

**Ronit Ricci. *Islam Translated: Literature, Conversion, and the Arabic Cosmopolis of South and Southeast Asia*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2011. 336 pp.**

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Ronit Ricci's book *Islam Translated: Literature, Conversion and the Arabic Cosmopolis of South and Southeast Asia* is an ambitious, erudite, and accessible work aimed at reformulating our understanding of the language, literature, history, and religion of much of maritime Asia. Despite setting her sights very high, Ricci delivers a fascinating book with the potential to transform contemporary debates framing our perceptions of Islamic conversion from south India to eastern Indonesia. In order to do this, Ricci focuses her attention on a text titled *The Book of One Thousand Questions*, a tale of conversion from Judaism to Islam, set in seventh-century Arabia. The text was originally composed in Arabic, but later spread, sometimes via Persian, into the corpuses of Tamil, Malay, and Javanese literature. The text in question narrates a conversion from Judaism to Islam set in seventh-century Arabia. Over the years, the story has been recast in many forms in other locales, and these often involve related characters and settings as the story was translated into the languages of South and Southeast Asia, and through its telling introduced the audience to the affirmed truths of Islam, as well as its history, practices, and genealogies. The processes of translation and conversion were symbiotic processes, Ricci argues, and produced a cultural zone she describes, adapting Sheldon Pollock's term, as an "Arabic Cosmopolis."

One of the strengths of the work is Ricci's acute attention to translation as a critical historical process involved in the spread of literature, religion, and ideas across vast expanses of the Asian maritime world. Her knowledge of Javanese, Malay, and Tamil languages—a rare combination in the academy—facilitates her ability to analyze the translation of Islamic texts from Arabic into the vernacular of South and Southeast Asia in a manner that cuts through the divides normally entrenched by area studies. On page 33 she states,

in order to understand a significant historical process through which Islam—as a belief system and a way of life—spread far and wide and was adopted in South and Southeast Asia, we must attend to translation in its narrowest sense—the rendering of the words of one language into another.

Ricci demonstrates how, despite the text's translation into three different languages and diverse cultural contexts, many characteristics of the stories in the text remained unchanged, thus making it possible to speak of an "Arabic Cosmopolis" stretching across much of the previously Sanskritized world. Ricci's book broadens Indonesia scholars' focus beyond national narratives, showing how people from a region stretching from southern India through Sumatra, Java, southern Borneo, Sulawesi, and throughout Maluku, as far east as Ambon, were tied together with a shared literary tradition from the sixteenth to the twentieth centuries.

Central to Ricci's narrative is a reorientation of the conception of "region." The Asian maritime world is the focus of her study, and she shows how, before colonial era conceptions of "India," "Indonesia," or even "South Asia" and "Southeast Asia," there was a cultural zone through which religion and literature flowed, uninhibited by

language barriers. Her concentration upon literary networks is reminiscent of the work by other scholars, such as Azyumardi Azra, but she pushes the debate in new directions. Rather than focusing on the teacher–student relationships present within Islamic scholarly traditions, she looks rather at how literature linked various parts of the Asian maritime world. For Ricci, each telling of the story was a meeting place between the trans-local and the trans-regional, between Tamil, Malay, and Javanese literary expressions and those of Arabic origin. While Ricci draws convincing links between each of these regions and their languages, the role of Persian as an intermediary is not fully explained, which one might expect given the influence it had upon literary traditions throughout the “Arabic cosmopolis.” Nevertheless, her view of literature as a two-way avenue for the maintenance of connections between the “very local” and the broader Islamic world shows us how people reconceived of themselves, and how the development of conversion literature was one that displayed this complex and often uneasy relationship. She argues for a sense of “shifting cosmopolitanisms” for the regions in question, as sites that experienced both localizing and standardizing forces shaping the literary traditions that both unified and diversified them.

In part 1 of the book, which includes chapters 3–5, Ricci concentrates on how the various “tellings” of the text became localized, or, rather, how through the process of translation they came to possess the cultural grammar of Javanese, Malay, and Tamil contexts. For our purposes, this review will concentrate on the former two. The Javanese text itself tells the story of a Jewish disciple, Samud Ibnu Salam, who questions the Prophet Muhammad on many aspects of Islam, ranging from the nature of God to the “seven grades of being” and many aspects of Islamic cosmology, and then ultimately converts to Islam. Throughout the story, many of the basic precepts of Islamic belief and practice are unveiled to the audience such that the purpose of the text is clear. Then, Ricci examines how the telling of the text changed over the course of two centuries: how the text first “emphasized narrative detail, stories, rituals, and the central role of the prophet” but later came to incorporate “mystical teachings that were central to Javanese Islam,” most significantly “*waḥdat al-wujūd*,” or Unity of Being, based upon the writings of Ibn al-ʿArabī and introduced to the region through the poems of Hamzah Fansuri (p. 79). In so doing, Ricci challenges the established narrative that such teachings represented the first phase of Southeast Asian Islam, one that was ultimately eclipsed by nineteenth-century reformism. Rather, she asserts, there were ebbs and flows in the narrative’s popularity and how late nineteenth-century tellings of the text were most explicit in their defense of *wujudīyya* doctrine in the face of mounting opposition. Ricci shows how, at that point, cantors transformed Samud Ibnu Salam from a Jewish disciple to a Muslim guru and the text came to represent a defense of Javanese Islam against ongoing reforms.

In contrast to the Javanese tellings, which were entirely limited to Java and southern Sumatra, Ricci examines Malay tellings of the text that ranged from Minangkabau and Singapore to Ambon. Her study demonstrates how a similar process of Malayification of the text played out in a manner very different from its Javanization. In the Malay tellings, characters such as Adam are dressed in *kain* and other local garb. In other scenes, figures played music using local instruments such as *kendang*, *serunai*, and *nafiri*. Perhaps more important to understanding the interplay between language and religion, however, Ricci demonstrates how the Malay texts employ a much greater degree of Arabic, often included without translation or

explanation. Ricci attributes this, in part, to the use of Jawi script, which could more easily accommodate Arabic words and phrases than the Javanese and Tamil scripts. She also notes how the process of producing Malay texts was “interlinear,” such that short Malay renderings of the text eventually gave way to bilingual texts containing varying portions of Malay and Arabic. Passages from the Qur’an were among the most commonly untranslated sections, thus giving audiences considerable exposure to Arabic, in contrast to versions in Javanese or Tamil. The power and prestige of Arabic as a sacred language thus had a more profound impact upon Malay audiences and figured more prominently as Arabic vocabulary was directly assimilated into Malay itself. Ricci thus provides scholars of Indonesia with contrasting examples of how a text with a common origin, and as part of a unifying literary tradition, had very different outcomes in cultural and historically specific periods and regions. The dynamics of translation thus were key to the varying developments of religion and language throughout Muslim Southeast Asia.

In part 2 of the book, Ricci turns to examining broader questions regarding the Arabic cosmopolis, literary networks, and Islamic conversion. She begins by focusing on the nature of the texts themselves. Ricci notes that Arabic was not only featured as a source language in texts where it preceded translation in vernacular languages, but that Arabic became interwoven into those languages often without explanation—thus transforming languages into strongly Arabicized or hybrid entities over time. The literary cultures that emerged were thus cosmopolitan, trans-regional, and multilingual. Ricci effectively breaks down the categories of “Javanese” and “Malay” as distinct entities, revealing how words, script, and meaning flowed into, within, and between these languages and Arabic, largely due to the authority imbued into the latter as a sacred language. She argues that “Arabicized forms of language used by Muslims of different regions were manifestations or variations of that authoritative, cosmopolitan language” (p. 182).

In the final two chapters and the conclusion, Ricci turns to the issue of how literature and translation informed the process of conversion. On page 246, Ricci poses the question, “How does a society, in the face of such a significant change as the conversion to a new religion, address the absence of prior text and memory, which are both so important in creating and maintaining a shared identity? How are texts newly created for this purpose, and how are they established so that they, in turn, come to figure as prior texts?” Central to Ricci’s analysis is how familiar characters, stories, language, and idioms came to herald momentous religious change as cantors cast the story in terms local audiences of the “Arabic cosmopolis” would understand. The author notes how the tellings of the *Book of One Thousand Questions* came to incorporate such prior texts, or how they portrayed old ideas, people, rituals, or other traditions as outdated or inherently inferior to those that triumphed over them during the conversion process.

Ricci’s book stands as a landmark in the scholarship on Islam in South and Southeast Asia. She exorcises notions of “syncretism” that have long haunted debates on Islam in these regions while bringing the literary and religious culture to life over the span of four centuries. For the readers of this journal in particular, Ricci offers both a rich investigation of Indonesian Islamic literary traditions as well as its reorientation within the broader Islamic world. Set comfortably between localized studies of Islam

that fail adequately to connect the local with the global and broad overviews that often gloss over variation and diversity—or even ignore South and Southeast Asian contributions to the Islamic world entirely—Ricci's book expands upon and challenges previous conceptions of Islam in her "Arabic cosmopolis."