

Translating the word *Muhtasib* - some considerations.

The word *muhtasib* may seem a rather unlikely starting-point for considerations about the translation of contemporary Arabic literature into European languages. Other terms from the same range of words describing political or juridical functions in Arab-Islamic society may appear more likely targets - *khalīfa*, for instance, *sultān*, *qādī*, or *wazīr*. These words have been accepted, more or less in the form of the Arabic original, into the different European dictionaries, ever since the *1001 Nights* enjoyed its sweeping success in the West during the 18th and the beginning of the 19th centuries – a fact that makes rendering them into European languages comparatively easy. Thus, while on the one hand *wazīr* or *qādī*, when occurring in a straightforward modern text, would probably be translated into English as "minister" and "judge", "sultan" on the other would probably be retained in its original form (as would *wazīr*, *vzier*, and *qādī*, *cadi*, in a "medieval" text), whereas *khalīfa* would be given its anglicized version "caliph".

As far as the "classical" usage is concerned, all these terms have acquired a range of connotations connected primarily with European fantasies developed during the period of Western expansion during the 18th and 19th centuries, fantasies that take a long time to die and that create, of course, a great number of problems for whoever has to present and explain things Middle Eastern. So, once again: the word *muhtasib* does not seem a likely starting point for considerations about translating modern Arabic literature into European languages. But it is, precisely because the word has not gone through all that fantasizing and is not at all fixed in our languages.

One by now famous work of contemporary Arabic writing brought the word back into people's minds, for, to the best of my knowledge, the function and, thus, the title of *muhtasib* no longer exists in Arab societies. A first short glance into *al-Muċjam al-ċarabī al-asāsī* seems to confirm this; we find the word *muhtasib* explained as: *man kâna(!) yatawallâ mansib al-hisba*.

The literary work I am referring to is, of course, Gamâl al-Ghîtânî's pioneering novel *az-Zaynî Barakât*, a book that has, unfortunately, not received the international publicity it deserves – and that in spite of numerous translations.

For the sake of those of you who have not had the privilege to read this marvellous work, here is a very brief résumé of the plot:

In the beginning of the 16th century of the Christian era (and one should remember that at that time the Ottoman Empire was expanding into the Arab world, its armies were approaching Egypt) a man was appointed *muhtasib* by the Egyptian Sultan. The hopes of all were pinned on this man, az-Zayni Barakât, hopes that repression would disappear and a better time would finally begin. Az-Zayni Barakât himself kindled those hopes through his public utterances. But, once in office, he seemed to change completely. Whether he only bowed to political necessity or whether he enjoyed the taste of power, whether he only reacted to the real threat to his country from outside or whether this was just a pretext, we do not know for sure all through the book. In any case, for the population the result is simply shattered hopes, people frustrated because one tyrant is replaced by what turns out to be just another one. There are, of course, many other stories interwoven with this main plot, in particular the struggle for political power on the level below the sultan between the *muhtasib* and the chief of police, and also the struggle for moral influence between the *muhtasib* and a group of sheikhs. All through the book az-Zayni Barakât is shown fulfilling different duties, but hardly ever the duty that is usually his: inspecting the markets. For these tasks, az-Zayni Barakât (or, more generally the *muhtasib* in Cairo) has his employees.

Now, the question could be asked, what seems to be the problem. A *muhtasib* is a *muhtasib* is a *muhtasib*. That might be so (it is not), but that does not provide us with a translation for the term that does not or may not know an equivalent. And this is the point I am driving at.

A brief look at some of the solutions given in different translations of G. al-Ghîtânî's novel is as rewarding as it is revealing.

I consulted the French translation, published in 1985 (by Jean-François Fourcade), the Dutch one (by Richard van Leeuwen), the English one (by Farouk Abdel Wahab), and the German one (by myself), all published in 1988, and finally the Spanish one (by Milagros Nuin Monreal), published in 1994.

The examples used here are taken from a paragraph just at the beginning of the book, where the chief of the police, Zakarîya ibn Râdî, ponders in dismay about the new *muhtasib*, of whom he

barely knows the name, a fact that, to him, indicates a complete lack of efficiency on the part of his own police apparatus and, thus, a menace to the security of the state:

The French translation uses the expression "le nouveau Grand Censeur"(44), the title being capitalized, and a few lines later the position is called "la charge de la Censure", again "Censure" with a capital C. This is in accordance with a mention of this title a dozen pages earlier, where we read: "la charge de la Censure de notre ville du Caire"(32).

The same passages are given in Dutch as: "de nieuwe oppercensur"(41) and "het ambt van oppercensur"; in English as: "the new *Muhtasib*"(33) and "the post of *Muhtasib*", *muhtasib* being in these two (and, of course, all other) cases capitalized and printed in italics; and in Spanish: "el nuevo almotacén"(47) and "el cargo de las cuentas generales", respectively. The German version, being the essential point of this paper, will be given below.

The rather different ways chosen to render this personality's function and title (to which one more, and a very different one for that matter, will be added) seem to indicate a problem or, at least, a particular difficulty, which is, in short: how to translate a term the concept of which

- firstly, changed considerably even in the area of its origin, and
- secondly, has no obvious equivalent in the environment of the target language.

That the concept of the *muhtasib* changed considerably in the area of its origin is firmly attested by documents and a number of studies available about city life and the *hisba* in the Islamic world and its predecessor, the Hellenistic world. There, it was the *agoranómos* (sometimes other, more regional terms were also used) who was responsible for functions later taken over by the *muhtasib*. As the Latin equivalent of the word *agoranómos* we find *aedilis*, not, interestingly enough, *censor*. The transformation from *agoranómos* to *muhtasib* probably took place some time late in the 8th century and was meant, in the words of M. Gaudetroy-Demombynes "à élargir et à spiritualiser la magistrature municipale de l'*agoranome*" (38). This transformation was based on the elaboration of the theory of the *hisba*, a concept known to Muslims as well as scholars of Islamic history derived from a Quranic expression (occurring nine times) about "bidding to honour and forbidding dishonour" (Arberry). Thus, we read in Sura 3,110:

kuntum khayra ummatin ukhrijat fin-nâsi / ta'murûna bil-ma^crûfi wa-tanhawna ^cani l-munkari / wa-tu'minûna bi-LLâhi ("You are the best nation ever brought forth to men, bidding to honour, and forbidding dishonour and believing in God").

Now, in some places this *muhtasib*, or holder of the *hisba*, was but a lowly functionary, whereas in other places, Cairo among them, he came to be an important magistrate, ranking above the *qâdî* in several chronicles and treatises about the *hisba*.

This is definitely the kind of of a *muhtasib's* position az-Zayni Barakât held, both in historical reality, as presented by Ibn Iyâs and in Gamâl al-Ghîtânî's novel.

At present, as indicated above, no office exists comparable to that of the *muhtasib* held by one single person. Therefore, no word is available for desparate translators.

So what is to be done?

The word *censor* is used in two translations, the French one: Grand Censeur, and the Dutch one: oppercensur. In both cases the simple censor is raised to chief censor in order to indicate the importance of the office. It is difficult for someone with a limited knowledge of French and a very limited knowledge of Dutch to decide which connotations the word carries in both languags. In any case, there remains the problem of adopting the designation of a post different from the one expressed in the original word and, thus, the danger of a false identification.

In German, in any case, the use of the word "Zensor" is out of the question. The dictionaries tell us the original meaning of the word – a high-ranking ancient Roman magistrate. But this is only for the sophisticated few. A normal German-speaking person will immediately think of someone crossing out lines in newspapers or tearing pages from magazines. This is the "Zensor"! And I have the impression that this is also the first and foremost connotation which occurs to a speaker of French when hearing the word "censeur" and "censure".

To judge the rendering of the word *muhtasib* as *almotacén* in Spanish is even more difficult. At first sight the use of a word derived from the Arabic *muhtasib* appears practical, but on the other hand, it would have to be determined to what extent the meaning has been narrowed down to very specific tasks. (as the *Diccionario de la Lengua Española*, 1992, would suggest) and whether the word is not completely unfamiliar to an average speaker of today's Spanish.

Not much need to be said about the English translator's solution – retaining the original word in italics, explained, of course, in a glossary. There we read: "markets inspector ... (followed by some details of his tasks, ending with the statement) It thus combined religious with temporal concerns" (Xxii). Even though there is an introduction giving historical background knowledge and explaining the activities of the *muhtasib* in the beginning of the 16th century in Cairo, I do not consider this solution a happy one, because, quite simply, it is not a translation.

All these and many other considerations haunted me while translating Gamâl al-Ghâtânî's masterpiece. I was able to consult the French and Dutch translations, which helped me a lot. But the way they tackled the *muhtasib* problem, I did not like and I had to look elsewhere, to find a completely different solution.

I looked into two different directions, the directions translators ought always to look in:

- the meaning of the word *muhtasib* in the context of the novel and
- the linguistic and social traditions of the German language.

There is not much more to add about the first point since I have already given the details needed to draw a picture of the *muhtasib* in the novel under discussion. Much more important is the other direction, in order to find, for example, an answer to the question which bureau or institution today would be responsible for fulfilling all the tasks that were incumbent upon the *muhtasib*, together with some specifically Islamic duties. It can be found, it is called: "Amt für Öffentliche Ordnung", which would translate as "Public Order Bureau", and even a brief glance in a telephone directory to identify the different sections of this bureau reveals a list that, somewhat modernized, resembles the *muhtasib*'s tasks as enumerated by al-Jarsîfî (13th cent.) in his *Risâla fil-hisba*.

There is the people's registration office, the bureau for public roads and buildings, the services of the police and those of street cleaning, the inspection of trades and crafts as well as taverns, the fire brigade, the control of forests and public lands, and finally a place where people have to pay their fines. All this comes under the umbrella of the Bureau of Public Order, even though there is no single official carrying this description in his title.

In the search for what I would consider an appropriate translation of *muhtasib* in a contemporary novel, this was the first step. There was another one, quite different from the first.

It is a well known fact that Germans, and even more Austrians, have a marked inclination towards titles. This is a disappearing tradition, but it still sticks in everybody's mind if only as a caricature of a formerly well-established social custom. The lowliest official would have a title containing three or four words, and his wife, and eventually his widow would, of course, insist on being addressed with the selfsame title, with wife or widow added. This tradition gave me the idea of **CREATING** a title in translating *muhtasib* instead of relying on anything already existing. It would be a creation that could achieve two different and essential purposes at the same time: it would describe the *muhtasib's* functions and it would convey the idea of his importance. Thus I called him, and now I am finally going to reveal my secret: "Inhaber des Amtes der Aufsicht über die Öffentliche Ordnung" – Holder of the Office of Supervision of Public Order. Repeating this title almost every time *az-Zayni Barakât* is mentioned in the novel gives him, so I think, the extraordinary importance he has.

Luckily not every word we translate demands this kind of reflection and inventiveness. On the other hand, it is a beautiful challenge to have to tackle problems of this sort now and then. Otherwise, how dull translation would become!

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