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Ronit Ricci. *Islam Translated: Literature, Conversion, and the Arabic Cosmopolis of South and Southeast Asia.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011. 336 pp. $45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-226-71088-4.

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Literature and Conversion

In this deftly argued and neatly written book, Ronit Ricci offers fresh insights and tools for the study of various locally produced Islamic texts and their reception in South and Southeast Asia. Following the well-discussed paradigm of the "Sanskrit Cosmopolis," which was introduced by the Sanskrit scholar Sheldon Pollock, Ricci develops the idea of the "Arabic Cosmopolis." Her valuable contribution lies in its potential to generate a debate about the trans-local Islamic literary sphere that is constituted and defined by language, literature, and religion at a broad level, and in South Asian Islam in particular. According to Ricci, the paradigm of the "Arabic cosmopolis" includes a large geographic area through South and Southeast Asia. Focusing specifically on local translations and transmissions of an Arabic text, *The Book of One Thousand Questions* (printed in Arabic in 1920), into local languages, such as Javanese, Tamil, and Malay, Ricci explores the processes of translation and conversion in South and Southeast Asia. Although this study is restricted to specific local languages, her observations and analytical paths provide tools to comprehend the contours of this text beyond the limits of the Arabic language or various languages that she discusses in the book.

The book begins with an introduction that theorizes the concept of the "Arabic cosmopolis." Connecting to various discussions on literary transmission, translation, and religious conversions, Ricci situates the local languages in a theoretical framework that circumscribes diverse historical phases, literary networks, and Islamization in South and Southeast Asia. The comparative study of India and Indonesia lifts this work to an extremely advantageous status. In the next key section of the introduction, Ricci expands this discussion of the literary networks further in theorizing these textual dynamics, and explains the concept of the "Arabic cosmopolis" of South and Southeast Asia. She argues that the comprehension of the processes of conversion and translation remain incomplete if we fail to consider seriously the role of Arabic. According to the author, "Arabic's incorporation–at many levels–into local vernaculars has brought about profound and long-lasting transformations" (p. 12).

This book has three parts: part 1 discusses translation focusing on the idea of untranslatability, part 2 examines the intriguing aspect of conversions, and part 3 offers concluding remarks. In the first part, Ricci uses three literary texts: *The Book of Samud* from Javanese; *Ayira Macala* (A thousand questions [printed 1984]) from Tamil; and finally *Seribu Masalah* (A thousand questions), the Malay version of *The Book of One Thousand Questions*. Her exploration begins with a basic premise that the word "translation" itself is untranslatable (p. 32). While this idea is intriguing, Ricci expands the definition of "translation" by examining various translations of the Arabic texts in local languages. The author discovers a shift in the approaches toward translation in locally produced texts that simultaneously effaced the individual translator but boldy and creatively reworked the text. Beginning with the wide-ranging transmission of the Arabic language Ricci discusses how the dynamics of conversion were reflected in *The Book of One Thousand Questions* in Javanese, Malay, and Tamil texts. In the third part, the conclusion, Ricci offers fresh insights on her idea of the Arabic cosmopolis by looking at the role of local communities in "the formation of a new literary and religious repository that was richly interconnected both with a distant past and with a local present" (p. 245).

Current research on the production and transmission of premodern South Asian literature focuses heavily on Sanskrit texts or Sanskrit-related materials. Although we have a few studies concerned with non-Sanskrit languages and literature, they too mostly focus on non-Islamic writing. Studies on Islamic literary materials remain unexplored. Undoubtedly, Ricci's book fills this void while successfully analyzing an Islamic narrative

that blends local and global Islamic cultural and social aspects. In this case, this work is more about the literary networks of South and Southeast Muslim communities than South and Southeast Asia as such. Ricci uses the term "literary networks" in a specific way as it represents "shared texts, including stories, poems, genealogies, histories, and treatises on a broad range of topics, as well as the readers, listeners, authors, patrons, translators, and scribes who created, translated, supported, and transmitted them" (p. 2). For a student of literary and cultural studies, this idea of literary networks opens up a wide array of research options and provides a wealth of materials and their uses in the literary cultures of South Indian Islam. This entire discussion on literary networks takes on a fascinating turn when Ricci uses the concept of "prior texts" as proposed by A. L. Becker about the uses of old texts and their reformulations in modern times. This observation parallels neatly the debate on various Muslim texts now being circulated in South Asia in general, and South India in particular.

Ricci's work prioritizes the uses of diverse genres of literary texts both in manuscript and printed books, mainly shaped by the influx of Arabic. The examples she presents clearly demonstrate that they were shaped by an Arabic model, which fits comfortably into her proposition about the Arabic cosmopolis. However, the use of Arabic as a religious language and its vocabulary has a certain hierarchy, which in some contexts equals a "normative" Islam. Although many textual materials within the religious sphere of Islam remain fixed to an Arabic paradigm, it is imperative to recognize the popularity of Sufi materials that borrow heavily from Persian-language sources. In the realm of popular Islam and Sufi devotional materials, either oral or written, we find an equally significant network that is equivalent to the Arabic cosmopolis. Although Ricci refers to a few aspects of the Persian narrative in her book, she does so in relation to the Arabic cosmopolis. How could we make use of her valuable tools in the context of Persianate Islamic literary networks? Even in the case of the conversions that occupied a significant place in Ricci's analysis, the networks of Persian literary texts have a crucial role as many Sufi schools in South Asia adapted and appropriated Persian Sufi texts to "convert" non-Muslims into Muslims. Ricci's work opens up the possibility for developing a different study using Persian narratives.

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