Translation and the Analytical Study of Religion
November 22, 2019, San Diego, CA

But this pushing beyond the limits of one’s habitual usages, this breaking down and reshaping
of one’s own language through the process of translation, is never an easy business, in part be-
cause (if I may be allowed a hypostatization) it depends on the willingness of the use of transla-
tor’s language to subject itself to this transforming power.

Talal Asad, 157, “The Concept of Cultural Translation” Writing Cultures, Clifford & Marcus, 1986

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Sholeh Wolpé: I did what no one, to my knowledge, has ever done before in translating classical
literature. I followed the absence of gender in Persian nouns and pronouns! The Divine, Simorgh,
the Hoopoe, the Wayfarers, and all the birds are not necessarily male or female. In Persian, we
do not have “he” or “she,” “his” or “hers.” This masterpiece is about our souls and the human
soul is genderless. I respected that in my translation. ¹

Women Translating the Classics, Interview, by Alta L. Price, August 22, 2018.

In its 9th annual workshop, SORAAAD asks, how do we contend with translation as a function, not
only of lexicality or even transmission across genres and media, but also of adaptation across time,
technologies, space, power relations, immigration, and diaspora? How does translation surface or
sublimate matters of religious minority, race, disability, gender, orientation, and class? In short, how
do we talk about translation as a mode of social control? How should we consider translation as we
acquire data, focus on specific texts or media, or process observations in the field? And how then
might we ‘translate’ our own concerns about translation across disciplines and throughout the acad-
emy?

Recognizing that translation has often been intertwined with missionization, colonization and de-
struction—and noting therefore that translation(s) must be considered in relation to the politics of
interlocution, colonialism minstrelsy, social control, and appropriation—SORAAAD’s 2019 workshop
considers translation as the doubled burden of our discipline: that which renders our received data
problematic, and yet also the tool by which we must re-render those problems intelligible to and
across other fields.

The workshop will address the changing nature of what is associated with translation. Typically con-
ceived of as cross-cultural, what of translation, or the capacity to persist in representing others in
accepted narratives, as a locative in-group assertion of power? As those who translate increasingly

¹ Women Translating the Classics: An Interview with Emily Wilson, Sholeh Wolpé, and Arshia Sattar. Alta L. Price,
wordswithoutborders.org, August 22, 2018, Download date April 21, 2019.
hail from the culture of origin, can translation become an act of qualified recovery (Wolpé)? Is it that, as the base of those allowed to translate and present “official versions” diversifies, we can contend with the violence of colonialism? Scholars would do well to remain mindful of substituting one kind of elite for another and the continuing issue of what is deemed worthy of translation—and with this, the politics of canon.

The workshop will also address the move away from logo-centrism and literalism, while remaining mindful of fundamentalisms and the outsized role of missionary Christianity on the institutionalization of translation. Positively, the move away from logocentrism means equalizing or balancing attention to oral traditions, material objects, performance, human behaviors, and affects. The SORAAAD workshop asserts that taking up translation—and with it adaptation and extensibility—should compel us to retool theory, methodology, and historiography in our research design.

SORAAAD asserts that all discussions of research design (conceptualization, theory, method, data acquisition/field work) must address larger social scientific discussions regarding principles of representation and responsible uses of evidence. Multiple disciplines are working now to decolonize themselves, and yet such efforts exist often alongside—and sometimes overlap with—others to defend empire. How do we talk about translation, adaptation, and extensibility in an era strongly marked (and retrojected) by the impacts of colonialism and white supremacy, and the resurgence of religious nationalism? And how do we talk about translation and religion in ways that capture these categories as discursive sites and constructive processes? It is our contention—and the premise of this year’s workshop—that religion scholars should more openly discuss matters of translation and adaptation, not only to work in a more responsibly interdisciplinary manner, but also to make the extensibility of our research clearer. This is our bridge to the other disciplines.

To address these issues and more, we are pleased to announce that George Archer, Alison Melnick Dyer, Shreena Gandhi, Marko Geslani, Ed Silver, Kayla R. Wheeler, and others will share their work and insights on: how to address diversity in orality and literacy when translating the Qur’an; gender, audience, and the politics of translation in Tibetan Buddhism; the impacts of translation on the study of North American religions; Cold War Orientalism and model minoritization in Hindu studies; strategic untranslatability and the subaltern politics of the Tower of Babel; and how scholars and Muslims outside of the academy can translate complex arguments about Arab-centrism and anti-Blackness in American Islam without giving Islamophobes ammunition for Orientalism or xenophobia. Jens Kreinath, Jamel Velji, Ipsita Chatterjea, David Feltmate, and David Walker will then facilitate the concluding segment of the workshop, wherein attendees discuss the intersection of their research and teaching with the workshop’s themes.
SORAAAD is happy to host an alliance of scholars to discuss the state of different initiatives to address the impacts of translating across languages in the professional context of unconscious and overt Christocentrism, the impact it has on how we talk about adaptation by the subjects of our research, and extensibility as we draw upon other case studies and disciplines to design our research. Drawing on research from across the humanities and social sciences, and noting also new advances in the digital humanities, we ask together: How do we think through issues of translation, adaptation, and extensibility, so that we might refine and qualify study design in order to understand better how religious communities, religious events, and religious affect function at different times and places?

REGISTRATION
To register, please send an email to william.arnal@uregina.ca. Place “SORAAAD 2019 Registration” in the subject line, and include your name, indication of rank (independent scholar, graduate student, professor, etc.), and institution, if applicable, in the body of the email. Please indicate if you are a Vegan, Vegetarian, avoiding Gluten or Soy, or are a Non-Vegetarian avoiding a specific type of meat. If you are a parent who needs to attend with a child, please let us know what you need to accommodate your participation; at this time we have no formal child care arrangements. The workshop site has a single-occupancy gender neutral bathroom.

We will ask those registering to identify briefly (a sentence or two) what they want to get out of the workshop, whether it's catching up on the literature, updating a syllabus, revisiting curriculum, designing research, or completing a writing project. We will devote the final segment of the workshop to discussing the intersection of the workshop's themes and the work of those attending. Our hope is that this will help those participating use the workshop more effectively for their own projects.

Please note you are not registered until you are sent a confirmation of registration.

SORAAAD ONLINE
SORAAAD.org
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