Multilingual locals and literary circulation before colonialism

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Looking backward, looking forward

Accounts of literary modernity under conditions of colonialism in Asia, Africa, and the Middle East tend to begin form the standpoint of colonialism itself—its impact at the level of new ideas about language, literature, community and "the public"; of new genres like the novel or the short story; of new literary institutions like the journal, associations, and colonial education systems; of new figures of writers and public intellectuals; and of the new diglossia between the colonial language (typically English or French) and local or transregional languages.[1] From this perspective, what was there *before* and gets loosely termed the "precolonial," tends to get fixed into a static and stable "tradition" that needed the colonial impulse to reform and restart.

The three essays in this special issue (and the workshop from which they derive) instead ask the question "what was there before colonialism" from the understanding that this "before" was a dynamic assemblage, but also that taking the "late precolonial" as a standpoint can offer us new perspectives on the questions of "colonial impact" and literary modernity.[2] In this, we are inspired not just by the rich scholarship on the eighteenth century in India, which has focused on the vitality of local, regional, and transregional actors unleashed by the fragmentation of the Mughal empire and the new possibilities offered by the East India Company,[3] but also by the project on "Musical transitions to European colonialism in the Eastern

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[1] Chandra, *Oppressive Present,* Mufti, *Forget English!,* Hourani, *Arabic Thought,* Patel, *The Arab Nahda*.
[2] These essays come from the workshop "Multilingual Locals and Significant Geographies before Colonialism," held at SOAS, University of London on 16-18 June 2016. This was the first in our ERC-funded project *Multilingual Locals and Significant Geographies: a ground-up approach to world* literature (2016-2020); for the full program and abstracts see:
https://www.soas.ac.uk/cclps/research/multilingual-locals-and-significant-geographies/events/16jun2016-workshop-multilingual-locals-and-significant-geographies-before-colonialism.html.
[3] See e.g. Alavi, *Eighteenth Century,* Bayly, *Rulers, Townsmen,* Hakala, *Negotiating Languages.*

Indian Ocean" run by Katherine Schofield at King's College London, of which Richard Williams was part. Through a comparative study of North India and the Malay world, this project showed that "colonial discourse" on music was irrelevant to most regional systems of knowledge until the late nineteenth century. Moreover, "[p]recolonial knowledge systems did not consecutively give way to transitional, then colonial knowledge systems. Instead, reformism was but one strand among many thriving lineages of knowledge that competed for precedence in dynamic musical economies during the colonial era. These streams were facilitated or altered in their course by colonial presence and action, but the vast majority were not beholden to colonial epistemologies." The Musical Transition project noted that, "operating in multiple languages was normative" and "we too needed to place different languages back into dialogue;" and also that, "[p]eople across this region cultivated rich, virtuosic aesthetics of borrowing and reuse across media; and an intermedial perspective is required to make sense of how they responded to new, European entrants into this regional space."[4] Orsini applies this comparative and dynamic multilingual approach to literary transitions to colonialism in her essay.

Looking ahead to colonialism and not backward from it thus involves looking at *other* actors, sites, and practices from those listed in the first paragraph, and asking which of those continued into the colonial period while of course being affected by the new economic and political conditions. Williams's essay for example shows the circulation and flexibility of musicological texts across different languages and circles of connoisseurs, colonial patrons included.

The papers in this special issue were initially conceived (on the basis of our workshop) to map pre-colonial histories of local and transregional multilingualism in North India, Morocco, and the Horn of Africa. [5] In Morocco, this involves

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[4] https://www.kcl.ac.uk/artshums/depts/music/research/proj/mutran/index.aspx. At the SOAS workshop, Schofield also drew our attention to the reception of European music and particularly European instruments, including the harpsichord, among traditional musical families.
[5] see fn 1.

"placing back into dialogue" Tmazight (Berber), classical Arabic and spoken Arabic (Darija), but also Spanish and Judeo-Moroccan; for North India, Persian, Hindavi, Arabic and Sanskrit; and for the Horn of Africa Ge'ez, Arabic, Tigrinya, Somali and Amharic. However, the dynamics of multilingualism, the role of orature and genres in literary texts and practices, and the way different languages separate and mix in the pre-colonial period remain largely under-researched for Morocco and the Horn of Africa in comparison with the considerable work done in North India.[6] The Horn of Africa, for example, was part of an extensive network of cultural exchanges extending to the Middle East and the Eastern Mediterranean, yet the Christian literature in Ge'ez (rich in translations from Greek, Syrian and Arabic, among other languages) and the Muslim literature in Arabic have been studied separately, as distinctive and self-contained traditions. Some extensive research projects[7] are currently collecting, digitalizing and classifying manuscripts from Ge'ez-speaking and Arabic-speaking areas of the Horn—these offer a wealth of materials for future comparative studies in literary and intellectual history. [8] This special issue is therefore a call for more research from the perspective of "multilingual local" and the geographies of circulation and interaction between languages, literatures and communities in the pre-colonial period in this and other areas. In turn, this will offer a better understanding of the making and unmaking of languages and cultural practices during and after colonialism in the regions.[9]

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[6] Orsini, "How to," Orsini and Sheikh, *After Timure Left*, Orsini and Schofield, *Tellings and Texts,* d'Hubert, *In the Shade.*

[7] Ethio-SPaRe: Cultural Heritage of Christian Ethiopia. Salvation, Preservation, Research; TraCES: From Translation to Creation: Changes in Ethiopic Style and Lexicon from Late Antiquity to the Middle Ages; Beta maṣāḥǝft: Manuscripts of Ethiopia and Eritrea; and IslHornAfr: Islam in the Horn of Africa, A Comparative Literary Approach.

[8] An important step in this direction has been a 2017 special issue of *Afrique* analyzing the cross-fertilization and points of contact between the Christian and Islamic manuscript cultures of Ethiopia. Other comparative studies are Wetter's "Amharic literature in Arabic script," and Abdulwehab, *Hand-list*; see also Pankhurst, "Indigenising Islam."

[9] Orsini, "Multilingual Local" and "Whose Amnesia?"

Approaches to literary multilingualism

Perhaps one of the most enduring marks of colonial influence in the formerly colonized world has been that of language ideology. This includes the Herderian idea of language as the expression of community and the marker of community difference (e.g. Arab vs Tmazight in Morocco, and Hindi vs Urdu in North India), but also the perceived need to have a single language for the sake of national consolidation. While the resulting language politics and diglossia between the chosen standard (print-)language and local/spoken languages obtained also within Europe (Anderson), in the colonies this language ideology also produced a new diglossia in which the colonial language became the new High language in education and the higher echelons of the administration, to which local and transregional languages became subordinated. Everywhere, typically the script-language-community continuum also shaped the writing of literary histories, projecting contemporary identities, whether ethnic of linguistic, back into the past.[10] Against the nationalist temptation to streamline and isolate ethnic and linguistic histories, one of the first tasks when reassessing what went on "before" in these multilingual societies and literary cultures is therefore, as the Musical Transition project put it, "place different languages back into dialogue."

Multilingualism is a broad term that covers many different situations and outcomes. As Williams puts it succinctly, "Of course, to be multilingual does not necessarily mean having the same proficiency in every language: in particular, people might be able to understand something they have heard or read, but not be able to compose their own works, or even speak confidently in that same language" (XX)—as the case of Bhanupratap Tivari in Orsini's essay shows. "In this

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[10] In a paper that could not become part of this issue, James Caron, for example, pushes back against attempts to reconstruct a unified history of "Dardistan" later fragmented by Pashto. He argued instead that Pashto could be conceived as a "rhizomic connective space" within "a newly-burgeoning interregional arena;" Caron, "Shadows of the Hindu Kush."

differentially multilingual context, a text can pass between languages, but can also be translated in multiple styles and forms within one language too," Williams adds (XX). Besides, "language is never *one* language," as Apoorvanand reminded us at the SOAS workshop, echoing Bakhtin: each language is heteroglossic and includes other languages.[11] Ronit Ricci also invited us to take emic metaphors seriously—if Arabic texts with Malay glosses are called "bearded texts," evoking the pious appearance of Muslim clerics, and without glosses texts appear "naked" and unread, should we think of Arabic and Malay here as two separate languages or as the Malay embracing and stretching towards Arabic?[12] Extending the metaphor, should we think of Arabic and Malay as two separate language or as two parts of the same body, each with a dedicated function but complementary to each other? Williams also notes that on the page, "transliteration creates the optical illusion of profound transformation, when the change is perhaps more nuanced… Conversely, two manuscripts that appear to represent the same text in the same script may have been intended for different reading practices, ultimately producing quite different texts in the moment of performance and reception" (Williams XX).

But how does one "put the languages back together"? One way is to *note* the *material, textual traces* in manuscripts—often words, proper names of people or places, or else phrases, marginalia, or sometimes interlingual translations—and then *ask what the theoretical import of these traces may be* for our understanding of literary and broader intellectual practices, genres, tastes, and ideas. Another way involves looking in texts for traces and contexts of oral performance, particularly songs and tales.[13]

Sometimes multilingual mediations may have occurred before a text was written down and go unrecorded.[14] In the case of interlingual Malay translations of

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[11] Bakthin, *Speech Genres*.

[12] Ricci, "Reading between the lines."

[13] See Orsini and Schofield, *Tellings and Texts*, also Gelaye, ""Amharic poems and songs," Brugnatelli, "Religious literature," and Wetter, "Religious literature."

[14] Gallien, "Passage to England."

Arabic Islamic texts, at the SOAS workshop Ronit Ricci showed how they bent and reshaped the Malay sentence; Martin Orwin suggested the possibility of Arabic metrical traces in Somali poetry; Simon Leese instead noted that interlingual Persian and particularly Urdu translations of Arabic poems in North India revel in the very possibility that such equivalence may be made.[15] In some cases, as in Bhanupratap Tivari's autobiography in Orsini's essay, multilingual textual traces are a direct result of curricula and canons that were *embodied* in individuals, and raise the question of what it means to think about multilingualism through the body—intuitively we know that we speak and move differently in different languages. The issue is even more central, Ghirmai Negash reminded us at the workshop, when dealing with oral traditions spanning centuries, in which texts carry several layers of multilingual mediations[16]. In some cases, multilingual traces are less clear, as in the case of Tigrinya sentences interspersed in Amharic manuscripts in Ethiopia.[17] To reiterate the point, we must move from simply *noting* these occurrences to *asking* what their theoretical import is.

If one approach to understanding multilingualism focuses on texts and textual traces, another focuses on *contexts*, particularly *spaces* and *people*. At the SOAS workshop, Selamawit Mecca described the linguistic and stylistic changes that the Geez hagiographical texts incurred, as saints and scholars travelled from monastery to monastery, from region to region.[18] Nathan Tabor's essay is an excellent example of the rich complexity that a focus on a single local site brings to light: texts about the gatherings at the celebrated Indo-Persian poet Bedil's grave in mid-eighteenth century Delhi reveal literary acts. "However," he notes, "evidence as collected from period sources is contradictory: the graveside gathering staged cutting-edge verse for a tight-knit group of literary connoisseurs yet the recitation of poetry and the

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[15] Ricci, "Reading between the lines," Orwin, "Is there any Arabic influence," Leese, "Reading *Bānat Suʿād*."

[16] Negash, "Pre-colonial writings."

[17] Nosnitsin, "Hierarchy of languages."

[18] Mecca, "Mapping the circulation."

material practices of the grave reveal non-elite participation, a context further complicated by the elite reciting in an emergent literary vernacular" (XX). So if some accounts focus on Persian poetic recitation and "friendly competition" between leading poets, others revel in scurrilous satirical exchanges, bilingual puns; for some, the loud participation of non-elites was a disgrace, for others it was all part of the fun. "This setting upholds the Persianate socio-aesthetic *khāss pasand wa ʿāmm fahm*, relished by the elite and understood by the masses. This literary ideal, as it bridges class-based realms, helpfully dissuades us from understanding Bedil's graveside poetry gathering as a bounded counter public. Rather, the graveside gathering is a discursive realm that socializes both elite and non-elite participants" (XX). A spatial focus that, following Doreen Massey, considers space as "the multiplicities of stories and trajectories" also allows us to escape the danger of idealizing multilingualism as signifying peaceful coexistence.[19] It spurs us to look for the inevitable exclusions and hierarchies, and look for other stories and other actors.[20]

Circulation, Comparison

Reflecting on the circuits along and through which translations of John Bunyan's *Pilgrim Progress* into African languages circulated, Isabel Hofmeyr has made the point that "we need to uncover empirically the complexity of circuits" and "we need to ask what the theoretical import of such journeys might be" (25). This is what Richard Williams does for the translation and circulation of the musicological text *Sangitadarpana*, noting the "repurposing" of the text for different contexts and functions.

Nathan Tabor speaks of the "everyday literary history of the multilingual Persianate ecumene from the Balkans to Bengal connected through Persian and

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[19] Massey, *For Space*, 9; for multilingualism in al-Andalus, see Gallego, "Languages of medieval Iberia.",
[20] Orsini, "Multilingual Local."

vernacular literary sociability" (XX), but while cosmopolitan languages and the knowledge and aesthetic systems they carried have been the object of intensive reflection in recent years, the relationship between cosmopolitan and vernacular languages requires further comparative study in order to avoid overly simplistic models of superimposition or complementarity.[21] (Orsini "How to", Kornicki for an example).

It has been easier to think multilingually in terms of specific groups or corpuses—as in the Italian scholar Alessandro Bausani's theorization of "Islamic languages" to describe situations in which Arabic, and to a lesser extent Persian and Ottoman Turkish, influenced the written traditions of the local languages of "Muslim peoples" such as Urdu, Turkish, Malay, etc.[22] In the case of Ethiopian Muslims, they spoke the language (more often languages) of the region where they lived, while Arabic was used in religious contexts, and probably for commercial interactions along the Red Sea/Somali coast. We also find manuscripts written in the local languages in the Arabic script ('Ajami), particularly in Harari.[23] Some languages, like Oromo, were first written down in the Arabic script in the context of Islamic schools, to facilitate preaching to non-Arabic speakers. For Morocco, where in Tmazight areas everyone spoke Tmazight while few people spoke Arabic, beside the repertoire of oral epics and legends, a corpus of manuscripts in the various forms of Tmazight has been collected and studied. This includes stories, texts on ritual obligations, devotional poems in praise of the Prophet or of Sufi shaykhs (*marabouts*).[24] By contrast, to our knowledge there has been no search for traces of Moroccan spoken Arabic (*darija*) in Classical Arabic manuscripts. What would a comparative study of the pre-colonial manuscript and oral literary culture of the

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[21] For cosmopolitan and vernacular, see Pollock, "The Cosmopolitan Vernacular" and "Indian in the vernacular millennium," Ricci, *Islam Translated,* Kornicki, *Languages, Scripts,* Vierke, "From across the ocean;" for a critique, see Orsini, "How to."

[22] Bausani, "Per una lettura", "Incontri linguistici", "Le lingue islamiche;" also Gori, "Language and Genre."

[23] Banti, "Literature of Harar," Ferguson, "Role of Arabic," Drewes, "Classical Arabic.

[24] Stroomer, *Tashelhyit Berber Texts,* Brugnatelli, "Religious literature."

Morocco that included Classical Arabic, *Darija*, Tmazight, and Judeo-Moroccan look like? Were there any interlingual and intralingual translations between these languages, and what would they say about broader intellectual and literary practices, genres, and tastes?

Clearly, regional as well as transregional comparison between corpuses, genres, tropes, and individual texts (as in Ricci's masterly *Islam Translated)* across multilingual Islamic societies following the path opened by Bausani will yield important insights and suggest further themes and methods, as Ronit Ricci's work has indeed shown for South-East Asia. But languages as well as societies have hardly, if ever, been mono-religious or mono-cultural, and so it is equally important to think about circulation across religious groups and religious imaginaries. In drawing inter-religious comparisons, genres, tropes, phrases, and stories are more likely to be the unit of analysis—typically "re-accented" in the process, to use Bakhtin's term.[25]

Finally, Isabel Hofmeyr also usefully reminds us of the *limits* of translatability and circulation, caused either by indifference or rejection, what Karla Mallette calls a "network failure" in the case of the disastrous attempt by the Venetian printer Alessandro Paganini to publish the Qur'an in Arabic in 1537 and market it in Ottoman lands.[26] While the printing industry in Venice was highly multilingual and used to dealing with multiple scripts—including Greek, Cyrillic, Aramaic, Hebrew, and Glaglolitic—, Paganini's clumsy attempt to reproduce Arabic diacritics and the many mistakes and typos led to disaster. The merchant who brought it to Istanbul was arrested and sentenced to death and all the copies were ordered to be destroyed, and the family of the Venetian printer seems to have been ruined.[27]

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[25] Bakhtin, *Speech Genres*, Orsini "Na Turk" and "Social Life of Genre", also Pauwels, *Cultural Exchange*; for an approach that uses conceptual tools of translation studies, Stewart, "In Search of Equivalence."

[26] Mallette, "Significant geographies."

[27] Ibid.

To conclude, the three essays presented in this issue all concern multilingual North India, but from three different methodological perspectives—one (Orsini) offers a broad overview that seeks to recover the linguistic and literary dynamism of multilingual Awadh in the eighteenth century and the historical coevalness of the still princely Lucknow, colonial Calcutta, and transitional Banaras under encroaching East Indian Company rule. The second (Tabor), as already mentioned, focuses on contrasting accounts about literary practices in single local site—and like Orsini's is concerned with recovery "everyday literary practices." Williams's essay instead "follows" a text along a series of both interlingual and intralingual translation, calibrating continuities and changes in the fruition and patronage of musicological texts.[28] We very much hope that the insights and suggestions they offer will stimulate multilingual research in other parts of Asia, Africa, and the Middle East, as well as transnational comparisons. The discussions at the SOAS workshop in 2016 marked a tentative beginning, but clearly much more dialogue and collaborative work is needed.

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[28] On "following" as method, see Conrad, *What is Global History?*, 121-122.

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