
The volume under review here appeared as a special issue of the Revue des mondes musulmans et de la Méditerranée; it contains twelve articles and an introduction by the editors of the volume. The theme of the special issue, as explained by the editors in their introduction, is that of the relations between religion, language, and modernity in the Islamic world. Additional contents of this special issue include a study on fatwas issued by French imams, ten book reviews, and bibliographical information; these will be left out of consideration in this review.

The twelve articles are divided into three sections: “Expansion de l’islam et processus de vernacularisation en Afrique et Asie”, “Désislamisation, réislamisation et choix de langues”, and “Norme religieuse, éloquence et persuasion”. All articles in the first two sections deal with the relations between Islam and indigenous culture and the role of language in this interaction, whether within the Arab world (e.g., Berber and Arabic in North Africa) or in the Muslim world at large (e.g., Pakistan, Indonesia, Uzbekistan).

Of particular interest is Michael Laffan’s article on “The new turn to Mecca: Snapshots of Arabic printing and Sufi networks in late 19th century Java” (p. 113-131). The developments in the 19th century in Indonesia (then the Dutch East Indies) turn out to have a much wider scope than suggested by the modest title of this article. The author sketches how, traditionally, Islamic learning in Indonesia had been dominated by teachers who used Malay in their teaching and who relied on manuscripts either in Malay or with Malay interlinear translation of Arabic texts. Learning meant the memorization of these texts, and most students would not have had access to original Arabic sources. The ‘turn to Mecca’ implied a shift in learning: more and more Muslims went to Mecca and Jeddah and stayed there for several years in order to learn Arabic.

The Dutch colonial authorities at the time were particularly alarmed by the fact that many of these students had become members of Sufi brotherhoods, some of which were regarded as dangerous to the status quo in the Dutch Indies. The author convincingly shows that the shift from Arabic/Malay manuscripts to Arabic-only books had more to do with a shift in learning: what these students were looking for was access to a much larger body of knowledge than was included in the current curriculum in Indonesia. One might even say that for these students learning Arabic was a pathway to modernity.

I was struck by a modern parallel in Mali, as analyzed by Dinie Bouwman (Throwing stones at the moon: The role of Arabic in contemporary Mali. Ph.D. diss., Leiden University, 2005). She describes how young Malinese Muslims find a new way to free and independent thinking when they free themselves from the dictate of the old-fashioned teachers in Mali, who have memorized a few Arabic texts and heavily lean on translations of these texts in indigenous languages, such as Bambara. The new students, on the other hand, earnestly strive to improve their knowledge of Arabic and by going to study abroad at such centres as the Azhar university in Cairo, they become
acquainted with a wide array of Arabic books, rather than a restrictive selection. This is quite similar to the process described by Laffan in his article.

A similar development is sketched for the Swahili-speaking region in East Africa by Jean-Claude Penrad, “L’intangible et la nécessité: Arabe et kiswahili en islam d’Afrique orientale” (p. 27-45). In East Africa, knowledge of Arabic and access to the Arabic-written heritage used to be restricted to a literate elite (p. 29). In the second half of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, a reform was undertaken by some scholars to replace Arabic with Swahili, so that this knowledge became available to a much larger group of people (p. 33). This vernacularization of the faith had been inspired partly by the activities of Christian missionaries, who used Swahili for the translation of the Bible. In parallel, Muslims started to translate the Qurʾān into Swahili as well.

In a recent development in East Africa, also described by Penrad, Arabic has gained a new role through the impact of young ‘arabisants’, who come back to the region after their studies in Arabic-speaking universities. They re-introduce Arabic as the language of religion, as well as new, stricter rules about behaviour, dress, and general practice of the believers. Although this point is not mentioned by Penrad, this may also have led to a re-arabization of the language (cf. e.g. Abdelkader Lodhi, “The status of Arabic in East Africa”, in On the dignity of man: Oriental and Classical studies in honour of Frithiof Rundgren, ed. by Tryggve Kronholm and Eva Riad, Stockholm: Almqvist and Wiksell, 1984-1986, p. 257-262, who states that Arabic has come to be preferred to English as the source for scientific loanwords).

A similar conflict took place in another African country, Cameroon, but with a different outcome. Hamadou Adama, “Choix linguistique et modernité islamique au Cameroun: Le cas du fulfulde et de l’arabe” (p. 47-68), analyzes the debate in Cameroon about the question which language is the better instrument for modernity. This debate focuses on the choice of an alphabet system for the writing of Fulfulde: Arabic script (ağamî) or Latin script. Recent events in the last decade might have militated against Arabic script as the instrument to reach modernity, but the two groups of traditional Fulfulde-geared marabouts and young Arabic-trained ulema seem to have reached a certain level of peaceful coexistence, at least for the time being. It is not clear from the article whether the author believes that this harmonious solution has a chance of surviving in a world with increasing tension between different attitudes towards Islam. At any rate, because of their close association with Christianity (p. 68), French (and English) are unlikely to play any role in this debate.

The confusing division of loyalties in Turkey is the topic of two articles about secularization and the role of Arabic in Turkey; here, the strictly secularizing forces of the new Republic made any appeal to Arabic suspect, as the interesting contribution by Umut Azak, “Secularism in Turkey as a nationalist search for vernacular Islam: The ban on the call to prayer in Arabic (1932-1950)” (p. 161-179) illustrates with a case study about the language use in the call to prayer. The most confusing aspect about the Turkish situation is that the defence of the secularist position is largely in the hands of the army, while those who call for greater freedom are representatives of religious factions that are not often found in alliance with a call for constitutional freedom.

Johann Strauss, “Modernisation, nationalisation, désislamisation: La transformation du turc aux XIX-XXe siècles” (p. 135-159) sketches the debate about the introduction