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Introduction: Sufi Texts in Translation

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Abstract

This special issue of the *Journal of Sufi Studies* attempts to make the case that the act of translation is best seen as a recurrent activity necessitated by the various changes that inform the interpretation of Sufi texts on the one hand, and the languages and cultures that receive them on the other. The nine Sufi texts featured in this collection illustrate the diversity of genres and variety of languages in which they have been written, thereby pointing up the distinctive hermeneutic potentials of translation theory and practice when these texts are rendered by experts into modern European languages, particularly English and French.

Keywords

doctrinal treatises – poetic texts – hagiographic works – manuals – translation theory and practice – cross-cultural translation – hermeneutics – interpretation

The long and ongoing history of Sufism has produced a rich and diverse range of textual, institutional, and ritual traditions. Yet much of the Sufi textual corpus remains undocumented and untranslated into Western languages. This special double issue of the *Journal of Sufi Studies* represents a modest attempt to address this lacuna. It is also an invitation to encourage scholars

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and students to publish more Sufi texts in translation. The texts presented in this issue, mostly translated for the first time into English or French, expand the range of textual resources available for use in the study and teaching of Islam and Sufism.

The perpetual nature of change implies the constant need for new translations both by members of a tradition and by those who study a tradition. For those within a tradition like Sufism, a skillful response to newly emerging problems of life involves the translation and application of older forms of knowledge. Contemporary Sufis look back to their traditions and seek to make older texts accessible to fellow practitioners through translations into local languages. In Pakistan, for example, a host of linguistic and cultural changes have made it increasingly difficult for contemporary readers of Urdu to feel at home in older Urdu translations of Sufi texts that date back to several decades. A quick glance at the number of recent translations of Sufi texts into Indonesian, Persian, Turkish, and Urdu confirms the vibrant practice of translation within these types of contemporary Sufi communities.

For those who study a tradition like Sufism, the need for new translations is necessitated by the growth in our knowledge about Islam and Muslims and the increasing emphasis on self-reflection within the academy. As scholars, we are more attuned to the nuances of Islam and more aware of the ways in which the early Western study of Islam was shaped and colored by the politics which informed the act and project of colonization. As such, many classic Sufi texts which were rendered into German, Italian, Spanish, French and English during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, also demand to be translated anew.

Viewed as a response to the vicissitudes of language and culture, the practice of translation (whether by Sufi practitioners or scholars of Sufism) is an ongoing activity. This temporal perspective points up the serious shortcoming inherent in the view which maintains that "translators are traitors" (from the Italian saying "*traduttore traditore*"). We can rightly respond that translation does not simply cause a loss of meaning but that it also introduces certain advantages and even profits hitherto unimagined. But the stronger rejoinder to this static, zero sum view that pits translational gain against loss is the foregoing observation that the law of change allows no escape from translation. A temporal framing encourages our attention to shift from a sole focus on the formal elements of the text; it expands our horizons so that we can entertain the complexity of needs and circumstances which are simultaneously concealed in and invariably inform the production of any translation. This temporal framing also allows us to see cross-cultural similarities and the more stable features of human cultures. We can appreciate the reason why, in

Christian traditions, for example, the process of moving the remains or relics of saints from one locale to another is called "translation." Analogously, it would be worth contemplating whether ritual performances, like the seasonal celebrations of the birth and death of Sufi masters might provide a better model for conceptualizing the multiple aspects of the process of translation, as opposed to the static view which conceives of the act of translation solely in terms of meanings that were "lost" or "gained."

The present selection of Sufi texts situates itself in the broader view of translation theory and practice as a necessary and recurrent activity. The nine Sufi texts featured in this issue seek to illustrate three main points: (1) the diversity of genres historically enshrined in Sufi writings; (2) the variety of languages and therefore fecundity of expressions of what we call "Sufism"; (3) the hermeneutic promise of translation.

The famous Sufi thinker Ibn al-ʿArabī (d. 638/1240) has expressed his distinctive account of Sufi theory and practice in numerous writings, especially through the multiple volumes of his *al-Futūḥāt al-makkiyya* ("Meccan Revelations"), the eighth chapter of which is translated in the present volume. Sufi doctrinal and speculative metaphysics is also represented in this issue by the treatise titled *al-Wāridāt al-qalbiyya* ("Arrivers in the Heart") which was written by another celebrated author and someone deeply influenced by Ibn al-ʿArabī, namely the great Safavid philosopher Mullā Ṣadrā (d. 1050/1640). Also philosophical in nature is the dense pamphlet, *al-Taswiya bayna al-ifāda wa-l-qabūl* ("The Equivalence between Giving and Receiving"), which was penned by an Indian contemporary of Mullā Ṣadrā, Muḥibb Allāh Ilāhābādī (d. 1058/1648). These medieval and early modern treatises in Sufi philosophy can be said to form parts of a puzzle that account for a genre of doctrinal literature that we are coming to better understand in contemporary scholarship.

Another genre commonly employed by Sufis was that of biography or biographical hagiography. Our selection features one item – the *Ḥālāt-i Pahlawān Muḥammad* ("The Spiritual States of Muḥammad the Champion") – authored by the talented Timurid man of letters ʿAlī Shīr Nawāʾī (d. 906/1501). Alongside prose, Sufis past and present have made considerable use of poetry to express their experience of the world and their own inner lives. Such is the case of two modern Sufi poets whose several ghazals are translated here. The first is a Tajik Naqshbandī named ʿAbd al-Raḥīm Dawlat Īlākī (d. 1947) and the other is a renowned Pakistani Chishtī, Ẕahīn Shāh Tājī (d. 1978).

Just like poetry, the genre of practical and theoretical essays continues to be used by Sufis. With the *Bayān al-taʿabbudāt* ("The Exposition of Devotions") by the West African Dan Tafa (d. 1280/1864) and the *Duilian* ("Parallel Sentences") by the Chinese Ma Qixi (d. 1914), we have two fine modern examples of this

genre. A fairly neglected body of Sufi writing, that of *ṭarīqa* manuals, is also highlighted in the form of a short *Risāle-i gül-ābād* ("Treatise of the Rosette") written by the twelfth/eighteenth century Ottoman figure Ibrāhīm el-Eşrefī el-Qādirī.

If the majority of our translated Sufi works were composed in one of the three more well-known languages of Islamic culture, that is, Arabic (Ibn al-ʿArabī, Mullā Ṣadrā, Muḥibb Allāh Ilāhābādī and Dan Tafa), Persian (ʿAbd al-Raḥīm Dawlat Īlākī), and Ottoman Turkish (Ibrāhīm el-Eşrefī el-Qādirī), three texts were written in less known yet significant languages: Chaghatay Turkish (ʿAlī Shīr Nawāʾī), Urdu (Ẕahīn Shāh Tājī), and Chinese (Ma Qixi). One distinctive feature of these translations from various languages other than Arabic is the manner in which they can shed light on how classical Arabic Sufi terms and concepts are reinterpreted and reinvigorated into vernacular languages and diverse intellectual traditions.

Translating these Sufi idioms into understandable English or French requires a clear comprehension of the original texts and their allusions or veiled meanings. Beyond this basic requirement, the translation process can offer better and, at times, new interpretations, which would hardly be possible without carefully grappling with the minutiae of the text being translated. Ali Karjoo-Ravary shows that the interwoven contexts of modern astronomy and science fiction allows new possibilities for understanding the eighth chapter of the *Futūḥāt*. Beyond being a reflection of the human soul, an intermediary realm between ultimate reality and our world, or a place of symbolic visions, the chapter is a fine expression of the Sufi understanding of God's infinite creativity and knowledge, suggesting that there are things to be known and seen that are completely unlike what can be found in the physical world. William Chittick enlightens the complex synthesis of Sufism and philosophy in *al-Wāridāt al-qalbiyya* thanks to a translation that combines the vast array of precise philosophical concepts with a peculiar mode of Sufi thought based on the heart and its capacity for knowledge. As a result, the text seeks to demonstrate that metaphysical knowledge should be reinterpreted as a specific operation consisting in the recognition of Lordhood and, by extension, the true nature of human selfhood. In contrast to the usual reference to the concept of the "oneness of existence" associated with commentators belonging to the school of Ibn al-ʿArabī, the originality of the South Asian author of the *Taswiya*, as documented through a new translation by Shankar Nair, lies in the ability to describe the divine Reality as "pure essence/quiddity," and with recourse to modes of disputation which straddle the domains of metaphysics and physics.

Modern Sufi practical and theoretical writings present many forgotten or unknown aspects of Sufism. Coming to terms with them can do much to

help modern scholars reconceptualise a number of the so-called givens of the Sufi tradition. Oludamini Ogunnaike's translation of *Bayān al-taʿabbudāt* gives readers a fresh look at how technical Sufi discussions, as informed by the Akbarian worldview, belonged to a thirteenth/nineteenth-century West African spiritual and intellectual tradition which is still very much alive today. Marie-Paule Hille points up the non-Islamic Chinese vocabulary in her translation of the *Duilian* – a specific textual form – as well as its prescriptive style, which uses dissyllabics in order to present a unique Chinese expression of Sufi thought.

Whether biographic, didactic, or poetic in nature, Sufi narrative texts are not uniform and display differences even within one genre. Translations are helpful in documenting this range of expression. Marc Toutant shows that the *Ḥālāt-i Pahlawān Muḥammad* differs from the usual hagiography to which it is often reduced. The author of the *Ḥālāt* makes fun of his own credulity when he is tempted to interpret a particular event as the manifestation of a supernatural power of the Champion Muḥammad. Alexandre Papas argues that former readings of the *Risāle-i gül-ābād* may have missed the mark: for Sufis, the rose is certainly a metaphor of the Prophet's blossoming among humans, a manifestation of God's presence; but at the same time, through the act of translation it also comes to light that the author of this text envisions the rose as a sign with secret meanings known only to a few Sufi masters (just like those few roses that are to be found scattered across a desert). In their respective contributions, Stéphane Dudoignon and Amer Latif demonstrate that Sufi mystical poetry can be translated adequately. The loss of meaning from the source language is regained at a new level once brought over to the target language, thereby simultaneously being informed by and introducing in the latter new types of rhythm, lyrical images, and hermeneutic possibilities. Modern ghazals, with their mixing of classical tropes and novel use of language, reveal themselves to be acts of internal translation that vernacularize and recontextualize the classical tropes of the Persian poetical tradition.

In sum, this special double issue of the *Journal of Sufi Studies* can be seen as something of a translation workshop wherein various translation techniques and theories are tested, and different approaches celebrated, with the hope of encouraging the study and indeed further translation of the various expressions of Sufism's many genres and textual traditions.