Chapter 18

Introduction to Section III: Cultural Affiliations and Society*

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18.1 A Translational Protagonist

In his diary entry of 6 January 1520, the papal master of ceremonies Paride de Grassi mentions an event that has caused quite a sensation in Rome: the christening of an emissary of the king of Fez being held in papal captivity at the time. According to the diarist, during his one-year confinement the ambassador requested permission to become a Christian and then received comprehensive instruction in Christianity. He soon renounced the “Mauritanian faith” and, when questioned, recognized all the articles of the Christian. His baptism was subsequently scheduled for Epiphany. No less elevated a man of God than the pope performed the baptism in no less sacred a setting than St Peter’s. Three cardinals were appointed to serve as the converted ambassador’s sponsors. He was baptized Giovanni Leone de’ Medici – a name combining the birth, papal, and family names of the pope himself.

Six years later, the *Libro de la Cosmographia & Geographia de Affrica* was carried to completion. The Italian manuscript would go on to have an extremely successful career, even though, in terms of language, it was not beyond all doubt but in fact betrayed an author whose native tongue could hardly have been Italian. It is only from the colophon that we learn the date and place of the work’s

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completion, as well as the author's name: Joan Lione Granatino, literally John the Lion of Granada. Nearly 500 pages in length, the manuscript now in the Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale in Rome consists of nine parts. At the end of part one, which is conceived as a general introduction to the geography, climate, economy, and culture of Africa, the author, having described the virtues of the Africans, turns to their vices, a subject that, as he stresses, is anything but easy for him. After all, it is in Africa that he has been raised and become a decent man, a "buon uomo". Like any "compositore", however, he must tell things as they are whether he wants to or not. But, he adds, where the Africans deserve reproof, he will apologetically emphasize that he was not born in Africa, but in Granada. If the land of his birth is to be rebuked, on the other hand, he will insist that he has grown up in Africa, and not in Granada. After its first appearance in print in 1550, the *Cosmographia* came out in multiple further editions and translations to which Europe owed a major portion of its knowledge about Africa until well into the nineteenth century.

It will come as no surprise: the convert Giovanni Leone de' Medici and the author of the *Cosmographia* were one and the same person. To begin with, the homonymity can hardly be a coincidence. More importantly, though, it has proven possible to retrace the convert's footsteps – even if some are missing – to the *Cosmographia*, because he stayed in Rome to study, teach, and write. By the time he completed his work in early 1526, he was no longer a stranger to the humanist circles of Italy, but known as a teacher, copyist, annotator, and translator, and moreover as the author of a considerable number of scholarly treatises who, since his baptism, called himself Yuhanna al-Asad ('John the Lion') whenever he wrote his name in Arabic.

We have the scholar and emissary himself to thank for almost everything we know about him – for example the name he bore before his baptism. Already during his confinement, he had been permitted to borrow manuscripts from the Vatican Library, which he had twice signed for in Arabic as "Al-Hasan bin Muhammad bin Ahmad al-Wazzan al-Fasi". Whereas in these two cases the addition "al-Fasi" underscored his North African past, on another occasion he supplemented his Arabic signature with "al-Gharnati" – that is, "from Granada". We know of his North African past only because he talks about it in his *Cosmographia*. That work is also the sole source of information about his early childhood in Granada before the family fled the victorious Castilians for Fez (where emigrants and refugees from the Iberian Peninsula had already been living for centuries), possibly as early as 1491. And it is likewise from his famous geographical work that we learn about his study of law at one of the mosque universities in Fez and about his travels as a diplomat (and slave trader) in the service of the Wattasid sultan that took him to sub-Saharan Africa more than once, but also to Algiers, Tunis, Istanbul, and Cairo. Perhaps most importantly, however, it is exclusively in the *Cosmographia* (especially part eight) that he informs his readers of his plans to write a book about Europe as soon as he returns to North Africa. What this means, however, is that, while writing his book about Africa in Europe he presumably did not have only a Christian readership in mind but, from his vantage point in Europe, was frequently also compelled to think of Africa – if only from the perspective of an Ottoman ambassador to Venice who keeps a close

eye on the Italian book market. Yuhanna al-Asad evidently never wrote that book about Europe. He is known to have returned to Africa one year after completing the *Cosmographia*, and to have been living in Tunis in 1532. By that point in time, the *Cosmographia* was already well known in humanist circles of Europe.¹

18.2 Cultural Translation as “Cultural Encounter”

If this introduction has begun with the story of the – prominent – learned convert Yuhanna al-Asad, then chiefly for one reason: it is a story that permits an understanding of “cultural translation” as “cultural borrowing”, and thus, entirely in keeping with the priority programme, as a praxis not only for communicating culture, but also for forming it. The *Cosmographia* is more than just a translation: it is a transformation of culture and knowledge. At the same time, the story of its author demonstrates that translation is always also inter- and transcultural communication involving the renegotiation of knowledge hierarchies. Within this context, translation proves to be a reciprocal – if often asymmetrical – transformation process encompassing human beings and their affiliations as much as it does aesthetic, emotional, and ritual practices. Seen from this angle, cultural translation reveals differences and makes them productive rather than doing away with them.² What is more, this approach offers a means of understanding translation as a dynamic (and highly idiosyncratic) medium of cultural transfer, cultural conflict, and cultural hybridization – in short, as a “cultural encounter” and thus to a certain extent as “translation without an original”, to quote the words used by Doris Bachmann-Medick to formulate (and demand) it from the postcolonial perspective.³ Incidentally, from around 1500 onwards Europe exported ‘its’ translation culture, claiming in the process to be the ‘original’. Yet the translational potentials offered by the reimport of this export have hardly been investigated to date. The question of how the European translation culture, the display of European power, and the European interpretation of the self and the world are interlinked has for the most part yet to be answered.⁴

A further aspect of Yuhanna al-Asad is that he acquaints us with a highly unique kind of cultural border-crosser. He was a scholar who, by converting to a different faith during his imprisonment, managed to attain the ambiguous freedom that allowed him to install himself in a productive “interstice”.⁵ He was moreover a

¹For an in-depth discussion of Yuhanna al-Asad and his geography of Africa, see Davis (2006) (also available in paperback and, since 2008, in German). Also see Rauchenberger (1999); Burschel (2013).

²Also see Mahler (2016).

³See, for example, Bachmann-Medick (2017), here pp. 24–29. [Trans. JR].

⁴On this subject, here only Schaffer et al. (2009).

⁵For a discussion of the (postcolonial) concept of the “interstice”, if with a different emphasis, here only Weigel (2002), here esp. p. 153. [Trans. JR].

convert who gradually found his way to a “language of exile”, as articulations of such freedom can be referred to after the example of James Clifford and diaspora research, and – his return to Africa always on the horizon but himself cut off from the networks of Islamic tradition – became an “author of his own”.⁶ And finally, he was a “cultural broker” who offers us insights into still insufficiently surveyed spaces of translation where bodies of experience and knowledge are transformed in such a way as to gain a new power of interpretation.⁷

At the same time, the case of Yuhanna al-Asad describes a programme that enables us to uncover the ambiguous dynamics of inter- and transcultural translation processes and investigate them adequately from an actor-centred perspective. The third section of this collective volume adopts this approach in that it sheds light on how “cultural brokers” mediate between different linguistic worlds, systems of meaning, patterns of interpretation, and conceptions of order, thus becoming “cultural translators”. In one way or another, they all advance to become agents of cultural evolution.

18.3 Agents of Cultural Evolution

In the first contribution to this section, Lukas Maier devotes himself to Henrietta Maria of France and the scope she enjoyed for cultural action. Through her marriage to Charles I in 1625, she had become queen of England, Scotland, and Ireland, and she was already perceived as a cultural border-crosser in her lifetime (see chap. 19). The study focusses on the new interior decoration of St James’s Palace in London under her direction; she resided there until 1642. She created new room sequences, for example, that permitted a merging of the English court ceremonial with the French, a phenomenon already her contemporaries referred to as “ritual translation”. This is to say nothing of the various processes of religious hybridization that took place primarily in the palace’s pictorial programmes. In other words, Maier conceives of the queen as a “cultural broker” and her palace as an arena of intermedia translations of great performative power, in a sense as a “third space” (to quote Homi Bhabha) that offers insights into the interplay between female options for action – which were always also political – and image-anthropological patterns of perception. Henrietta Maria moreover calls our attention to a group of “brokers” who have hitherto received little attention in the translation context: the wives of European rulers, most of whom came from abroad.

Unlike ‘foreign’ queens, missionaries are no newcomers to the category of “cultural broker”. In the second contribution to this section, however, the author Giulia Nardini departs from other studies on the subject in that she develops a

⁶Clifford (1994), p. 310.

⁷The term “cultural broker” first appears in Richter (1988).

multi-stage model of cultural translation which she tests as an analytical tool in the reconstruction of mission strategies (see chap. 20). Her analysis concentrates primarily on the Jesuit Roberto Nobili, who missionized from 1606 onwards in the Southern Indian city of Madurai. Like other missionaries, he faced multiple challenges at once. He had to translate Christian texts, practices, and rituals for the people he was seeking to evangelize, while at the same time translating their holy texts, practices, and rituals into his own linguistic world. He had to learn how those multi-ethnic groups could be involved in the translation process in a socially adequate manner, and at the same time to accept that his translations were translated by them into their own languages and rituals. He had to ensure that these ‘local’ and ‘regional’ translations satisfied the standards of a globalized Christianity consisting of competing institutionalized interpretation authorities, while at the same time keeping sight of the various (usually complex) power structures where he was. In the case of Nobili, it was above all the religious and cultural ‘trends’ of the Tamil Nāyaka society that he had to take into consideration, and that ultimately rendered cultural translation a kind of transcultural version of cultural contact between the *Imitation of Christ* and the Nāyaka ethos.

In the third contribution to this section, Paula Manstetten examines another “broker” group to which, once again, little attention has hitherto been paid – that of the learned Arabic Christians of Early Modern Europe (see chap. 21). For her study, she cites the example of Salomon Negri, a Syrian Melkite. Already in his youth, Negri learned Latin, Greek, and Italian from European missionaries in Damascus. At the end of a career that had taken him to Halle, Venice, Constantinople, and Rome, he died in London in 1727. Manstetten concentrates primarily on Negri’s “self-fashioning” as a language teacher and translator. Her investigation revolves around a question that is at the centre of nearly all the priority programme projects but is rarely stated in so many words: How does the work of translation affect the translator? Even in Negri’s case, this question is anything but easy to answer, despite the fact that he left a wealth of personal testimonials behind, among them a description of his life, countless letters, and, not least importantly, marginalia in his handwritten translations. One thing is clear, however: like Yuhanna al-Asad and many other “cultural brokers”, “border-crossers”, and “go-betweens”⁸ who face the problem of ‘self-translation’ between different cultural affiliations, Negri also seems to have been a master at ‘situational conversion’.⁹ His letters of application, for example, abound with ever-new metamorphoses, all the way down to clever changes of his name in various languages – in essence a form of transcultural hybridization. At the same time, it is beyond dispute that Negri (and many others) thus more or less permanently circumvented ‘simple’, ‘unambiguous’ affiliations, something they were indeed compelled to do.

⁸On the terms “border-crossers” and “go-betweens”, here only Jobs and Mackenthun (2013).

⁹A combination of “situational ethnicity” and “cultural conversion” in Kohl (1987). [Trans. JR].

The fourth contribution to section three likewise enquires into the cultural – and in this case also legal-political – affiliation of a figure of cosmopolitan character and his family. Irena Fliter takes a look at the so-called “Camondo affair” that caused an international stir in 1782 (see chap. 22). After the Jewish merchant Chaim Camondo was accused of conspiracy, the sultan ordered him and his family banned from Istanbul to Cyprus. The Habsburg ambassador to Istanbul (among others) intervened and attained permission for the Camondos to go to Trieste. One of the arguments the ambassador cited in favour of a destination in the Danube Monarchy was that Camondo was a “native subject of the Habsburg empire”. But what did that mean? What did a place of birth mean for the status of ‘belonging’ to a certain territory, particularly with regard to the head of an internationally active family of merchants and bankers? What were the ‘concrete’ factors behind the intervention? In her search for answers to these questions, the author gains deep insights into the cosmopolitan culture of the translation of lifestyles, financial practices, and not least of all border-crossing identity models in a period of increasing focus on nation. Chaim Camondo knew what that meant; he knew that transnational ‘interstices’ were the terrain essential to his survival, and that they were shrinking. At the same time, he never left a doubt about the fact that the Ottoman Empire was his “patrie”, even if, politically, legally, and economically speaking, he had found a new home. He also spoke the language of exile.

The final contribution returns to the subject of missionary work, now in the guise of the Jewish pietist mission. Avraham Siluk examines the annotated 1733 translation of the Epistle to the Romans into Yiddish, in which context he also discusses the pietist Institutum Judaicum in Halle, where a highly idiosyncratic translation milieu developed (see chap. 23). The Institutum not only oversaw the translation of biblical and catechistic writings into Yiddish and the publication of those translations, but also sent “travelling studiosi” out to Jewish communities as far afield as the Ottoman Empire, with a special emphasis on missionizing in rural areas. Siluk repeatedly underscores the role of converts who, like the translator of the Epistle to the Romans, Heinrich Christian Immanuel Frommann, exerted a strong influence on the publishing programme and the mission’s teaching methods. They likewise merit the designation “cultural brokers”; after all, they made major contributions to a culture of translation that owed its literary sophistication not least of all to myriad instances of religious border-crossing. Even more importantly, however, a look at the Institutum Judaicum’s pietist language workshop once again clearly reveals that translation always goes beyond the mere transcoding of words and sentences from one language to another. As this contribution strikingly confirms, translation is a complex and purposive act based on the division of labour and concerned with the relative effect of more or less compatible modes of expression. It is thus beyond question that the translational actors we observe in Halle can likewise be considered agents of cultural evolution. And here again it holds true: their texts are products of collective action – indeed, products of collective action with a strong tendency towards collective authorship.

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