

BOOK REVIEW

Islam Translated: Literature, Conversion, and the Arabic Cosmopolis of South and Southeast Asia, by Ronit Ricci. Chicago and London: The University Of Chicago Press, 2011, 313 pp.

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"Translation is, in itself, a form of conversion."

The coming of Islam to South Asia and Southeast Asia has long held the interest of scholars of religion, history and culture around the world. There is an impressive body of work on the Islamisation of these regions, studying its routes and the roles played by traders, missionaries, Sufi brotherhoods and diplomatic emissaries. Lesser known, perhaps, is the role of literary activity such as composing, translating and the public reading of texts, in the spread of Islam in these regions.

The award-winning¹ *Islam Translated: Literature, Conversion, and the Arabic Cosmopolis of South and Southeast Asia* by Ronit Ricci sets out to investigate how literary texts, their production and translation contributed to Islamisation in South India, Java and the Malay world. The writing of literature and their translation into vernacular languages, Ricci proposes, are intertwined with the conversion to Islam of people and cultures in these regions. The text at the centre of Ricci's study is the *Book of One Thousand Questions*, which was translated into multiple languages from the original Arabic, including Tamil, Javanese and Malay. To understand the significance of this text and its correlation with the themes explored in Ricci's book, it is necessary to provide a brief summary of the *Book of One Thousand Questions* and how it came to South and Southeast Asia.

The original *Book of One Thousand Questions* is based on passages from the Qur'an and *hadīth*² literature about a Jewish leader, Abdullah Ibnu Salam, who engaged the Prophet Muhammad in a series of questions about Islam, theology, mysticism, eschatology and various other matters. Ultimately, Abdullah Ibnu Salam is convinced by Muhammad's answers, acknowledges that Muhammad is a prophet and accepts Islam. This narrative then made its way to South India and the Malay world via Persian translations, or through direct translations from Arabic into the vernacular. Subsequently, multiple manuscripts of translations of the *Book of One Thousand Questions* circulated in the area encompassing what are today

South India, Sri Lanka, and parts of Indonesia, from the 16th century up to the early 20th century.

Islam Translated focuses on four translations of the *Book of One Thousand Questions* to illustrate the ways that literature, its translation and their links to conversion helped bring about Islamisation in South India and Southeast Asia. The texts are *Āyira Macalā* (Tamil), *Serat Samud* and *Serat Suluk Samud Ibnu Salam* (Javanese) and *Hikayat Seribu Masalah* (Malay). Ricci dissects the intersection of texts, translation, cultures and languages in the making of a transregional Islamic space, offering brilliant and insightful analysis.

The chapters in this volume are thematically grouped under two broad headings, both of which are key themes: "Translation" and "Conversion." "Translation" introduces the reader to the translation traditions of the Tamil, Javanese, and Malay languages, and outlines the histories and features of the *Book of One Thousand Questions* translations in the three languages. "Conversion" discusses the ways in which the Arabic language was "converted" in the region through translation, literary depictions of conversion to Islam in Javanese and Malay manuscripts, and finally, compares the representations of Abdullah Ibnu Salam and the Prophet Muhammad in the manuscripts examined. Overall, this book takes care to provide readers with the necessary context of the study in the very beginning, before progressively taking them through the *Āyira Macalā*, *Serat Samud*, *Serat Suluk Samud Ibnu Salam*, and *Hikayat Seribu Masalah*, and on to the larger topics and themes derived from these manuscripts.

Ricci's excellent scholarship is evident—she deftly weaves multiple topics on language(s), translation, literary networks and conversion into a fascinating narrative. Comparing three disparate languages i.e. Tamil, Javanese and Malay and their translation traditions, is a monumental effort, but Ricci is equal to the task. Her creative use of the "cosmopolis"³ as a tool to outline the ways that language, literature and translation linked the diverse cultures in areas where Arabic held sway in Asia enables the reader to imagine a world that was connected through a shared literary tradition. This significantly broadens a worldview that is too used to imagining the world as defined by geographical and/or national boundaries.

The other topics addressed in *Islam Translated* adds to its comprehensive coverage, including how the Arabic language and its script were transformed by translation, traces of pre-Islamic traditions and Sufism in the Asian *Book of One Thousand Questions* manuscripts and comparative perspectives on depictions of Jewish-Muslim relations in the manuscripts. One of the strongest impressions that this book made is how geographical areas as seemingly distant as South India and the islands of Java and Sumatra fall within the same Arabic cosmopolis and literary network. Trade and religion has always connected these areas even before the coming of Islam; what Ricci does in this volume is to show how those connections continued over several centuries, with translation being an impetus.

Islam Translated pushes the boundaries of scholarship on literature, religion and culture. It challenges readers to re-imagine the past as distinguished by connectivity through common platforms (Islam, the Arabic language, and literary and translation traditions). It is a valuable addition to existing studies on Islamisation in South and Southeast Asia, and deserves to be required reading for anyone who wishes to delve further into the subject.

Finally, a note on how contemporary readers will find this volume useful. Reading *Islam Translated* is especially relevant in an era marked by political violence and strife predicated along religious and sectarian lines. The literary network constructed by the diverse translations of the *Book of One Thousand Questions* in South Asia and Southeast Asia represents a model of syncretism, learning and wisdom that carries important lessons for the present. So does the tradition of questioning and dialogue in acquiring knowledge and affirming one's faith, as depicted by the encounter between Abdullah Ibnu Salam and the Prophet Muhammad.

NOTES

1. *Islam Translated* was awarded the Harry J. Benda Prize in Southeast Asian Studies and Best First Book in the History of Religions from the American Academy of Religion (The University of Chicago Press, <http://www.press.uchicago.edu/ucp/books/book/chicago/I/bo11274031.html>)
2. *Hadīth* are reports of the Prophet Muhammad's words, deeds and actions (including his tacit approval/disapproval) by his family members, companions and contemporaries.
3. The concept was originated by Sheldon Pollock (2006), who proposed it to explain the wide-ranging spread and influence of Sanskrit over a vast area and among diverse political entities in Asia (Ricci, 2011, p. 4)

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- Pollock, S. 2006. *The language of the gods in the world of men: Sanskrit, culture, and power in premodern India*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.
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