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INTRODUCTION

Arabic as a Contact Language

Since the Renaissance, since the grand discoveries that marked the beginnings of Europe's hold upon the world, extraordinary in its hegemony over peoples of color, no event bears an equal historical importance [...]. The [Asia-Africa] Conference of Bandung was more than a military triumph, which established a new, initially provisional equilibrium of political forces [...]: it was a moral victory for peoples of color.

—LÉOPOLD SÉDAR SENGHOR, “LES NATIONALISMES D’OUTREMER ET L’AVENIR DES PEUPLES DE COULEUR”

WITH THE MASTERY OF a single language—Arabic—seventeenth-century merchants could voyage without the help of a translator from the Strait of Gibraltar in the eastern Mediterranean to the Strait of Malacca, which marks the passage from the Indian Ocean to the Pacific.¹ By the mid-twentieth century, this same transregional expanse would be described at the Bandung Conference as the “main artery” of European imperialism, against which newly independent states were rising in opposition.² Across this transcontinental African and Asian space, the Arabic language connected many regions—and also coexisted with other languages, which were envisioned at times as complements and at times as rivals. How have communities across this expanse interpreted those points of contact and coexistence—and through what ideological grounds? A broad comparison underscores the stakes of these questions. Vernacular-language literatures in Western Europe are often interpreted through their development against a Latin imperial or ecumenical tradition. How, then, might we compare the study of national and vernacular literatures

developing within an Arabic context? What implications might this comparison have for how we assess decolonizing national cultures—cultures shaped both by European imperial pressures and by the cultural impact of ritual (or Qur’anic) Arabic?

Beyond its status as a ritual language among Muslims worldwide, Arabic had served as an unrivaled medium of commercial access between Asia and Africa since the thirteenth century, after the secrets of monsoon seafaring were discovered, opening trade routes between the Arabian Peninsula and coastal regions from East Africa to Southeast Asia. In the fifteenth century, Arabic’s unrivaled status as a commercial lingua franca from the Strait of Gibraltar to the “spice islands” of the East Indies meant that Portuguese voyagers to the Indian Ocean relied heavily on Arabic interpreters, and seventeenth-century Dutch merchant travelers considered Arabic mastery an asset worthy of scholarly investment. By the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, however, as European rivalries intensified and coalesced across continental Asia and Africa, Arabic became progressively overshadowed by European literacies within its former channels of transregional exchange.

New biases against Arabic also gained traction among European Orientalists and colonial agents, many of whom associated Arabic and Arabicized literacies with globally “second-class” status. As the influential French scholar and colonial officer Alfred Le Chatelier expressed this prejudice in 1899, “Muslim society is divided into two neatly distinct classes wherever the Muslim literate in European languages progresses beside the Muslim literate in Arabic,” between “a class whose thinking remains exclusively Qur’anic, through use of the religious language, Arabic, Persian, or Turkish, and a class whose minds awoken to civilization” through exposure to European languages.³ Arabicized literacies, in other words, were becoming viewed by colonial commentators as the mark of a new global underclass.

The effects of this shifting status for Arabic varied across Europe’s colonies. The process gave rise to the uneven displacement of Arabic as an administrative language and script across arabophone regions and print markets. While generalities are difficult to draw, emerging ideas within circles of Orientalist scholarship naturalized the progressively marginal status of Arabic relative to European literacies—as though Arabic had always been destined to a position of global subordination and “civilizational” irrelevance, inimical to “progress” in European-dominated terms.

These attitudes elicited responses across Europe’s colonial frontiers. Under the growing influence of metropolitan European scholarship and the pressures

of colony-based policy makers and colonial publishing houses, writers across Arabic-Islamic “contact zones” in Asia and Africa were increasingly compelled to respond to colonial biases against Arabic as a cultural artifice, an orthographic constraint, and a regressive local presence. Across emerging print platforms, colonial ideologies of language converged with defensive claims about Arabic’s enduring relevance and its long-standing coexistence with a diversity of languages and dialects.

This book argues that, against these shifting asymmetries of imperial power, writing across Arabic-Islamic contact zones gave the Arabic language and script new political meaning. No longer merely a commercial lingua franca or a ritual language for Muslim communities globally, Arabic became an anticolonial medium for many writers. Writers from West and North Africa to Southeast Asia defended Arabic as a counterimperial medium for challenging cultural asymmetries imposed by imperial Europe, though others questioned the prestigious status that both ritual Arabic and European languages held relative to local vernaculars and languages across Asia and Africa. I take these intersecting hierarchies as my point of departure, to illustrate how Arabic’s contact with colonial rivals and vernacular alternatives had generative results, both culturally and aesthetically. Debates comparing the status of Arabic with other languages were central to new modes of imagining a more equitable world with the formation of counterimperial ideologies and the emergence of newly independent states in the twentieth century.

Against seismic shifts in the exchange value of Arabic and European languages during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the writers I examine promoted different visions of cultural parity in the wake of European imperialism. In three comparative cases, I examine how the status of Arabic as a charismatic medium, script, and symbol factored into evolving ideas about egalitarian futures across several regions. Moving in focus from French West Africa and the Dutch East Indies to Egypt under Ottoman and British control, I emphasize a thread of commonality across a multilingual corpus of counterimperial writing in the shadow of Arabic as an acrolect or prestige language. Within these regions, assertions of cultural equality were at times expressly aligned with traditional Arabic-Islamic teachings on parity between Arabs and non-Arabs. Such assertions were also at times expressed through positionally subordinate “vernacular” sensibilities in the wake of colonial language hierarchies. To make legible both forms of expression and alignment, I begin with Arabic literacy as a common ground for many writers, before moving across a broader dispersion across languages and dialects that were elevated alongside

Arabic as emancipatory media by the mid- to late twentieth century—from Wolof to colloquial Egyptian and Indonesian Malay. The book ends with observations on how writers both within and beyond the regions labeled by Europeans as the “Middle East” advanced vernacular, subaltern sensibilities against both Arabocentric and Eurocentric forms of ethnic and linguistic prejudice.

By examining the formation of national cultures at the convergence of scriptural, colonial, and local languages, I offer a lens for reassessing the rise of anticolonial nationalisms as reflected through debates on language politics across a historically arabophone space. In consequence, I draw attention to the following dynamics. Arabic literacies and Islamic cultural assimilation were contending with two centrifugal forces that gained momentum during the nineteenth century and into the twentieth century. The first was the genesis of new forms of (proto-)national self-consciousness emerging against an imperial European or Ottoman presence, which lent urgency to the reappraisal of ethnic and linguistic differences within a transregional Muslim community. The second was the growing politicization of Arabic as an interconfessional mark of identity. Tensions surrounding new regionalisms or nationalisms, linguistic difference, and Islamic orthodoxy were interpreted across a broad political spectrum in late colonial and postcolonial contexts. This spectrum ranged from defenders of ritual orthodoxies (who equated Arabic literacy with Islamic cultural belonging) to writers espousing a more qualified acceptance (if not outright rejection) of scriptural standards of Arabic as a cultural force and local literary medium.

Within colonial and postcolonial studies, much of the discussion of contact zones and center-periphery relations has focused on the impact of imperial European languages on local vernaculars, with scholars often framing these dynamics as oppositional.⁴ Pursuing an alternative approach, I argue that the relationship between ritual Arabic and its linguistic others was often not one of binary opposition. Their coexistence gave rise to creative tensions and literary innovations irreducible to European imperial influences or to Eurocentric paradigms of progressive vernacularization in the model of post-Reformation Europe. Examining the uneven transition to independence across sites drawn from Southeast Asia, sub-Saharan Africa, and the Middle East, this book works against tendencies to interpret the history of postcolonial literature and postindependence writing through singularly European influences and paradigms. The polycentric status of Arabic as a foundationally interethnic medium, from its complex history of codification through its geo-

graphically expanding vocation as a ritual presence, importantly factored into this dynamic.

By highlighting what has been gained rather than lost through Arabic's history as a language in contact with a diversity of alternatives, I hope to counter two common misconceptions about Arabic's status relative to other languages or vernaculars. Despite periodic claims of the "untranslatability" of Arabic, Arabic was not rigidly immutable or untranslatable in its historical contact with other languages and unstandardized dialects.⁵ Nor was it a cultural obsolescence lagging behind (but destined to follow) a more "modern," post-Latinate European precedent of vernacularization. These misconceptions gained traction with the rise of European Orientalist writing during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as European literacies gained prominence over Arabic alternatives, a shift discussed in the opening chapter. As ritual Arabic remained a force of continued importance across arabophone regions, it coexisted with a diversity of translational practices that at times positioned Arabic and non-Arabic languages on an equal footing and tempered notions of Arabic linguistic mastery as a sign of cultural distinction and unrivaled Muslim piety. I demonstrate this common pattern across a series of cases from West Africa, the Middle East, and Southeast Asia, within the long shadow of Arabic's historical influence as a language of high ritual culture. Across many literary variations, a conciliation between ritual Arabic and local vernaculars appears, giving rise to innovations in literary form. Such innovations play on the meanings of cultural parity between the sacred and the vernacular, between the worldly and the otherworldly, and between ethnolinguistic Arabness and non-Arabness.

Key Concepts and Their Limits

Several concepts central to the book—the concept of the vernacular, the notion of Arabic as a sacralized "truth language" in Islamic contexts, and the notion of Arabic-Islamic contact zones—require further definition. In general, I use the term "vernacular" to designate a language in structural opposition to a more prestigious lingua franca—whether the latter is a European language serving as an elite and hegemonic medium within a colonial territory (English, French, or Dutch) or a ritual variety of Arabic (*fuṣḥā*) connecting Muslim communities transregionally. Notwithstanding this general usage, at times I qualify my reliance on the term "vernacular" to reveal the translational risks involved in the application of the concept beyond European contexts.

Deriving from the Latin term *vernaculus*, meaning the language of the “homeborn slave” (*verna*) in imperial Roman domains, the term carries connotations of the *domestic*, *native*, and *indigenous*. Arising through these associations, the concept in English tends “to describe the structurally inferior position of many European languages with regard to Latin” until the sixteenth century.⁶ The term “vernacular” has acquired an additional association within colonial and postcolonial studies, however, where it is often associated with counterhegemonic projects that challenged the global dominance of imperial Europe itself. In the context of African literary history in particular, designations of “vernacular-language” literature—from Gikūyū to Wolof—often align with anti-elitist literary projects advanced in the twentieth century by writers such as Ngūgī wa Thiong’o who employed indigenous-language writing to unsettle the prestige of colonial alternatives.

Certain caveats, however, are vital to bear in mind. As Tobias Warner has aptly noted of West African language debates, “[T]here are no ‘value neutral’ terms for discussing languages” in the wake of imperial European contact.⁷ Joseph Errington explains this non-neutrality in the following pithy formulation: “[C]olonial agents made alien ways of speaking into objects of knowledge, so that their speakers could be made subjects of colonial power.”⁸ The disciplinary dominance of European linguistic concepts can be viewed as a by-product of this process. Despite its counterhegemonic associations within postcolonial studies, then, the term “vernacular” is complicated by the history of vernacular-language literacies as objects of colonial distortion and policy manipulation, as colonial agents and linguists mobilized European linguistic categories to legitimize their authority over languages beyond Europe’s colonial frontiers. Across vast distances, colonial agents taxonomized “unfamiliar tongues” as “vernacular” or “nonvernacular” forms of speech and used these categories to engineer state-sanctioned literacies for rising generations of colonial subjects within the so-called Muslim world. Such concepts accrued a disciplinary currency that remains difficult to dislodge after centuries of European global dominance.⁹

As a result, it may be difficult to disentangle any discussion of vernacular language debates from Eurocentric concepts and modes of framing. Yet, by comparing subaltern, “vernacular” literatures relative to both European and Arabic prestige languages, we can develop a more accurate sense of how histories of language contact remain ideologically fraught at the global intersection of Eurocentric and Arabocentric hierarchies. At times I will therefore use “vernacular” to designate positionally subordinate languages and dialects rela-

tive to high literary Arabic (*fuṣḥā*) and to colonial European languages, and at others I bracket the term as a borrowed and relatively Eurocentric concept within Arabic-Islamic contact zones, in the search for alternatives to nuance this conceptual common ground.

In this book, I frequently employ the term “contact zone” to designate “social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, grapple with each other,” through “highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination”—as Mary Louise Pratt explained the phrase in *Imperial Eyes*.¹⁰ Against the term “colonial frontier,” which she suggests “is grounded within a European expansionist perspective (the frontier is a frontier only with respect to Europe),”¹¹ Pratt employed “contact zone” to privilege more polycentric copresences and perspectives beyond an expansionary colonial center. I borrow from Pratt’s notion but add the qualifier “Arabic-Islamic” to designate the imbrication of two forms of stratification and hierarchy within the regions I examine. These include hierarchies imposed not only through colonial contact with Europe but through spaces of encounter in which formerly remote peoples became connected by the twinned processes of Islamization and Arabization.

Throughout the book, I use “contact language” not to describe Arabic as a “pidgin,” as sociolinguists frequently use the term, but more simply to describe its position as a language of transregional connection. Arabic’s status as a medium used between non-native speakers necessarily implicates a transregional “zone of translation.”¹² In the following chapters, I focus on what is gained rather than lost through Arabic’s history as a contact language, in its movement across the regional frontiers of an expanding arabophone realm. Rather than framing its histories of contact through anxieties about linguistic corruption and attenuation in its movement away from an “originary” center, I recover the innovations of intercultural texts developed by communities in contact with Arabic, including in regions where non-native speakers were preponderant. From West Africa to Southeast Asia, writers who were self-consciously marginal—relative to Arabic-Islamic cultural centers and sites of early conversion—engaged in selective forms of cultural borrowing, innovation, and autoethnographic writing, contending with local histories of stratification and cultural minoritization in the shadow of Arabic as a language of high ritual and cultural prestige.

The term “arabophone” (a calque on the term “francophone”) is frequently used in French-language scholarship to designate writers and speakers of Arabic. Building on Jurji Zaydān’s expansive notion of a transregional arabophone readership (as discussed later in chapter 2), I broaden the term’s application

to designate a cultural community beyond a “core” of native Arabic-language writers in North Africa and the Middle East, to encompass non-native West African and Southeast Asian writers and speakers of Arabic. By beginning with arabophone writing as a comparative common ground, I draw attention to horizons of literary comparison that move beyond Eurocentric paradigms and disciplinary configurations. To engage with Asian and African cultural histories impacted by both Arabic and European languages, I sometimes use the term “Europhone” as a shorthand to designate modern European languages as a group. This term admittedly occludes the heterogeneity of European languages themselves, but it is useful to provisionally frame how certain authors “write back” to both European metropolitan and Arabic cultural centers.

Global Arabic: “Cosmopolitan” and “Sacred”

The prestige accorded to Arabic was in part indebted to its status as a sacralized language of revelation and as what some scholars have called a “truth language.” Benedict Anderson coined the term to designate “the idea that a particular script-language offered privileged access to ontological truth.” Anderson illustrates the concept through the examples of both Church Latin and Qur’anic Arabic, languages that “called into being the great transcontinental sodalities of Christendom” and an Islamic *umma* or global community.¹³ Despite their illustrative value, such broad classifications of “truth languages” bracket the singular importance of the multilingual interpreters and translators who employ these languages—figures whose translingual work tempers the monolingual force of any language as a supposedly unrivaled means to access a higher ontological reality.

This terminological shorthand on Anderson’s part also raises questions of commensurability—not least between Church Latin and ritual Arabic. Broadly unaddressed in Anderson’s coinage are the risks of employing largely European terms of analysis within Islamized arabophone regions and beyond the Latinate boundaries of early European Christendom. What analytical nuances are gained when European terms are displaced by alternatives drawn from Arabic lineages and source materials, as the histories of Arabic as a contact language are retraced across Asian and African territories? These observations bear not only on the application of the terms “vernacular” and “truth language” to Arabic-Islamic contexts but also on using Eurocentric notions of “racial” and “national” difference to frame histories of contact between Arabic and other languages.

Following Ronit Ricci's example in *Islam Translated*, I see Arabic as a "cosmopolitan language," viewing it as a prestigious medium used by literary elites to communicate across regional and linguistic differences. Arabic, however, also inaugurated a new "vernacular age" wherever it was regionally introduced, as Ricci explains.¹⁴ Dynamics of Islamic conversion and translation contributed to the formation of a new repository of shared stories, religious motifs, and narrative traditions in Arabicized vernaculars across South and Southeast Asia, or what she calls an Arabic "cosmopolis."¹⁵ Like Ricci, I approach Arabic's cosmopolitan presence as a basis for exploring literary innovations across a diversity of vernacular contexts, though I consider regions of a different dispersion than the South and Southeast Asian sites that Ricci examines.

Arabic's cosmopolitan function often intersects with its sacred one. Though scholars frequently differentiate between the roles functionally occupied by a "sacred language" and a "cosmopolitan language," I use both terms to frame Arabic's transregional vocation, switching between the two according to my own shifting emphasis. What is consistent, however, is that I approach Arabic as a charismatic language, understood to be both "sacred" (ritually important) and "cosmopolitan" (conferring prestige to writers). Arabic, in this regard, often appears as a sign of distinction among writers who used it to express their sense of Muslim belonging and their cultivation (or *adab*).

One of my core aims is to emphasize Arabic's status as a dynamic language of print, literary experimentation, and transcultural influence, rather than one of stasis and cultural stagnation. Literary Arabic (*fuṣṣḥā*) underwent an uneven process of reform during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in the Middle East, becoming a grammatically simplified and lexically enriched print standard that evolved over the period treated within the book. In connection to this, Arabic's taxonomic designation as a "living" (rather than "moribund") language by European Orientalists and native speakers became a matter of public controversy, especially as attached to the designation of *fuṣṣḥā* after the nineteenth century (often equated with "classical" or "Qur'anic" Arabic, though not universally accepted as such). Underlying these controversies over terminology were questions and anxieties about Arabic's capacity to modernize as a print medium, given its formidable history—its association with a "classical" poetic canon and with ideals of eloquence (or *faṣāḥa*) associated with the Qur'an. Several authors featured in this book theorized Arabic's capacity to balance between its ritual vocation for Muslims worldwide and its role as a cosmopolitan language of print that would interact with and borrow from other languages.

Arabic speakers historically described the Arabic of the Qur'an, of classical literature, and of erudite literary texts with a single term: *al-luġha al-ʿarabiyya al-fuṣṣḥā*, or “eloquent Arabic.” European commentators beginning in the nineteenth century in contrast tended to variegate their designations for Arabic according to context and function, variously translating *fuṣṣḥā* as “classical,” “Qur’anic,” “premodern,” or “written” Arabic. The unique anglophone term “Modern Standard Arabic,” now used to describe literary Arabic after its linguistic reforms as a print standard in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, was a later contribution by U.S.-based linguists in the wake of these debates. Though we can think of “modern” literary Arabic (*fuṣṣḥā*) as historically connected to “Qur’anic Arabic,” the two are not identical, in part due to the impact of these debates and associated reforms dating from the nineteenth century. The histories of contact between Western European commentators and native Arabic literary elites contributed to this complex history of taxonomic differentiation, a differentiation that remains controversial.¹⁶ Contact with European linguists resulted in innovations among native Arabic speech communities to describe *fuṣṣḥā* before and after its nineteenth- and early twentieth-century print reforms—for example, differentiating *fuṣṣḥā al-turāth* (classical Arabic) from *fuṣṣḥā al-ʿāṣr* or *al-ʿarabiyya al-muʿāṣira* (modern Arabic).¹⁷

In framing Arabic as a “sacred language” for the purposes of this book, I found Webb Keane’s working definition of religious language to be particularly useful. He sees religious languages as linguistic practices that are perceived by speakers or users themselves to be marked or unusual, “distinct from ordinary experience, or situated across some sort of ontological divide from something understood as a more everyday ‘here and now.’” Keane suggests that religious language “commonly helps make present what would otherwise, in the course of ordinary experience, be absent or imperceptible.”¹⁸ I interpret this definition to encompass the perceptions not only of users or speakers but also of listeners of a language deemed sacred.

Across the contexts and cases examined in this book, two exemplars recur of this marked experience of sacred or religious language. One is the perceived experience of Arabic as an unrivaled form of divine or divinely inspired speech. The second is connected but not reducible to Arabic, through verse 30:22 in the Qur’an, which sanctifies linguistic differences. This second case can be described as an intense religious experience of linguistic otherness that is grounded in a listener’s perception of differences in human speech as a sign from beyond the “here and now.” Where difference ordinarily threatens to alienate speakers of distinct languages, its discernment in sacred or religious

terms ascribes a divine origin to that difference. At times I describe this second experience as the perception of a sanctified heteroglossia—where the variegation of languages is itself viewed as a sign of the wonders of a divinely created universe, an experience in which human hearers imagine themselves bridging (if not quite overcoming) an ontological divide between different speech communities. The experience thus connects ordinary speakers to what they understand as the universe’s otherworldly origins. Any languages “foreign” to a hearer—including non-Arabic languages to the Arabic speaker—are by this logic divine imprints, extensions of a divine message if not exactly divine or divinely inspired speech itself. These two experiences of religious or sacred language at times correspond to xenophilic and xenophobic attitudes that wend their way throughout this book, demonstrating the push and pull between purist ideologies of language that are attached to Arabic as a sacred medium and more heteroglossic values that reflect a history of linguistic intermingling among arabophone communities.

Thresholds of Arabness and Non-Arabness

The term *‘ajam* is generally undertheorized and underscrutinized, but it is crucial to understanding dynamics within Arabic-Islamic contact zones. The terms *‘ajam* for non-Arab peoples and *‘ajamiyya* for non-Arabic languages offer a vital conceptual trace for Arabic’s itinerant movement across ethnolinguistic and racial boundaries. As Yasir Suleiman observes, *‘ajami* (pl. *‘ajam*) is used in the Qur’an “to designate a binary group classification between Arabs and non-Arabs on the basis of language,” and it appears as a marked category to signify “what is—in terms of the Qur’an as revelation—a deviation from the standard or norm.”¹⁹

These terms apparently circulated in pre-Islamic Arabian communities to designate speakers of inscrutable forms of garbled or accented speech (not unlike *barbaros* in ancient Greek and Latin contexts). Qur’anic scripture enshrined these relational terms, as the Qur’an self-referentially characterizes its own status as a clear, Arabic revelation against an *‘ajamiyya* alternative or counterfactual across several verses.²⁰ With the spread of ritual Arabic, the terms *‘ajam* and *‘ajamiyya* were increasingly applied across ethnic lines to groups near the Arabian Peninsula, most notably to a Persian populace (a designation that they continue to retain), notwithstanding their more generalizable usage for non-Arab peoples and their languages.²¹ Etymologically associated with the Arabic term *‘ujma*, meaning “deficiencies in pronunciation or

speech,” *‘ajam(iyya)* is often opposed in classical Arabic texts to a purist ideal of eloquence (or *faṣāḥa*) and to “eloquent speech” (*fushā*). These terms vitally frame how Arabic is characterized within the Qur’an as an unrivaled language of ritual prestige, and they are crucial for framing subaltern sensibilities and interpretive practices relative to Arabic *fushā*, the language register associated with both Qur’anic scripture and the most elevated forms of classical poetry.

Across Arabic regions of contact, the notion of *‘ajam(iyya)* difference has taken on various accretions. As Islam expanded after the seventh century, the concept traveled along with Arabic as an evolving ethnonymic designation and came to describe a broader diversity of non-Arabic languages (*‘ajamiyyāt*) and non-Arab peoples (*‘ajam*, sing. *‘ajami*) across North Africa and West Asia. At times the term still refers to the garbled, accented, inscrutable, linguistically uncanny or xenophone. And at others, as an “ethnonym,” it refers to the non-Arab.²² Within sub-Saharan African contexts, the term *‘ajami* now refers to non-Arabic languages written in Arabic orthography, as the Arabic script came to transcribe at least eighty languages across continental Africa, yielding literary traditions in at least twenty-nine continental African vernaculars and attenuating the term’s originally pejorative meaning.²³ In nineteenth-century Arabic canonical texts, the terms *‘ajam* and *‘ajamiyya* continued to mark the boundaries of Arabic speech communities after colonial French and British incursions in North Africa but extended to new horizons of contact with non-Arab European foreigners. This included the terms’ employment as pejorative designations for European Orientalists, whose interference in questions of Arabic philology and poetics was increasingly felt by native speakers—some of whom disdained European Orientalists and missionaries as accented (*‘ajami*) speakers of Arabic.

In Arabocentric terms, then, *‘ajam* (with its derivatives) largely remained a pejorative term of scorn; it names a boundary of inclusion and exclusion for the “Arabophone” and ethnolinguistically marks those who fail to pass. In Islamic intellectual traditions, however, the term is more ambiguous. On the one hand, it frames the uniqueness of the Qur’an as a clear, Arabic revelation. Yet it is equally invoked to advance heteroglossic or pluralist ideologies of language that attach to Muslim communities, pointing to an internal tension between Arabic’s historically centripetal and centrifugal movements, between a linguistic or scriptural orthodoxy in Arabic and the translational needs of a growing, linguistically diverse *umma* (or “community of believers”) among the *‘ajam*.²⁴ Although a pejorative term and a marked category among a core of native Arabic speakers, *‘ajam* has also been used to assert parity across

Arabic-Islamic contact zones among non-Arab Muslims—and to affirm the right to ethnolinguistic difference within an *umma* conjoined by a shared ritual language. The term appears, for example, in hadith, or “sayings,” attributed to the Prophet Muhammad’s last sermon (*khuṭbah al-widāʿ*), in which he is believed to have proclaimed: “[T]he Arab has no superiority over the non-Arab [*ʿajam*], nor the non-Arab over the Arab, except in piety to God.”²⁵ Variations on this hadith tradition extend ideals of parity between *sudān* and *bayḍān*—black and white—in addition to *ʿajam* and *ʿarab*.²⁶ On these grounds, as we will see, challenges to linguism and colorism were intertwined across diversifying Muslim communities.

In the early classical period (the first three centuries A.H.), exegetical elaborations on such notions of equality were at times idiomatically expressed (with claims that peoples were level as the surface of water or equal like the teeth of a comb), though Qurʾanic verses and hadith on unity and equality were often conceptually referenced through the Arabic term *taswiyya* (“leveling” or “equality”) among the pious.²⁷ Such sanctified notions of equality between *ʿarab* and *ʿajam* are reinforced by Qurʾanic verses that either proclaim the equality of peoples and tribes (*shuʿūb wa-qabāʿil*) or uphold linguistic diversity as a benediction:

Oh, Mankind! We have created you from a male and a female, and We have made you into groups and tribes [*shuʿūb wa-qabāʿil*], so that you may know one another. Truly the noblest [*akrām*] among you before God is the most righteous [or pious]. (49:13)²⁸

And among His wonders is the creation of the heavens and the earth, and the diversity [or differences: *ikhtilāf*] of your languages and your colors. In these are signs for mankind. (30:22)²⁹

Alongside notions of the Qurʾan as a self-referentially unrivaled *Arabic* revelation, then, the Qurʾan itself presents linguistic diversity (heteroglossia) as a divine sign.³⁰

Although these egalitarian precepts and interpretive traditions reinforce a right to *ʿajami* (non-Arab) difference from Arab counterparts within global Muslim communities, they are difficult to translate in ways that are culturally relevant to the Eurocentric terms and histories that dominate our current disciplines. The notion of *ʿajam(iyya)* difference as a protean, shifting concept remains underexamined and translationally eclipsed, despite the term’s centrality for framing subaltern sensibilities within Arabic-Islamic contact zones.

In European Orientalist texts, as Arabic literacies became increasingly politicized by colonial agents in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the term *‘ajam* is variously translated as *barbaros* against a Greco-Roman template and as “non-Arabs” in phil-Aryan and pan-Latinate terms. After the mid-nineteenth century, *‘ajami* came to be polemically translated as the non-Arab Indo-Aryan, applying especially to Greeks and Persians (relative to Arab “Semites”). Certain Orientalist commentators translated the term to frame competitive “Arab” and “non-Arab” forms of what they considered national pride or proto-national consciousness. Each of these translational decisions has freighted the autochthonous Arabic opposition of *‘ajam* to *‘arab* with new meanings and, arguably, with new distortions. But the most durable way the stakes of this opposition were translated in colonial-era Orientalist circles was through histories of what was described as Arab and non-Arab racial difference, racial competition, and racial equality or egalitarianism. Evidence of these colonial-era dependencies on racial and political-national terminology continue to resurface across the book, as *‘ajam-‘arab* conceptual dynamics are explored with various overlays.

Notwithstanding these translational difficulties, the recuperation—or rendering visible—of the concept of *‘ajami* otherness advances the important labor of making legible a shared Arabic-Islamic idealist tradition of ethnolinguistic parity. This idealism connects writers within regions considered both “centers” and “peripheries” of Arabic language use—from the Middle East to Southeast Asia and West Africa. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, its pluralist implications gained meaning among Wolof poets, novelists writing in Malay, Egyptian colloquial poets, and even writers using high literary Arabic or *fushhā*.

This book begins with the comparative reframing of the Arabophone, unsettling notions of centrality and peripherality among speakers of Arabic. The final arc of the book considers the obverse or inverse side of the *‘ajam(iyya)* as a relational concept. Where *‘ajam(iyya)* has crossed boundaries, it has gained in meaning; it offers a prism through which Arabic has traveled and—orthographically, scripturally, exegetically, and literarily—has mingled with the languages of non-Arab communities from continental West Africa to South Africa, from Persia, the Maghreb, and Iberia to insular Southeast Asia.

It has to be said, however, that the egalitarian claims central to this book—between *‘ajam* and *‘arab*, black and white—are largely *idealist* claims. Forms of color prejudice and linguistic bias were complex and changeable among early Arab and Muslim communities and were reflected by diverse exegetical

practices. For example, the Qur'anic verse 49:13 on the parity between peoples and tribes, which was used to defend egalitarian ideals by many of the writers featured in this book, has also been used to assert forms of ethnonationalism and tribalism in very different contexts.³¹ Although such divergent uses of verse 49:13 may appear to undercut the claims of the authors I discuss, these nonuniform practices make their invocation of the verse in the name of parity all the more poignant.

It would be a mistake to assume that dynamics of linguistic and racial prejudice were uniform—or were understood in conceptual terms equivalent to those of European commentators. I underscore this point on conceptual incommensurability to avoid “flattening out” a complex historical dynamic. As Bruce Hall, Ghenwa Hayek, and others have noted, however, this quandary does not mean that we should refrain from engaging with evidence of colorism and racial prejudice—or, I should add, language bias—for fear of misnaming these dynamics but, rather, that we should treat conceptual incommensurabilities with nuance across varied contexts.³²

Beyond the Margins of an Arabophone “Muslim World”

In examining egalitarian forms of literary expression, I focus on three sites with distinct imperial legacies that collectively represent both the custodial Middle Eastern “centers” and the Southeast Asian and West African “peripheries” of a realm politicized by European Orientalist scholars in the late nineteenth century as the “Muslim world.”³³ I focus on Senegal, formerly controlled by the French; Indonesia, a former Dutch colony; and semiautonomous Egypt, which emerged as a regional print center within the Ottoman Empire before it was occupied by the British in the late nineteenth century. Beginning with an interimperial approach to the questions that opened this introduction, my discussion builds toward a comparative focus on the discrete national contexts of Senegal, Indonesia, and Egypt in the mid- to late twentieth century. This comparison, however, ultimately yields claims among writers within the “peripheral” regions of West Africa and Southeast Asia that challenge the very grounds of that marginality, at times with reference to Qur'anically enshrined traditions of parity within a global Muslim religious community. Equally important are literary contributions from Egypt that unsettle or bracket notions of Arabic distinction and Arab Egyptian cultural centrality, despite Egypt's position as a center of Islamic learning and Arabic print culture during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The book moves through a centrifugal structure. Beginning with a focus on Arabic as a transregional and interethnic contact language, the discussion progresses through a linguistic and literary dispersion, encompassing literary languages native to Southeast Asia and sub-Saharan West Africa in the spirit of lateral comparisons. Moving through a diversity of languages in contact with ritual Arabic, I also connect controversies on subaltern vernacular writing in Southeast Asia and sub-Saharan West Africa to parallel debates about the literary representation of nonstandard, colloquial varieties of Arabic in the Middle East. These comparisons bypass connections to colonial Europe as a primary common ground and present an alternative approach to the often binary colonial/postcolonial constructions used in more isolated studies of national literatures emerging within Europe's former colonies. Even though I draw evidence from three regional or "area studies" sites, I aim to unsettle the common disciplinary lines that divide scholarship on these regions. I hope to bring greater visibility to global dynamics that cannot be explained through regional scales of analysis, highlighting the history of egalitarian ideals that gain meaning when understood beyond a regional or provincial frame.

The first section, "Reframing the Arabophone," focuses on influential authors from roughly the 1820s through the 1940s. I begin by introducing Orientalist polemics and colonial language policies that contributed to the marginalization of Arabic and the segregation of Arabic and European literacies across several of Europe's colonial territories. I also consider how writing in the late colonial period gave the Arabic language and script new meaning across imperial lines: No longer merely a religious, sacralized language, it became a counterimperial medium, portrayed as a language of symbolic opposition to a colonial or imperial presence.

The second section, "Vernacular Difference and Emerging Nationalisms," considers how the politicization of colonial languages and scriptural Arabic influenced the work of poets in Egypt, Senegal, and Indonesia in the decades surrounding independence (1930s–60s). This section considers how the interchange and competition between Arabic and vernacular traditions helped shape the emergent poetry of three national poetic canons. I also show how the relationship between Arabic and its surrounding vernaculars changed through the controversial search for an egalitarian and liberationist aesthetic in the mid-twentieth century. In addition, this section explores connections between poetic language and the rhetoric of emerging heads of state (Sukarno, Nasser, and Senghor) during an era of transformative political change, along with reference to the Bandung Conference as a leitmotif. The section draws

attention to the political catalysts and afterlives of poetic form and plays on the transnational visibility of the Bandung Conference as both a historical event and a near-mythic symbol within a decolonizing Asia-Africa.³⁴

Focusing on postcolonial writing toward the latter half of the twentieth century, the third section, “Connected Histories and Competing Literacies,” examines authors associated with an emerging “Third World” literary canon in Asia-Africa who challenged the status of Arabic as a language of religious prestige. Of leftist political sympathies, these authors either depicted the religious rise of Arabic as a matter of historical accident or sought to reconcile its sacralized status with a more secular, populist vision for local culture. By considering how the coexistence of sacred and vernacular languages is depicted in historical fiction, I also develop in this section a method of reading that considers how the traces of historically marginalized languages or dialects are nonetheless sustained in individual texts and in the apparent fissures of national literary histories. Drawing attention to questions of language and class, this final arc of the book emphasizes how novelists, from Senegal and Indonesia to Egypt, expressed commitments to linguistic egalitarianism, within the shared penumbra of ritual Arabic.

The enduring coexistence of sacralized Arabic with a diversity of vernacular languages has implications for the comparative study of emerging twentieth-century nationalisms, bearing on the secularity or religious pluralism of new nation-states and the nature of their linguistically bounded forms of communal imagining. In my concluding chapters, I invite readers to reconsider how vernacular literatures in the sites I examine scaffold an emerging national consciousness according to egalitarian contours. While Benedict Anderson influentially argued that national communities were foundationally mediated through the rise of print vernaculars against the decline of religious “truth languages” such as Latin or Arabic, this book demonstrates how that claim is complicated by the legacies of late colonial language policies and the enduring influence of Qur’anic Arabic on postcolonial writing and contemporary culture.

“Sacred Language” as a World Literary “Thread”

Retracing the politicization of Arabic in the wake of European empires also yields insights into polycentric cultural formations relevant to “world literature” as a frame of perennial resurgence. As Tobias Warner has observed in *The Tongue-Tied Imagination*, the iterative nature of the counterimperial “language question” draws us toward a renewed attention to the global dy-

namics of literary commensurability and incommensurability, of cultural integration and autonomy across various scales of world literary analysis. Warner further suggests that if language itself can be read as a kind of connective cross-thread, aligning readers and speakers across vast distances, language debates amount to the worked-over knots of these cross-threads. Attitudes in favor of linguistic purism and cultural distinction, he argues, are tantamount to perennial attempts to rend apart the entwined cross-threads of literary languages and the seams that connect literary texts.³⁵ A study of literary innovations at the interstices of language debates and translational dynamics, by this logic, can illuminate the constitutive tensions of globally interconnected forms.

Interest in world literature as both subject and literary frame has tended to surface during periods of major global transformation and crisis, as Djelal Kadir has observed of critical approaches to literature beyond narrowly national confines.³⁶ In European and American contexts, interest in world literature first emerged with the heights of European imperialism through intellectuals such as Goethe, resurged in the wake of World War II with critics such as Auerbach, and more recently arose as the end of the Cold War has redrawn the world's national and ideological boundaries. Scholars debating this most recent critical resurgence have noted that "world literature" as a frame at its best carries the promise of inclusive literary horizons, while also questioning whether this inclusive purview exists mostly on an aspirational or idealized plane, given the persistence of global inequalities that condition forms of literary circulation. Has translation as a globalized practice in the wake of European imperialism overdetermined what rises to the surface of "worldly" circulation in European languages such as English? Have the colonial beginnings of disciplines such as comparative linguistics constrained the taxonomies through which "literature" has come to be defined, translated, and globally consumed? Some critics have suggested that the interpretive frame of world literature privileges texts that circulate among cosmopolitan literary elites, to the detriment of more localized literary forms that travel less well—including those in provincial "vernaculars."³⁷

In different ways, my project aligns with both sides of the argument. On the one hand, David Damrosch's observations about the generative quality of literary circulation—rendering literature itself a "worldly" object—offer a useful frame for certain dimensions of this book. I trace the generative circulation of Qur'anic interpretive practices and Islamic narrative inheritances as they sur-

face in literary texts. Such practices moved through Arabic as a historically connective language, far beyond a core of native Arabic speech communities in West Asia and North Africa (or beyond a “point of origin,” to use Damrosch’s turn of phrase).³⁸ My book, however, is also attuned to Arabic’s distinctive position in the “push and pull” of world literary space. Although Arabic’s position in this space can be viewed as centrifugal (holding to itself, resisting translation), it can also be viewed as generative and centripetal. “Worldliness,” in this context, might refer to the transcultural effects of literary borrowing and adaptation, enabled in this case by Arabic’s enduring porousness and proximity to other languages.

I approach Arabic’s untranslatability not as a “given” or foreclosed fact associated with religious orthodoxies but, rather, as a claim posited and challenged by countervailing practices of translation, at times defended by ideas about Arabic’s coequal position to other languages, as already suggested in verse 30:22 of the Qur’an. It is through this push and pull between the monoglossic and heteroglossic—between the untranslatable and translatable—that world literary tensions appear. It is also through this push and pull between language attitudes that literature’s “normative force,” in Pheng Cheah’s terms, might be discerned.³⁹ By exploring the politics of language across historically colonized Asian and African regions, I trace the circulation of pluralist and egalitarian ideas within Muslim communities as a more equitable “world” was being envisioned after European empires.

Although this book ends with observations on heteroglossia as a pluralist value—drawing evidence from late twentieth-century Arabic literature—it begins with an account of how linguistic diversities were also once colonially usable, viewed by European Orientalists as a way to divide and disarm subjects across a colonized “Muslim world.” In the wake of an Orientalist past, “‘diversity’ itself is [or was] a colonial and Orientalist problematic” that “emerges precisely on the plane of equivalence that is literature,” as Aamir Mufti reminds us.⁴⁰ Aligning with this observation, the book begins with a chapter on controversial Orientalist and interimperial approaches to arabophone and Muslim diversity during the nineteenth century.

While it may seem counterintuitive to begin with a treatment of European Orientalist and colonial texts, my opening chapter foregrounds how European colonial engagements with Arabic—including efforts to moderate, contain, or displace the language—vested Arabic with new counterimperial associations (as explored in later chapters). Arabic’s characterization by many colonial Eu-

ropean authorities as a globally underclass language also conditioned how subaltern authors would rally to Arabic's defense as a language of enduring prestige. Moving from British-occupied Egypt as a rising center of Arabic print to French West Africa and Southeast Asia, where Arabic was colonially marginalized, I uncover defensive attachments to Arabic as a common development within and beyond the "Middle East."

I

Reframing the Arabophone

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1

Orientalism and Muslim Diversity

“Islam and the Race Problem”

It is undeniable that the human groups that, on the basis of whichever somatic and psychological kinship factors, feel united and are called races, presently bring humanity into troubles hitherto unknown. In making their proposal to overcome the impending crisis, the American writers [Lothrop Stoddard and Madison Grant] assume the total superiority of the white race, especially a particular part of that race, and aim at the preservation, for that human group, of all living conditions, under which it can stay what it is, regardless of what happens to yellow, red, brown, and black. They urge haste in erecting the necessary dams; they fail to see, however, that these would not turn the flood, but rather would bring about a struggle for life and death, compared to which the most recent war was mere child's play.

— CHRISTIAAN SNOUCK HURGRONJE, “DE ISLAM EN HET
RASSENPROBLEEM,” FEBRUARY 8, 1922

The redrawing of the global map in the wake of World War I coincided with the re-equilibrium of imperial rivalries, the formation of new protectorates and mandates, and the assertion of national boundaries across former Asian and African colonies of a war-torn Europe. Ruminating on this postwar cartography in a speech at Leiden University in 1922, the influential Dutch Orientalist (and former advisor to the Dutch East Indies colonial government) Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje observed with foreboding that this was a redrawing of the global map that would simply hold “until the next war.”¹ His premonition was that this demarcation of state-centered boundaries was opposed by the force of “inextricable” human networks that transcended them on the basis of a multitude of factors, including race and religion. These

factors, and in particular racial egotism and racial supremacy, he claimed, offered the prospect of an endless global struggle that would make the latest war appear like “child’s play.”

Citing incendiary pseudo-academic tracts such as the American Lothrop Stoddard’s *The Rising Tide of Color: The Threat against White World-Supremacy* (1920), Snouck Hurgronje presented an overview of “racial” antagonisms and their envisioned resolution within Islam’s own history as a point of contrast. Yet Snouck Hurgronje—like Orientalists who came before him—was still projecting European-language concepts upon his subject. The term “race,” ambiguous and polysemous itself in European contexts, had no clear equivalent in Arabic upon the term’s earliest translations into the Arabic language.² By translating into European terms what he called “racial” dynamics internal to Islamic history, Snouck Hurgronje was making a series of selective choices about what in Arabic and arabophone Muslim contexts might represent these European-derived notions: “racial difference” (*rasverschil*), “racial conflict” (*rasconflicten*), and “racial equality” (*gelijkwaardigheid*).

As previously noted, with Islam’s expansion after the seventh century, the terms *‘ajami/‘ajam* and *‘ajamiyyāt* traveled along with Arabic, to respectively designate a growing diversity of non-Arab demographics and non-Arab languages. At times referring to the garbled, accented, or inscrutable, and at times, to the non-Arab as a pejorative or marked category, the terms were also invoked to assert ideals of equality between *‘ajam* and *‘arab* and to affirm the right to ethnic and linguistic difference within an expanding *umma* otherwise unified by Arabic as a ritual language. The present chapter focuses not on these Arabic concepts for ethnolinguistic difference per se (a topic explored in later chapters) but, rather, on their distortive translation and interpretation in Western European Orientalist circles—distortions that paved the way for Snouck Hurgronje’s remarks in Leiden. I also explore how racialized characterizations of internal Muslim diversity—across *‘arabi* and *‘ajami* difference—resonated across scholarly and policy platforms, informing colonial theories of “divide and rule” and of Islam’s ideological “containment.”

In the late nineteenth century, the Arabic language was perceived to be expanding in influence—and Islam to be gaining in converts—in Africa and Southeast Asia, across regions where European empires had growing commercial ambitions and intensifying strategic interests. In the course of the mid-to-late nineteenth century, Orientalist scholarship itself was correlatively gaining in comparative dimensions—transregionally and transhistorically—in keeping with the exigencies of expansionary colonial ambitions within these territories.³ As the future of a progressively colonized “Muslim world” was

being assessed by the turn of the twentieth century, racialized European interpretations of *‘ajam* and *‘arab* difference gained meaning within circles of Orientalist interpreters and colonial stakeholders. Against this broader context, this chapter foregrounds how certain ideas on Islamic racial difference, strife, and accommodation were projected, circulated, and reinterpreted among influential Orientalist scholars and colonial agents. The fraught deployment of classically oriented scholarship to racially assess Islam’s contemporary diversity gained ground through the materials explored in the present chapter, with significant repercussions.

This chapter focuses on a spectrum of influential Orientalist voices in conversation about the future of Islam as a racialized global force. It arcs from the 1840s, with the rise of comparative Semitic philology and (proto-)Islamic studies in Europe, to the 1920s, after Orientalist exchanges were beset by the antagonisms of World War I. It moves in roughly chronological order. Among the most controversial figures featured is the French philosopher and philologist Ernest Renan (1823–92), whose early scholarship on “Semitic” and “Aryan” linguistic “races” set the tone for later scholarly debates. Ignaz Goldziher (1850–1921), a Hungarian scholar whose work transformed European Islamic studies, appears among Renan’s most ardent critics; the lifelong clerk of a Hungarian synagogue, Goldziher published his groundbreaking work avocationally, in part on the persistent encouragement of his close friend Snouck Hurgronje.

The Dutch Islamicist Snouck Hurgronje (1857–1936)—whose 1922 speech on racial dynamics was dedicated to Goldziher—emerges as one of the most fascinating and contradictory figures I examine here. Deployed by the Dutch government for the covert surveillance of Indonesian pilgrims on the Hajj (a mission during which he nominally converted to Islam), Snouck Hurgronje later became an architect of Islamist suppression in northern Sumatra (Aceh) as a Dutch colonial advisor. He also gained renown in European academic circles as an eminent scholar of Islamic law. His vacillation between colonial pragmatist and liberal academic offers a through line across this chapter. Other figures mentioned in the chapter include Alfred Le Chatelier (1855–1929), an African-based French colonial official and scholar of Islamic sociology, who was responsible for translating and publishing Snouck Hurgronje’s ideas in French.

This chapter looks principally at how Orientalist scholars and colonial stakeholders considered themselves to be interpreting transhistorical racial or ethnolinguistic dynamics in a set of texts from colonial European metropolises. The Orientalist texts and colonial commentaries examined here generally conflated Arabic literacies and Islamization, de-emphasizing the position of Arabic

as a historically interreligious medium (an issue considered in the following chapter). Polemical attention was instead placed on the role of Arabic as a culturally isolationist medium for racialized Arabs, a medium often conflated with the origins of Islam, or else as an inter-“racial” ritual language for historically expanding Muslim communities. Yet European “master concepts”—such as “race”—prove problematic in their remarks, as signs of cross-cultural distortion, incommensurability, and anachronism surface within their commentaries on the stakes of *‘arab* and *‘ajam* difference and acculturation.

We will begin with influential publications by Ernest Renan and Ignaz Goldziher, to trace how European racial and national taxonomies in foundational Orientalist scholarship displaced and politicized the autochthonous boundary terms of *‘arab* and *‘ajam* (Arab and non-Arab ethnolinguistic differences). The conceptual translation of *‘arab* and *‘ajam* difference through Eurocentric terms of racial and national diversity assumed real-world repercussions beyond scholarly exchanges, as European colonial agents became invested in the causes of Islam’s ongoing expansion and its containment in sub-Saharan West Africa and Southeast Asia. I then consider how the progressive dominance of European frameworks for understanding *‘arab* and *‘ajam* distinctions resonated within colonial policy circles. After examining how racialized Orientalist characterizations of Muslim diversity informed policy justifications for “divide and rule” in a colonial query on the “future of Islam” (in 1900–1901), the chapter concludes by comparing strategies for Islam’s ideological containment as envisioned by Snouck Hurgronje and his French counterpart and publisher, Le Chatelier. These figures theorized in parallel ways the dissociation of a non-Arab West African and Southeast Asian populace from Arabic-Islamic influences at the colonized margins of what they called the “Muslim world”—a problematic blanket designation that remains in current use. As with “the Middle East,” we should always refer to “the Muslim world” in awareness of its colonial derivation, noting the diversities too often hidden within these terms.

Mistranslation and Racial Becoming: When *‘Ajam* Became “Aryan”

A leading European interpreter of the diversity of the “Muslim world” was the French Orientalist Ernest Renan, from the 1840s until his death in 1892. Renan was the first European scholar to position Arabic language studies within the emerging field of comparative Semitic philology. Renan has been largely dis-

credited for his contributions to an anti-Semitic and phil-Aryan racial imaginary through his scholarly pursuits,⁴ but Renan's polemical writing overdetermined the parameters through which nineteenth-century debates on Muslim diversity would proceed in both scholarly domains and circles of colonial policy makers.

Renan's scholarship notably eclipsed the variety of Arabic terms for Arabic and non-Arabic languages and communities. These include the vital concept that frames the Qur'an as an "Arabic" revelation against an *'ajami* alternative—the latter Arabic term appearing nowhere in Renan's foundational *Histoire Générale et Systèmes Comparés des Langues Sémitiques* (1855). Equally eclipsed are terms for designating non-Arabic languages that had adopted the Arabic script. Instead, he translated (or approximated) the taxonomic meaning of *'ajamiyya* otherness (without citing the original Arabic term) as solecisms or *patois grossiers*, using this translation to racially characterize Arab communities as culturally closed, predisposed to dismiss all other languages as disorderly and ungrammatical, "incapables de règle."⁵ This was no small fault, for, by translating *'ajami* into the French term *patois* and overlooking the original term's philological traces in Arabic scholarship, he disregarded the way that this boundary term had framed historically shifting notions of Arabness itself, discounting forms of dynamism internal to the history of the Arabic language and its changing communities of speakers. This oversight was central to his reductive assertion that Arab (and ancient Bedouin) communities were exemplary "Semites" characterized by linguistic purism, closure, and self-regard. He notoriously contrasted this Semitic cultural and racial rigidity with an allegedly superior "Indo-Aryan" cultural and linguistic dynamism.⁶

Such arguments broadly served his claims that forms of grammatical rigidity and stasis reflected the communal mentality of Semitic speech communities, in contrast to the progressive dynamism of Indo-Aryan alternatives. Semitic dogmatisms and unities, he claimed, had given rise to the origins of monotheism—Judaism and Islam—in their Hebrew and Arabic conveyances; against these tendencies were the cultural leaven of allegedly more "dynamic" and variegated Indo-Aryan civilizations and their changeable languages (such as those of Greek and Persian communities), which countervailed Semitic forms of cultural conservatism and stasis across the history of world civilizations.⁷

What Renan misses is that the French term *patois* fails to convey other vital meanings of *'ajamiyya* as a boundary term—one that conveys not only monoglossic attachments to Arabic but also Arabic-Islamic defenses of

heteroglossia and ethnolinguistic parity. Renan thereby dismisses a constitutive tension evident within arabophone communities as Arabic expanded across an unrivaled diversity of regions and ritual users. Across Arabic-Islamic contact zones, monoglossic ideologies of language (defending the unrivaled preserve of Arabic as a sacralized, ritual language) were perennially in tension with heteroglossic ideologies of language (advancing the expansion of Arabic as an interethnic, “universal” medium in dynamic coexistence with *non-Arabic* tongues, or *‘ajamiyyāt*). He thereby de-emphasized the historical dynamism and fluidity of Arabic as a complex language of transregional contact and as an embodied medium: of mixed genealogies, social affect, shifting accent, and linguistic “passing,” at the intersection of spoken and written media, across a complex matrix of mixed ethnic affiliations.

Across Renan’s corpus of scholarship, Arabic terms of relational difference understood as *‘ajami* otherness come to be increasingly translated as a taxonomically non-Semitic, *Indo-Aryan* otherness. Beyond his translation of *‘ajami* difference to Arabic as a patois, as the “foreign influences” and “solecisms of new converts,”⁸ Renan engaged in other forms of distortive translation—and eclipsing—of the notion of *‘ajami* difference through phil-Aryan and anti-Semitic interpretive gestures. It would take a later generation of Orientalist scholars to partially redress this oversight, bringing greater visibility to these conceptual terms within the emerging field of Islamic studies in the late nineteenth century. But Renan’s early conceptual oversights and reliance on Eurocentric racial terminology to frame differences between *‘arab* and *‘ajam* remained entrenched in his wake and were carried forward even among later generations of more nuanced and scrupulous European scholars.

Regarding Arabic’s widespread and growing orthographic usage across continental Asia and Africa—what Renan called Arabic’s “promiscuity” with the languages of Muslim Asia and its active “conquering” of the African continent—he characterized the Arabic script as an ossified and even “destructive” writing system, a script that he claimed was a liability for “non-Arab” communities from Iberia to Java.⁹ Renan’s unfavorable judgment of Arabic as a written medium pertained as much to contemporary Muslim communities of “non-Arabs” as to arabographic or arabophone communities of medieval or classical antiquity. Indeed, within his own scholarly corpus, much ink was spilled to dissociate Arabic as a mere writing system from the supposedly original racial identity of non-Arab figures who employed Arabic to speak or write. This was a trend anticipated in his work on comparative philology and extended in his later work, where Renan claimed that Arab philosophy was

(continued...)

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