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**Translation and the
Production of Knowledge(s)**

則譯書一事非當今之急務歟？語云：知己知彼，百戰不殆。戰勝於疆場，則然，戰勝於廟堂，亦何獨不然。

馬建忠，一八九四年

Is translation not our most urgent mission now? As the saying goes: “Know yourself and know your enemy, and you will win every battle.” If that is true of victories on the battlefields, surely it is also true of victories in the halls of learning.

Ma Jianzhong, 1894

Translation and the Production of Knowledge(s)

Mona Baker

The point of departure for this special issue of *Alif* is that knowledge is “produced” rather than “discovered,” and that translation is a core mechanism for the production and circulation of all forms of knowledge. With very few exceptions, the intimate connection between translation and the mediation of knowledge has received relatively limited attention in translation studies to date, and even less in other areas of the humanities that one would expect to engage with this topic extensively, such as cultural studies, social movement studies, film studies, media studies, and the history of ideas. This despite the fact that some leading scholars and activists such as De Sousa Santos have long acknowledged the potentially transformative role that translation can play in reconfiguring social and political relations by articulating new forms of knowledge based on the responsible confrontation of diverse cultural experiences. The few, dispersed studies that have touched on the subject, whether in translation studies or other disciplines, have so far failed to encourage sustained engagement with the role played by translation in the production of knowledge across the entire spectrum of human activities.

Continued neglect of this topic is a cause for concern at a time when our world seems to be continually shrinking and fragmenting, and in an environment where discourses of globalization, development, human rights, diversity, and mutual understanding mask aggressive processes of homogenization, exclusion, and co-optation. In this context, where “there is no single universal social practice or collective subject to confer meaning and direction to history,” as De Sousa Santos points out, “the work of translation becomes crucial to define, in each concrete and historical moment or context, which constellations of subaltern practices carry more counter-hegemonic potential” (19). Here, active, critical reflection on translation—past and present, and in a variety of contexts—becomes a prerequisite to creating genuine mutual understanding and meaningful solidarity (see Baker; Fernández).

Translation has for too long been taken for granted and discussed uncritically in both lay and academic discourses as a technical process that merely enables the disinterested transfer of knowledge. This special issue contributes to shattering this illusion by presenting a wide range of case studies that demonstrate the complexity of translation and the variety of ends that it can be made to serve. Far from a disinterested practice that merely “transfers” different types of knowledge between cultural groupings with equal power and resources, the studies presented here reveal that translation creates traditions and narratives that actively shape the world for us. They reveal some aspects of the impact of translation on the production, renegotiation, and reification of knowledge in a wide range of contexts and genres: in the media, sacred texts, the legal system, literary criticism, international organizations, the world of politics and activism, historical and literary genres, and digital space. Ultimately, and despite acknowledging the potential for translation to exacerbate rather than ameliorate the imbalance of power between source and target cultures, these studies remind us that, at its best, “[t]he work of translation among knowledges starts from the idea that all cultures are incomplete and can, therefore, be enriched by dialogue and confrontation with other cultures” (De Sousa Santos 19).

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The next issues will center on the following themes:

Alif 39: Transnational Drama: Rituals, Theater, and
Performance

Alif 40: Mapping New Directions in the Humanities

Alif 41: Literature, Repressed History, and Philosophy
of History

Translating Orientalism into the Arabic *Nahda*

Spencer Scoville

The recent focus in translation studies on the agency and creative power of the translator as a mediator opens up new possibilities for understanding the role that translators play, not only in conveying knowledge from one linguistic sphere into another, but also in acting as a creative force within any given society.¹ The power of translation to create knowledge is amplified by the partnership, or dialogic nature, of composition involved in any act of translation. A translation inherently trades on the reputation and position of the text that it draws on, however tenuous the relationship between the two texts may be. Translation is consequently a powerful tool for introducing innovation into a cultural context. Such was clearly the case during the period known as the modern Arabic literary renaissance, or *nahda*, which stretched from the nineteenth into the early twentieth century. As authors and editors experimented with new literary forms and genres, translation from European literatures formed an unusually large part of all literary production, both fiction and non-fiction. Curiously, among the works selected for translation during this period, we find a large number of translated texts from European languages that are explicitly about the Arab world: geographical surveys, ethnographic descriptions, even fiction that is set in the region. These textual products of European colonialism produce and reproduce all the familiar Orientalist tropes and images of an exotic Oriental Other, forever backward and uncivilized—seemingly the last body of texts we would expect to appeal to an Arab reader eager to enter the modern world.

In what follows, I attempt to explain and interpret the selection of these texts for translation in two ways: first, by closely ex-

amining the decisions that the translators made, from the selection of particular texts for translation to the changes that they made to each text as they translated it; and, second, by considering the types of knowledge produced by translating Orientalist discourse into Arabic at the very time that colonialism was taking root in the region. The focus will be on examining how three different *nah-dawi* translators adapted and appropriated material from overtly Orientalist texts as they translated them into Arabic, simultaneously creating new types of knowledge and discourse in Arabic and writing themselves into the Orientalist paradigm that would come to drive European colonial activity in the region.

Self-Orientalizing and Translation

At first glance, the tendency to select Orientalist texts about Arab society for translation into Arabic may be interpreted as a self-Orientalizing phenomenon in which the Arab translator reproduces and reaffirms the philosophy and claims of the Orientalist works. Self-Orientalizing is discussed in a variety of post-colonial contexts. In *Orientalism*, Edward Said acknowledges the phenomenon, noting that “the modern Orient, in short, participates in its own Orientalizing” (324). His notion of this participation is, however, limited to the economic sphere, focusing on the ways in which the Orientalized subject participates in the economic structures that perpetuate the colonialist paradigm. Partha Chatterjee takes this concept of self-Orientalizing further in his work on Indian nationalist thought, in which he posits that nationalist discourse in India was built upon the same basic philosophical assumptions and teleology as post-Enlightenment European Orientalism, or what he terms the Orientalist thematic. Chatterjee defines the thematic as “an epistemological as well as ethical system which provides a framework of elements and rules for establishing relations between elements” (38). In this way, the colonized subject is trapped in a double-bind in which there seems to be no way to resist the colonizer without falling into, and adopting, the very philosophical stance that belittles and threatens them. The knowledge produced in the Western world becomes universal; in other words, the colonized peoples are persuaded to accept and adopt

“the same ‘objectifying’ procedures of knowledge constructed in the post-Enlightenment age of Western science” (Chatterjee 38). The translations considered here certainly fit into this pattern; each of the translators involved was anxious to bring modern scientific, epistemological, and literary conventions into the Arab(ic) cultural sphere. The impulse to create through translation a text that could fill a perceived gap in one’s culture is certainly a modernizing force, but what also motivated these translators was a need to engage with European modernity on their own terms, in their own language. Their work marks an epistemological shift made possible by the incorporation of new types of discourse into the Arabic intellectual and cultural landscape. Shaden Tageldin describes the translation of Orientalist texts into Arabic as a seductive possibility of reciprocity and partnership, pointing out that “Orientalist discourse attracted Egyptian intellectuals because it appeared to *validate* the Arab-Islamic even as it denigrated it, putting European and Egyptian on an illusory footing of ‘equal’ exchange” (9). The promise of engaging in rational dialogue with European modernity obscured the complications brought on by adopting a set of rules established by one’s oppressor. In the early translations of Orientalist literature that I consider here, talk of resistance to colonial power is premature—the voice of these translators is not one of open resistance as much as it is a voice of hopeful participation and co-creation.

Nahdawi intellectuals sought just such a change in the epistemological and ethical systems in which they lived and functioned. In these translations, we can see three different individuals striving to create new modes of expression and knowing in Arabic. When they looked at the body of modern scientific knowledge and literary production available in European languages and found texts describing their own history, homeland, and society, they must have felt a certain sense of pride and excitement. They might have seen in their presence in this new body of literature an open invitation to participate in the creation and dissemination of knowledge through the established institutions of modern knowledge production—newspapers, literary journals, scholarly texts, textbooks. They could not have perceived their translations as acts of resistance, I would argue,

because the European colonization of their region was not yet a foregone conclusion. Translation provided an important arena for linguistic and literary experimentation that allowed them to bring not only innovative content across into Arabic, but also new discourses and types of knowledge.

Literary historians tend to focus on the impulse to alter the Arabic language so prevalent among *nahdawi* authors—a desire to simplify it and alter it in order to accommodate the type of modern prose that they associated with modernity. Every literary history of the period describes the concern on the part of authors and intellectuals to create an Arabic idiom that could participate in the conversations taking place in the modern scientific world, as they perceived it in the context of Western Europe. Translation played a central role in creating this new arena of knowledge. On the one hand, it was *the* space in which individuals could articulate an Arabic idiom closer to the rhythm and style that they found in the European languages they encountered. One could “get away” with introducing literary, social, and linguistic devices in a translation that would have been unimaginable in an original Arabic literary text at the time.² On the other hand, in very practical terms, translation brought the content of these scientifically advanced cultural worlds to a new Arab readership. The texts considered in this article illustrate the importance of both dynamics in bringing modern Europe to the Arab reader, in addition to inserting the Arab subject into the European texts selected for translation.

The three translations I analyze here reproduce and reconfigure three types of Orientalist texts from European sources: one work of fiction, a narrative by French author François-René de Chateaubriand, translated by Mustafa Lutfi al-Manfaluti (1876-1924) in 1915; one geographical description of Palestine, written by Russian Orientalist Nikolai Aleksandrovich Eleonskii and translated by Khalil Baydas (1874-1949) in 1898; and one collection of *hadith* curated by Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy and translated by Salim Qub‘ayn (1870-1951) in 1915. In analyzing each of these translations, I wish to focus on the ways in which working with clearly Orientalist texts allows the translators to consider their own images in the mirror of modern European scientific and literary discourse. In doing so, however, they did not simply reproduce

the picture that was presented in these texts, but introduced changes that revealed their agency as mediators. In each case, putting the European source texts next to the Arabic translations brings into sharp relief some of the ways in which these translators were working to write their culture into the discourse of modernity on their own terms, at the same time that they were ostensibly working to make an existing discourse available to an Arabic-reading audience for the first time. From a translation studies point of view, these three texts exemplify the wide variety of translation practices common in Arabic literature during the *nahda*. Baydas's 1898 translation of Eleonskii's *Ocherki iz Bibleiskoi Geografii* (Essays on Biblical Geography) is a straightforward reproduction of his source text, funded by a foreign religious organization (the Imperial Orthodox Palestine Society). It is representative of the wide variety of scientific texts translated and published in the Arabic-language periodicals of the day. Al-Manfaluti, in turn, "translates" a story (Chateaubriand's *Les aventures du dernier Abencerage*) from a language he does not know (based on plot summaries rendered by his friends), and publishes his translation in 1915 without mentioning the original author or title, all common practices among literary translators of this period. Moreover, his work exemplifies the ways in which Arab authors sought to use fiction to educate their readers in moral, ethical, and civic matters. Finally, Qub'ayn's 1915 "translation" is closer to a curatorial project than a translation: He publishes in Arabic a collection of *hadith* originally selected and published by Leo Tolstoy in a Russian translation, thus bringing the texts back to their source language.

The variety presented by these works does not reside only in the nature of the translation process involved in the production of each Arabic text, but in the resultant type of knowledge and discourse that each translation seeks to create. Where Baydas's translation reclaims and repopulates a Palestinian landscape with contemporary Palestinian citizens (both within the text and in the text's life as a textbook used to educate Palestinian citizens in Imperial Orthodox Palestine Society schools), al-Manfaluti and Qub'ayn strive to reclaim different parts of Arab history and heritage, reaching back to the recognized golden ages of Andalusia and the life of Prophet Muhammad, respectively. Because these

translations are based on works created by avid lovers of European culture, it is difficult to classify them as voices of resistance. At the same time, the bold ways in which the translators impose and insert themselves into their source texts illustrate the fact that the translation of Orientalist texts during this period does not simply constitute passive acceptance of European knowledge, but involves the active creation of a body of knowledge that incorporates the modern Arab subject into the discourse of European modernity. All three translators further trade on the cultural capital of their European co-authors, proving to themselves and to their audiences that Arabic can participate in the discourse of modernity — that modern knowledge can be created and transmitted via Arabic to an Arab audience.

Describing Palestine to Palestinians

The first text to consider represents exactly the type of literature that Said labeled Orientalist: an ethnographic geography of biblical Palestine composed in the libraries of Moscow. In 1896, Nikolai Aleksandr Eleonskii, an archpriest and professor of theology at Moscow University, published a geographical work entitled *Ocherki iz Bibleiskoi Geographii*. Drawing on existing geographical surveys of the area, he sought to offer a complete description of the Holy Land in one book (ultimately two volumes), describing the physical setting and the lives of the peoples who lived there in biblical times, and providing background to the student of the Bible who would like to better understand the part of the world in which the key events of Christianity took place. Although over the course of his career Eleonskii devoted most of his efforts to exegetical writing, this geographical work remains the most widely known in his oeuvre, having been reprinted several times. When it was first published in St. Petersburg, Khalil Baydas was still a student in the Russian seminary at Nazareth, where he first encountered Eleonskii's work. Shortly after he graduated in 1898, Baydas published the first volume of his Arabic translation of the work, entitled *Kitab al-rawda al-mu'nisa fi wasf al-ard al-muqaddasa* [The Book of Pleasant Gardens in Describing the Holy Land]. The fact that this translation appeared