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## Introduction to travelling Islam

Raia, A.; Ngom, F., Kaag, M.M.A.; Kossmann, M.G.

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## Introduction to Travelling Islam

At the core of this special issue, *Travelling Islam: The Circulation of Ideas in Africa*, lies the editors' fascination with the circulation of ideas by means of African languages, texts and people in and from Islamic Africa. It draws inspiration from a previous work on "Travelling Texts Beyond the West," co-edited by Clarissa Vierke and Annachiara Raia.<sup>1</sup> Further input has been provided by a workshop organised in 2020 with the generous support of LUCIS (Leiden University Centre of Islam in Society) and in cooperation with colleagues from the African Studies Centre Leiden, its collaborative research group 'Africa in the World: Rethinking Africa's Global Connections,' and the NEH Ajami Project.<sup>2</sup>

The special issue includes five contributions that together span space and time. It nicely combines literary history with anthropology and cultural studies and, by underscoring the importance of mobility and transcontinental connections for the understanding of Islam in Africa,<sup>3</sup> it contributes to a more dynamic, mobile and "global" appreciation of the subject of African Studies. As rightly pointed out by Edward Alpers, we can no longer continue to restrict our understanding of African History to the continental landmass known as Africa, as a unique monolithic system of exchange, a world apart.<sup>4</sup> Given a renewed attention to Africa's role in world history and, particularly, its relationship to the African diaspora, historians have already sought to study Africa as a conduit and to identify the Atlantic Africa, Mediterranean Africa, and Indian Ocean Africa as the three major world historical contexts in which to situate Africa.

In the following contributions, the reader will be able to see Islamic Africa connected and shaped by Afro-Asian connections (Mutuia, Raia, Vierke) as

1 Clarissa Vierke and Annachiara Raia, "Texts Travelling Beyond the West," *Asian Journal of African Studies*, vol. 48 (2020), p. 1–30, <http://www.dbpia.co.kr/journal/articleDetail?nodeId=NODE09356381>.

2 During the workshop, Prof. Fallou Ngom delivered a keynote lecture on the "Significance of Ajami Sources in the study of Muslim Africa." We thank Prof. Ngom for his contribution as well as the other speakers who presented but did not contribute to this special issue: Rüdiger Seesemann, Alessandro Gori, Andrea Brigaglia, Tal Tamari and Annelien Bouland.

3 See also Mayke Kaag, "African Muslims and their Global Connections, Truth and Trust Making in Troubled Times," Inaugural Lecture, University of Amsterdam, 5 October 2022.

4 Edward Alpers, "Indian Ocean Africa: The Island Factor," *Emergences: Journal for the Study of Media & Composite Cultures*, 10/2 (2000), p. 373–386.

well as African-European connections (Musa, Kaag). The diverse contributions will further show several foci and agents at play, namely: texts (manuscript and print), people and media adaptation. Altogether they seek to study transnational Islam in the modern and contemporary discourse and practice of a globalized world, while showing how texts and people forge histories and are part of an Islamic cosmopolis, concurrently local and translocal.<sup>5</sup>

Our exploration starts with Swahili, widely known as a transregional language of Islamic discourse. In her contribution, Clarissa Vierke delves into the translocal circulation of the poem, *The Hawk and the Dove*. Drawing from Sufi movements and their emphasis on poetry in vernacular languages as a means to ignite religious zeal in wider audiences, the poem is also based on sources that have widely travelled the Indian Ocean. From a literary and comparative perspective, Vierke views the poem as part of a longer history of circulation beyond the Swahili coast, and she continues by comparing this version with other popular, vernacular versions in the Arabic dialect of Algeria, Hausa in Nigeria, and the earlier adaptations by Moriscos from the Iberian Peninsula in Aljamiado.

Vierke's contribution puts into the spotlight the role of media in passing on specific traditions – mnemonically or via handwritten *aides mémoires* – to future generations, a subject also extensively treated in Ibrahim Musa's paper (see below).

In Chapane Mutiua's paper, the less studied history of a Qur'an manuscript that, according to oral testimony, travelled from Oman to Inhambane via Zanzibar between the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries is investigated. Through an analysis of its textual "luggage," such as ink, paper, script and writing style, Mutiua aptly shows why one should assume that the text located in Southern Mozambique was in fact produced beyond that area. By doing so, he highlights transoceanic connections with other hubs of Quranic manuscripts' production in the western Indian Ocean region.

Mutiua and Vierke's papers show and delve clearly into the transmission and circulation of handwritten texts from across Africa and the Indian Ocean.<sup>6</sup> The study of this phase and forms of knowledge production helps to better

5 On the Islamic Cosmopolis connecting Muslims in South and South-East India, see Ronit Ricci, *Islam Translated. Literature, Conversion, and the Arabic Cosmopolis of South and Southeast Asia*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2011.

6 See also Chapane Mutiua and Clarissa Vierke, "The Poem about the Prophet's Death in Mozambique – Swahili as a Transregional Language of Islamic Poetry," *Journal for Islamic Studies* 38/2 (2022), p. 44–74.

understand similar far reaching Afro-Asia connections forged by means of print when scholars and members of welfare organizations started to “set up presses and publishing projects, drawing on the local literary heritage and encouraging new creation, different in substance and format from the old.”<sup>7</sup> As it has also occurred for other parts of the Muslim world, steam, the railway and later the postal service created new conduits of communication for spreading Islam beyond an Arabic-speaking elite. In Annachiara Raia’s contribution, the focus thus shifts from manuscript to print, and attention is dedicated to literary networks that unfold transoceanic Muslim histories woven between Swahili authors, Muslim scholars and printing presses from the Middle East and family-run publishers with Indian roots. Framed within a book history theoretical approach and combined with ethnographic research, Raia explains how transoceanic religious and intellectual networks have been operating beyond national borders.

From a contemporary perspective, in Mayke Kaag’s paper, the reader is invited to look at present-day migration movements from Senegal to Europe. More specifically, her paper shifts the focus from texts to people by looking at Senegalese migrants of the Murid Sufi order residing in Italy and the Netherlands and investigating how their “religious luggage” is important to them in the migration context and may circulate further from there. Kaag analyses in her paper what moving people carry in terms of religious “luggage,” and what this means for the circulation of religious ideas in Africa and beyond.

The special issue is concluded by Ibrahim Musa’s contribution on the *qiṣaṣ* (plural of *qiṣṣa*, fable) in order to study how Muslim cultural discourse is being reshaped. For this, Musa develops a conceptual and analytical framework at the intersection of discourse and communication, imagination, intertextuality, and intermediality. His conclusion that “Muslims rely on fables from *isrāʾīliyyāt* and other sources to adapt the *qiṣaṣ* to various cultural environments, languages, and media” resonates with Vierke’s observations, confirming the pivotal role played by religious mediation in the circulation and forging of Muslim cultural discourses.

It is a desideratum of this special issue that the five papers may deepen our understanding of Islam in African milieus within a framework of ongoing

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7 Ami Ayalon, *The Arabic Print Revolution: Cultural Production and Mass Readership*, Cambridge University Press, 2016, x. On the impact of print in the Muslim world, see Francis Robinson, “Technology and Religious Change: Islam and the Impact of Print,” *Modern Asian Studies* 27/1 (1993), p. 229–251.

translocal negotiation, and hence, creation, circulation, transformation, and re-appropriation.

*Annachiara Raia*

African Studies Centre - Centre for the Arts in Society, Leiden University,  
Leiden, The Netherlands  
*a.raia@asc.leidenuniv.nl*

*Fallou Ngom*

Department of Anthropology, Boston University, Boston, USA  
*fngom@bu.edu*

*Mayke Kaag*

African Studies Centre, Leiden University, Leiden, and the Department of  
Anthropology, University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam, The Netherlands  
*kaag@ascleiden.nl*

*Maarten Kossmann*

Leiden University Centre for Linguistics, Leiden University, Leiden,  
The Netherlands  
*m.g.kossmann@hum.leidenuniv.nl*