by Ricci specifically to Arabic here, however, is debatable and reproduces claims of the Tradition, rather than the fluid textual realities of community since the ninth century. In fact, the central argument of the seventh chapter underlines to this reader that ‘Arabic Cosmopolis’ may be a limiting concept. In examining the question of conversion, Ricci notes: ‘Conversion to Islam meant, in part, the translation of stories from Arabic or Persian into Tamil, Malay and Javanese’ (p. 214). As key Persian versions of *Kitāb* are not examined, and neither is the textual corpus put into conversation with material and landscape evidence, this argument is too thinly stretched. The eighth chapter is perhaps the most suggestive, as it thinks productively through the presence of a Jewish conversant in a dialogue about faith. One is reminded of Simon Digby’s essays on the Sufi-Yogi encounter here, and wonders what Ricci would make of the non-Muslim as a necessary part of recognising difference in South Asia.

Ricci reads together a geographic and linguistic context that has largely remained hidden in Indological studies and one is reminded of another context-shaping work to judge its potential impact. In 1977, *Hagarism: The Making of the Islamic World* by Patricia Crone and Michael Cook re-cast the Muslim past as a process of translation—whereby early Islam was created through the alliance between Arab Eastern Syriac Jewish tradition, the ‘Hagarene’. To many critical reviewers, this argument had a long history in European thought (from Robert of Ketton to Martin Luther to André du Ryer to Voltaire), with Muhammad imagined as translator of bits of the Talmud and the New Testament. But *Hagarism*’s impact was on another front—it situated early Islam in the Near East of late Antiquity—and much of current scholarship reflects this change. We now focus on a process-based, evolutionary Islam that got coherence from its interaction with the socio-political world of the seventh century. The late ‘Umayyad and ‘Abbasid period ‘translation project’ is a constitutive part of our understanding with any number of scholarly texts dealing with the movement of the Sanskrit theories of governance or Greek dream manuals into Arabic.

Yet, Ricci retains a regard for some core ‘Islam’ which remains ‘Arab’ or ‘Arabic’. Tradition itself maintains that Qur’an’s earliest ‘translation’ were into Persian and, perhaps, *lisan al-Hindi* (language of al-Hind). The geo-political reality of the Damascus centered ‘Umayyad empire stretching to Andalus, Khurasan and Sind necessitated the creations of newly translated tax collectors, religious guides and historians, and then fact of translation appears obligatory. The evidences

from Ibn-i ‘Ishaq to al-Madā’ini to al-Tabārī to Buzūrg ibn Shariyār all reflect an imperium where bureaucratisation propelled translation as an engine of growth just as geographies moved into Persian across central and northern Asia. In effect, Persian is the key intermediary language for the whole set of translations under examination by Ricci, yet, the analytical focus of *Islam Translated* is on the encounter between ‘Islamic and Arabic culture’.

What is conversion, then, but translation? Understood thusly, Islam—as a faith and a polity—has always reflected all the various processes of translation that one can imagine historically or conceptually. It is composed of theological, political and material forms borrowed, molded, transcreated, expressed the myriad pre-texts that surrounded it. *Islam Translated* helps us think about movement of objects as texts, though the people and landscape retreat into the background. It is an accomplished and close reading of a series of poly-lingual texts that bring to our attention a most-overlooked geography as their ‘necessary’ context. Undoubtedly, this is an important book in the field which also has three useful maps.

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ARUPJYOTI SAIKIA, *A Century of Protests: Peasant Politics in Assam Since 1900* (New Delhi: Routledge), 2014, pp. 480.

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Saikia’s book offers a dense narrative of agrarian relations and peasant politics in Assam from 1900–70, based on a rich repertoire of sources, like government documents, newspaper reports, vernacular tracts, political literature, memoirs and interviews. The first chapter outlines the complexities of the agrarian terrain of Assam. Saikia makes visible the structure of agrarian relations in Assam around the late nineteenth/early twentieth century by noting the interrelations between several familiar variables of agrarian power, namely, rent, tenancy forms, migration, indebtedness, and landlessness. His general aim in this chapter is to show how sharecropping became the most dominant feature of the peasant economy in Assam due to exorbitant exactions in the form of rent and other customary services, absentee landlordism, grip over cultivation and marketing of produce by moneylenders, governmental promotion of jute cultivation by encouragement of immigration of east Bengali peasants, spread of small peasant holdings and landlessness. The chapter assembles the central object of analysis of the book, as Saikia says: ‘This complex re-alignment of the agrarian economy—predominantly characterized by sharecropping...also redefined the agrarian relation and nature of rural politics...’ (p. 72).

The second chapter tracks the formation of different kinds of political articulation of the condition of the peasantry. Saikia begins by highlighting petitioning

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