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Across and beyond the Islamic Mediterranean

Bausani's concepts of 'Islamic languages' and 'Islamic literature' and their relevance in times of global studies

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Abstract: This article discusses the present relevance and recent revival of an ambitious, pioneering project launched more than half a century ago by the distinguished Italian Islamicist Alessandro Bausani (1921-88), namely his case for a comparative literature of Islamic languages. After examining the meanings and implications of these concepts, I address some of the criticisms they have attracted, including charges of essentialism and culturalism. Their current relevance is further discussed with regard to both premodern and contemporary Islam, by considering some of the recent developments and readjustments of this theoretical framework by scholars working in the footsteps of Bausani. Special attention is devoted to studies focusing on the emic dimension of Islamic languages and literatures or, in other words, on the presence of similar notions in the linguistic imagination and ideologies of both premodern and contemporary Muslims.

Keywords: Islamic languages, Islamic literatures, Alessandro Bausani (1921-88), contact linguistics, language ideology

Taking "the Islamic Mediterranean" as the focus of an academic journal is an invitation to think in terms of contact areas rather than cultural exclusivism. Instead of singling out, within the cultural history of the Mediterranean, those elements that display an unmistakable Islamic identity, such a notion is better read, in my view, as a call to think of Islam as an integral part of the wide, thick web of cultural interconnections that have shaped the Mediterranean as a cultural space in the *longue durée,* unlike what the Eurocentric label of *Mare Nostrum* may suggest. In the same perspective, it should always be kept in mind that the Mediterranean was, in turn, only a leg of a wider web of connections, bridging Asia, Africa and Europe, in which Islam played a pivotal role throughout its history. We are living in times of increasing academic specialization, including in narrowly circumscribed area studies, but also in times of rising methodological challenges from a growing trend in the Humanities, variously labeled as Global Studies, Global History or Connected Histories. The obvious importance of globalization to present-day societies has raised a growing awareness that processes of globalization were far from unknown to premodern societies, albeit in less intense and pervasive ways than in our digital era. It is within this framework that I will propose some reflections on an ambitious, pioneering project that was launched more than half a century ago by a distinguished scholar from the then Department of Oriental Studies at Sapienza University of Rome, Alessandro Bausani, namely what he called "a comparative literature of Islamic languages". Of course, his reflections were limited to the languages of the Muslim World. However, as we shall see, not only is that area much wider than is generally assumed but, more importantly, the issue of languages lying at the crossroads between Islamic and

non-Islamic influences was also raised by Bausani, and is potentially relevant to the study of virtually any human language.

In what follows, I will start by outlining what Bausani meant by "Islamic languages" by asking some basic questions:

- How can a language be labeled as Islamic?
- In what sense do the languages of the Islamic world belong together?
- What does an intra-Islamic comparative approach add to our understanding of those languages and of their literary output (in the broad sense of the term)?

Secondly, I will discuss the relevance of this concept today, i.e. both to present research (after decades of changes and debates in the scholarly approaches to the study of Islam), and to our understanding of present-day Muslims.

As for present research, I will address some of the criticisms that have been raised (or that can be raised) to this notion, especially in times of postmodernism, with special attention to possible charges of essentialism and culturalism, and I will point to some recent developments and readjustments of this theoretical framework.

As for present Islam, I will focus, firstly, on the epistemic break introduced by the adoption of the notion of "national language" in Muslim societies and, secondly, on an alternative understanding of the label "Islamic languages" that was elaborated within Muslim intellectual circles after Bausani, but also independently of him, as part of a wider trend in the linguistic ideologies of present-day Muslims.

Finally, I will propose a provisional appraisal of recent studies that are reviving and rethinking Bausani's suggestions, with a special focus on the emic dimension of Islamic languages and literatures or, in other words, on the presence of similar notions in the linguistic imagination and ideologies of both premodern and contemporary Muslims.

1. Bausani's notion of Islamic languages: definition and implications

Let us start by Bausani's notion of Islamic languages, which indeed cannot be fully understood without introducing the quite uncommon personality of Alessandro Bausani himself, at least through some sketchy information.

His lifetime span is situated between 1921 and 1988. He was born and raised in Rome but traveled extensively throughout the Muslim World (especially its Eastern part) and beyond. He held the chair of Islamic Studies, and for some time also those of Persian Language and Literature and History of Religions at Sapienza (as well as, for a while, at University of Naples "L'Orientale"). He was an impressive polyglot, contributing scholarly publications on a wide range of languages and literatures of Asia, from the so-called "classical languages of Islam" (Arabic, Persian and Turkish) to some languages of the Indian sub-continent and South-East Asia, but also on languages spoken outside the world of Islam (e.g., Basque; Quechua and other languages of native Americans; the native language of the Easter Island, and so forth).

He promoted a holistic approach to Islam as a subject of human sciences, to be understood in broadly cultural rather than in narrowly religious terms. Thus, in his perspective, what in

his time was usually labelled as "marginal" to Islamic studies (be that in geographical, chronological or doctrinal terms) became central to a more thorough understanding of Islam as a whole. He conceived of the study of Islam in a comparative perspective close to historical anthropology, focusing on similarities and differences not only between religious doctrines, but also between the mindsets of believers of different faiths.[1]

Strongly sympathetic to Islam, he held a firm anti-colonial stance well before the postcolonial turn in the humanities (Scarcia Amoretti 2008), while being at the same time still a classical scholar who proudly called himself an "Orientalist" – at a time when the term had not yet taken on the pejorative overtones that Edward Said's (1978) famous pamphlet attached to it.

He was a deeply religious man. Raised in a very traditional Catholic milieu, he embraced the Bahá'í faith in his youth but engaged in a close dialogue with both Christian and Muslim scholars throughout his life (Savi 2008).

While a taste for the way the languages spoken by Muslims worldwide relate to one another can be considered as a leitmotiv of all his scholarly career, and is already detectable in his early works (e.g. Bausani 1951), his elaboration of a notion of Islamic languages and his project of a comparative literature thereof can be viewed as a culminating point in his thought.

This notion was first introduced (to the best of my knowledge) in 1967 in his brief article "Per una letteratura comparata delle lingue islamiche" ("The case for a comparative literature of Islamic languages": Bausani 1967). Subsequently, it was reworked and refined in theoretical terms in a few more articles, all of which published in Italian, the last one being "Le lingue islamiche: interazioni e acculturazioni" ("Islamic languages: interactions and acculturations": Bausani 1981). It was also applied to specific (and rather eccentric) case-studies in a few further articles published between these two dates, as well as in more general works, including his outlines of the history of the literatures of Iran, Pakistan, South-East Asia and so on.

Since only one article out of all this production was published in English (i.e. Bausani 1975), these ideas have had a limited echo outside Italy. While recent attempts to rediscuss them within international frameworks have started to recirculate them among a wider scholarly community, as I will show, much is still to be done to this effect. Moreover, his comparative literature of Islamic languages remained a project for the generations to come rather than a systematic endeavor achieved by Bausani himself during his lifetime.

That said, what did Bausani mean by "Islamic languages"? His starting point was the remark that the languages spoken by Muslim-majority populations, among which Islam has long been an important element of their collective cultural identity, bear striking similarities to one another, despite being genetically unrelated (or, in some cases, only remotely related). This applies, in the first place, to the so-called three classical languages of Islamic civilization, i.e. Arabic, Persian and Turkish, but also to a much larger range of languages spoken in an area spanning from sub-Saharan West Africa to South-East Asia.

Such similarities can only be explained in terms of language contact or, more precisely, of shared linguistic and cultural influences. Thus, in Bausani's words (1975: 113), a tentative definition of an Islamic language is

[1] On Bausani's approach to Islamic studies, see Calasso 2021 and Zappa 2021.

> a language which, at a certain moment in its history, presents itself deeply influenced, lexically, graphically and to a certain extent also morphologically and syntactically, and even phonologically, by the great languages of the Islamic world: Arabic and Persian.

Such a definition, however, was still provisional and indeed inadequate: as pointed out by a leading scholar in contact linguistics and in Arabic studies, Kees Versteegh (2020), many European languages have also been influenced in one way or another by Arabic or Persian, but it would sound rather odd to label them as Islamic. Thus, how deep must this influence be in order to identify a language as "Islamic"? Is it only a matter of depth of such an influence? And if so, how can we measure it?

What is peculiar to Islamic languages, as Bausani further explains, is the way this influence has taken place. Two ideas are crucial to this point. In Bausani's words, what he called *"influsso libresco"*, literally "bookish influence", and *"osmosi dall'alto",* which can be roughly translated as "top-down osmosis".

The phrase "bookish influence" corresponds to his remark that most of the vocabulary and of the other features shared by "Islamic languages" were not the outcome of a massive, oral contact between native speakers of the languages involved, although this also played a role. Instead, in most cases, it must be understood as a scholarly output of a learned elite of native speakers of a given target language who were highly literate in a given source language, typically a prestigious language of Islamic culture serving as a superstratum.

In many cases, the prestigious source language at stake was, quite obviously, Arabic. However, in as many other cases, it was rather Persian, which had been the first language to be directly impacted by Arabic, to adopt the Arabic script, and to produce literary works, creating an Arabic-Persian fusion that would later influence many other languages, especially in Asia. Elsewhere, for instance in the Balkans under the Ottomans, the main prestigious source language impacting local native languages was rather Ottoman Turkish. In most such cases, a complex, fascinating chain of embedded influences was at play: thus, many loanwords from Arabic entered distant languages indirectly, through Persian, Turkish or other languages serving as intermediaries.

Whatever the case, the scholarly register of the source languages played a much more important role than its colloquial registers. Thus, for instance, classical Arabic and Ottoman Turkish were much more influential than Arabic dialects or colloquial Turkish. This, in turn, also accounts for the relatively high degree of inter-translatability of complex concepts across Islamic languages, at least as far as the learned and abstract vocabulary is concerned, which is of great relevance to the study of religious, intellectual and literary history.[2]

However, the bookish character of such an influence would have limited its impact to scholarly circles and highly elaborated texts, had it not been compensated by a phenomenon that Bausani called "top-down osmosis". By this phrase, he meant that many elements of this repertoire slowly but steadily penetrated, albeit to a lesser extent, into the vocabulary of the poorly literate and even of the illiterate classes, who consistently tended to imitate as far as they could the language practices of the scholarly elite, especially when speaking of abstract subjects.

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[2] For a recent experiment trying to take full advantage of this inter-translatability for the teaching of Italian L2 to a class of native speakers of disparate (though geographically close) "Islamic languages", see Salvaggio 2020b.

Illiterate and poorly literate people were also reached out by preachers, many of whom were Sufis, who adopted one of the prestigious languages of Islam as the *written* means of instruction, trying to translate its concepts in a simplified way in the local vernaculars spoken by their audience. However, the prestigious language of instruction in which their reference books were written, and which over time influenced the local vernaculars, was not necessarily the native language of the preachers: thus, for instance, classical Malay was much more influenced by Arabic than by Persian, although most of the preachers who spread Islam in South-East Asia were rather Persians or Indians. Similar considerations apply to sub-Saharan Africa, where local preachers used classical Arabic texts even though they were native speakers of one of the local vernaculars.[3]

Thus, in order for a language to become Islamic, it must have been exposed to the prestige of Arabic, Persian or any other previously Islamized language. Such a prestige status typically obtains in contexts where Islam is dominant, not necessarily in terms of demography or conversion rate, but rather in terms of cultural hegemony. Hence, in countries that have long been dominated by a Muslim minority promoting Islamic culture through a court that adopted Arabic, Persian or any Islamic language as its most prestigious means of intellectual or literary production, even the local languages spoken by mostly non-Muslim native speakers can be considered, in a sense, Islamic. Similar considerations arguably apply, albeit to a lesser extent, to contexts in which the court is not Muslim, but Islam is the religion of an influential trading and scholarly elite.

Two important points stem from these remarks. First, the religious identity of the speakers is not necessarily relevant to classifying their language as Islamic or non-Islamic. Second, this notion is likewise neither limited to the religious uses of a given language, nor to its religious vocabulary. Indeed, once Islam is understood in broadly cultural terms, its influence can be detected in any secular domain of culture; however, it can be especially felt in difficult words and phrases borrowed from the more formal registers, including much of the abstract vocabulary that even the common people understand and use.

This point brings us back to Bausani's project of a comparative literature of Islamic languages. Indeed, in spite of his interest in language contact as a subject in its own right, the main driving force behind his elaboration of the very notion of Islamic languages was, arguably, a literary concern.[4] Since his early works, Bausani actually complained that the literatures written in the different languages of Muslim civilization can be poorly understood if studied within the boundaries of narrowly ethnic, nationalist approaches. Indeed, entire literary genres and a wide repertoire of literary motifs circulated across language borders; hence, in his view, scholars should also cross those very borders in order to reconstruct the history of such genres and motifs more thoroughly, in their wide-ranging, cross-linguistic connections. Premodern Islamic culture, he argued, was a highly cosmopolitan one, preferring universal references to local ones.

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[3] While Bausani never engaged with sub-Saharan African languages to a significant extent, he suggested this parallel in Bausani 1975, 116-117.

[4] This point is made (and even, in my view, overstated) by Versteegh (2020, 20), who in his strongly critical appraisal of Bausani's theory, maintains: "Presumably, what Bausani had in mind was not a linguistic comparison, but a statement about the literatures in Islamic countries."

In such a trans-linguistic, pan-Islamic perspective, individual literary works in languages that had long been (and still are) widely viewed as peripheral to Islamic culture, like Sindhi or Malay, should, in his view, be fully acknowledged as masterpieces of their own genres on a global scale. Likewise, linguistic and literary experiments by Muslim minorities living on the outskirts of the Muslim World should attract more thorough scholarly interest as peculiar instances of wider trends, even when these experiments are short-lived and limited to literary or scholarly circles, as was the case with Aljamiado in Spain or with "Sino-Arabic" in China.

2. The relevance of the concept of "Islamic language" to present scholarship

In order to assess the possible relevance of the concept of "Islamic languages and literatures" to present scholarship, more than half a century after its first conception, I think we should start by observing that, despite its inclusiveness, this notion is, nowadays, liable to charges of essentialism and culturalism. Of course, Bausani was writing before the postmodernist turn in the humanities. After decades of reflections on issues of identity deconstruction, scholars are by now increasingly wary of the risk of essentializing identities (be they religious, ethnic, cultural or otherwise), or, in other words, of suggesting that someone's identity may predetermine their mindset and behavior; in our case, that the "essence" of a given language may be shaped by the religious identity of its speakers. In a recent, critical assessment of this notion, questioning the appropriateness of the label "Islamic" when applied to languages, Kees Versteegh argued that there was no reason to give priority to the religious factor, nor to any other cultural factor for that matter, when defining languages and classifying them into families – a field in which common genealogies or structural similarities should be the leading criterion (Versteegh 2020). Since – he added – "what Bausani was actually referring to was the deep sense of religio-cultural relationship between speakers of diverse languages who had adopted Islam, [...] labels such as 'Islamic/Muslim' should therefore be applied to these speakers, rather than to their languages" (Versteegh 2020, 5). However, such a reading overlooks that for Bausani (as, indeed, for the present writer), the whole issue was not all about the linguistic ideologies of Muslims; this notion also captures an actual relation between the languages involved.

Furthermore, Bausani maintained that a parallel notion of "Christian languages" would not make sense, since historically the languages of Christianity have not been exposed to a comparable process of shared, top-down influences the same way as Islamic languages were. This point was explicitly related to his tendency to see Islam as something more than just a religion, or anyway as a religion unlike any other, pervading all aspects of life, including secular domains, which, in Versteegh's (as in many others') view, is nothing else than unwarranted and biased Islamic exceptionalism (Versteegh 2020, 6-7; 20-21).[5] The only field in which religious labels can correctly apply to languages according to Versteegh (2020, 10-13) is religiolects, i.e. distinctive varieties of a given language used by members of single reli-

[5] The debate on this point is, of course, endless, and in the last decades there has been a growing wariness among scholars towards this kind of "Islamic exceptionalism". For a recent relaunch of a comprehensive, holistic understanding of Islam in a more complex theoretical perspective, see Ahmed 2016.

gious communities, especially when speaking to insiders (Hary and Wine 2013). These, however, – as he correctly remarks – are not the preserve of Muslims: indeed Jewish, Christian and Muslim religiolects coexist, for instance, among the speakers of some regional forms of colloquial Arabic, as well as in some medieval instances of so-called Middle Arabic. Versteegh (2020, 14-15) is of course right to pinpoint that languages like Afrikaans, whose Muslim speakers have always been a minority and have never enjoyed any cultural hegemony within the wider community of native speakers, can hardly be labeled as "Islamic", in spite of the longstanding presence of a Muslim religiolect therein, boasting even a written production in the Arabic script. However, it is clear that Bausani did not restrict his analysis to religiolects, only taking some of them as instances of wider and more complex phenomena which Versteegh's approach fails to address. To be true, Versteegh's main concern is to check the viability of Bausani's notion from a strictly linguistic point of view – a perspective that Bausani was clearly dissatisfied with from the outset, arguing that there is more to languages than what a narrowly linguistic approach can uncover.[6]

Overall, although many of the examples referred to by Versteegh are undoubtedly instructive and thought-provoking, my main objection to charges of essentialism and Islamic exceptionalism is that Bausani's resort to such an encompassing notion served precisely the conscious purpose of countering other, more narrow-minded forms of essentialism that were more popular in his days, when nationalism was still on the rise among the elites of the newly independent Asian and African countries, and paradigms based on ethnic and national identities were still well established among Western scholars. As highlighted by Islam Dayeh (2022, 109),

> The brilliance of Bausani's notion of 'Islamic languages' lies in that it helps us to move beyond national philology and language families based on 'ethnicity' and 'race' (e.g., 'Indo-Aryan' and 'Semitic') to uncover literary ecologies across language groups connected by religious and cultural ties.

Besides, in his holistic approach to the study of Islam, Bausani was as much interested in the recurrent traits of Muslim cultures as in the variety of their manifestations, including some of the most eccentric outcomes, as well as idiosyncratic exceptions to tentative general rules. His notion of Islamic languages remained a rather flexible analytical tool, never made into a normative model.

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[6] For instance, when discussing the shift of the population of Azerbaijan from an Iranian to a Turkic language which took place around the 10th century, and arguing that such a shift could be more easily explained by keeping in mind that, from the speakers' perspective, the literary language had remained the same, while only the spoken dialect had changed, Bausani (1981, 15) wrote: "Of course, the idea that languages like Persian, Turkish or Urdu may be viewed as spoken dialects of a shared literary language (i.e. classical Persian) is indeed hard to swallow, for a linguist from the neo-grammatical or historico-ethnological tradition; however, that is just the way things are" (translation mine). Bausani's almost defiant attitude to some features of linguistics was also remarked as a thought-provoking aspect of his approach by D'Anna (2019). For a linguist's sympathetic view of the peculiarities of Bausani's approach to linguistics, with a special focus on language games and language invention (analyzed in parallel with his interest for religious invention), see also Lancioni 2021. However, on Bausani's serious engagement with linguistics, with special reference to his early insight on the history of Persian syntax, often ahead of his time, see Orsatti 2021.

All this said, the risk of reifying Bausani's notion of Islamic languages and literatures into fixed entities remains. Much depends on the ways this analytical tool is handled. I would argue that the most effective antidote to this risk is moving beyond binary classifications and exclusive labels.[7] Instead of trying to determine whether such and such language, or such and such variety of a given language, is or is not to be considered as Islamic, in many cases it is more useful to focus on *processes* of linguistic Islamization.[8] Such processes may reach different stages in different languages or in different literary genres; they may affect unevenly different features of a given language, or different registers and semantic fields. Still more importantly, they often coexist and interact in unpredictable ways with a host of different phenomena of language contact and language change, including the influence of rival linguistic and literary superstrata, which may limit or reshape their impact.

Some of the most interesting recent contributions to this field adopt precisely this dynamic approach. A case in point is Alessandro Mengozzi's (2023) recent study of the partial adoption of Islamic scholarly (including religious) vocabulary and Islamic narrative motifs in religious literary texts produced by Christians and Jews in early modern varieties of Neo-Aramaic. This phenomenon is all the more surprising insofar as it comes from authors who had chosen to adopt what had become a minority language, closely associated with religious minorities in an Islamic-dominated area, so that some degree of purism vis-à-vis Islamic influences might have been expected. However, in his article, Mengozzi explained it precisely by the exposure of both the authors of these texts and their intended audience to the cultural hegemony of Islam, showing through different examples that Islamic references and motifs might have been introduced sometimes in a polemic vein (as a form of "appropriation of the linguistic resources of the adversaries"), sometimes for pedagogic purposes (due to the multi-religious, multilingual make-up of their audience, deeply familiar with both Arabic and Islam), sometimes as a stylistic device or as a form of virtuosity. Of course, neither Neo-Aramaic as a language, nor these texts can be labeled as Islamic; however, a limited, but still significant process of lexical and literary Islamization can be identified as one of the factors that help understand these texts in all their depth. In Mengozzi's (2023, 111-2) words, all this shows that

> the spoken or literary languages of the religious non-Muslim minorities share, at the regional, local level, the same linguistic-literary processes of Islamization as the languages of the Muslim majority. [...] In this perspective, Bausani's concept of Islamic languages (and literatures) remains valid as a model for research and investigation, even on the languages and literatures of non-Muslim minorities that conform with or react against the majority's culture(s).

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[7] I agree, again, with Dayeh (2022, 109) when writing "I fail to see the value of [this kind of] linguistic classification unless it is related to literary and cultural analysis." After all, Bausani (1975, 111) himself had humorously observed that "typological systems of classification could be invented almost *ad infinitum,* selecting various criteria. Obviously, some of them have no great scientific utility."

[8] I had already made this point in Zappa 2008, 1196 (quoted and translated as follows by Mengozzi 2023, 111): "Rather than postulating a rigid divide between Islamic and non-Islamic languages as a matter of fact, it is more appropriate to speak of more or less advanced processes of linguistic-literary Islamization that coexist and interact in various ways and with different outcomes with other processes, triggered in turn by the influence of non-Islamic superstrates".

Bausani was himself already well aware of the partial extent to which a language could be Islamized when he focused on languages spoken in contact areas where influences from competing superstrata overlap. By competing superstrata I mean rival prestigious languages, some of which were Islamic, while others were not. Classical Malay is a case in point and is also the subject of Bausani's only article on Islamic languages published in English. In that article, he comes to the conclusion that

> the presence of an older Sanskrit superstratum plus the shortness of the lapse of time between the beginning of Islamization [of South-East Asia] and the advent of colonialism prevented the formation of a completely Muslim language, so that – in a way, and without any depreciatory connotation – classical Malay could be defined as a 'failed' Muslim language, or a 'quasi-Muslim' language, if you prefer (Bausani 1975, 120).

As this example shows, in many cases the label "Islamic" should be applied to a language in a nuanced way: a language can be considered as *partially* Islamic, or perhaps better, *partially Islamized* (which suggests that it underwent an incomplete process of Islamization). Besides, it can be labelled "Islamic" alongside any other labels or definitions that may help grasp its features. In many cases, degrees of Islamization within a given language or literature may, in turn, vary according to literary genres and authorial choices, as well as according to individual speakers and registers.

Once Bausani's understanding of Islamic languages and literatures as a heuristic tool is carefully finetuned, and risks of essentialization dispelled, linguistic analysis can still greatly benefit from it. For instance, it can help make sense of the presence of loanwords and loan phrases that display an unmistakable bookish origin (by their semantic area or by their spelling, or otherwise) in the ordinary speech of uneducated speakers – a phenomenon that tends to be underestimated by the more common approaches to contact linguistics. This proves especially useful in all instances in which the source language playing a stronger influence on the languages at stake was not native to any of the groups of speakers in contact but rather used as a written tool (or for formal oral purposes) by one or both of them. The semantic area in which the influence of an Islamic superstratum is most strongly felt in a given language (or register therein) can, in turn, help identify the main channels through which linguistic Islamization has taken place. Equally telling may be the comparison of loanwords from rival (Islamic and non-Islamic) superstrata within a given language. Comparative analysis of the vocabulary of different languages, having undergone varying degrees of Islamization, in specific semantic areas or registers may also prove more productive once the Islamic factor is considered. Anyway, the field that can benefit most from Bausani's approach is undoubtedly that of literary studies.

To be honest, Bausani's project of a comparative literature of Islamic languages has never developed into a systematic historical outline, which sounds like a virtually impossible task. While few scholars have ever matched his polyglottic skills, even Bausani conceived of this as a long-term project to be carried out through teamwork. A few collective attempts at comparative studies of single genres across Islamic languages have indeed been carried out independently from his inspiration: for instance, an outstanding, two-volume edited book on *Qaṣīda poetry in Asia and Africa* (Sperl and Shackle 1996) was published by Brill almost thirty years ago. However, in spite of the impressive range of texts and literary languages taken into

account, lack of acquaintance with Bausani's ideas deprived, in my view, the editors of (and the contributors to) those volumes of a more coherent and productive framework for their comparative remarks.[9] In particular, the problem of defining the *qaṣīda,* both as a form and as a genre, and outlining its boundaries, which – as the editors remark – tend to be blurred and to vary according to individual languages, would have benefited from a wider preliminary attempt at reconstructing a comprehensive system of genres, subgenres and variants thereof across Islamic literatures. On the other hand, it seems to me highly unlikely that Bausani's tripartite classification of Islamic literary texts, divided into *qaṣīda, ġazal and naẓm,* might be revived and serve as a basis for a comprehensive history of Islamic literatures. Indeed, as Bausani (1967, 149-153) himself clarified, these three "major literary variants of Islamic culture" (later in the same article called "literary dialects" or "types") did not coincide, in his view, with their homonymous genres, being in a purely "allusive" relation with them. Moreover, Bausani's description of them, while undoubtedly thought-provoking, is arguably too idiosyncratic to be followed in any systematic way by later generations of scholars.

Through the last few years, however, Bausani's ideas on Islamic languages and literatures have re-started to attract some scholarly attention, at least among Italian scholars, mostly (and arguably not by chance) within the framework of collective research projects. An international conference on "Islamic languages", for instance, was convened at Roma Tre University in 2019, and part of the papers were later published within a thematic issue of *Eurasian Studies* (Olivieri, Lancioni and Bernardini, eds. 2020). A panel on "Rethinking Islamic languages" was presented in 2022 to the *Insaniyyat* Forum in Tunis, also focusing on Muslim representations of Islamic languages in both premodern and postcolonial times.[10] A research project on "Islamic literatures in sub-Saharan Africa: themes, genres and publics", coordinated by Martin Orwin, is currently underway in the framework of PRIN ("Progetti di Ricerca di Rilevante Interesse Nazionale", i.e. Italian "Research Projects of Considerable National Interest"), although it mostly focuses on Islamic religious literature, thus narrowing the scope of Bausani's understanding of this notion. Almost simultaneously, a collective research project on "Islamic Languages on the Silk Road: Lexical, Semantic and Symbolic-cultural Convergences" has been launched at the University of Venice. The project, explicitly building on Bausani's ideas, aims, among other objectives, at

> the realization of a 'lexicon of Islamic Languages', namely a multilingual corpus of Arabic loanwords (often associated with Qur'anic occurrences), distinctive of 'Islamic Languages' and particularly significant for their connotative value and symbolic, philosophical and ethical-religious dimensions, in a comparative perspective with the different semantization process of the same concepts in major European languages.[11]

Other scholars, however, also work individually along paths that have been opened by Bausani's suggestions about Islamic languages and literatures. One of the most interesting

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[9] For more thorough comparison between Sperl and Shackle (1996) and Bausani's approach, see Zappa 2008, 1197-1200.

[10] See https://insaniyyat.com/conference/165

[11] See https://www.unive.it/pag/36675/ I am grateful to Elisabetta Ragagnin for making me aware of such a promising project.

examples concerns the way Muslims through history have perceived their own linguistic identity, as well as the connections linking their languages to each other. Bausani (1981, 3-4) had already provided a few, rather eccentric examples to show that an almost instinctive sense "of the basic, cultural, non-ethnic [= non genealogical] 'unity' of all Muslim languages, though not clearly expressed, is certainly present at least potentially in the consciousness of Muslim peoples." More recently, Federico Salvaggio has started to explore the way multilingualism, both among humans in general and within the Islamic *umma* in particular, was conceived of by premodern Muslim thinkers, especially at a time when an increasing number of languages other than Arabic were starting to be used as literary languages, including for religious texts, and this had to be justified on a theoretical ground (Salvaggio 2024, 642-647). In this respect, while the Arabic linguistic tradition offers little or no evidence, since it was almost completely uninterested in any language other than Arabic, other typologies of texts prove more rewarding (including texts by Sufis, theologians, philosophers, and even geographers and historians). For instance, commentaries to Qur'ān 30: 22, in which the providential "variety of your languages and colors" *(ikhtilāf alsinati-kum wa-alwāni-kum)* is mentioned among God' signs *(min āyāti-Hi),* provide the basis of what Salvaggio (2020, 6-12) calls "a theology of multilingualism". Equally relevant were also some metalinguistic reflections that stem from Qur'anic suggestions on issues like: Which was the primordial human language? How and why (i.e. out of divine punishment or rather blessing) did it split into a multiplicity of mutually unintelligible languages? What place was assigned to Arabic (as well as to the languages of former revelations) within this providential design and amidst other languages? Is multilingualism connected with religious diversity? And so forth.

Significantly enough, in some Sufi texts, language diversity is used as a metaphor for religious diversity, and the mastery of different languages is extolled to symbolize awareness of the multiple paths that lead to the knowledge of the ultimate reality *(al-ḥaqīqa)* laying behind different linguistic forms and conveyed by them (Salvaggio 2024, 11-12). In a different vein, such a widespread understanding of human languages, in all their variety, as equally capable of conveying meaning properly, coupled with the versatility of some authors in different languages, underlies, in Salvaggio's (2024, 641-2) view, the wide diffusion, from al-Andalus to the Indian Subcontinent, of peculiar genres of 'macaronic' or *mulamma'* poetry, combining a prestigious literary language with a variety of local vernaculars (including some Arabic dialects). Bausani (1981, 9-10) had already dealt with similar examples of "playful macaronism" within his theory of Islamic languages and literatures, arguing that it would be misleading to take them as evidence of actual everyday practices of language mix (or switching) that were taking place in spoken contexts, since the incorporation of colloquial and 'folk' lexemes and locutions in elaborate texts composed by highly educated authors was rather appreciated as "an extremely sophisticated form of literary elegance."

In a further study, Salvaggio (2021) draws a compelling parallel between the theoretical (and theological) underpinnings of the ennoblement of local vernaculars for literary ends that was triggered by this process of "vernacularization of Islamic knowledge" and the coeval elaboration by Dante, in his celebrated treatise *De vulgari eloquentia,* of a rationale for composing literary texts in what was then the Italian vernacular alongside Latin.

A further development of Bausani's theory which was initiated after his death is its application to languages with limited (or no) written tradition (also touched upon by Salvaggio

2024, with special reference to the Indian subcontinent), as is the case with so many languages of sub-Saharan Africa at least up to a recent past. Indeed, since Bausani mostly focused on literary uses of languages, African languages spoken by Muslims mostly remained beyond the scope of his enquiry. However, many of them display a high rate of Arabic loanwords and calques, especially in their abstract vocabulary, and a significant presence of learned Islamic religious references and literary motifs in their oral literatures. Thus, Bausani's ideas proved very inspiring to my own contributions to this field (Zappa 2004; 2009a; 2009b; 2011), dealing with Islamic texts in Bambara (or Bamana), a major language of Mali; however, they also had to be readjusted. In such languages, in spite of the lack (or dearth) of a local written tradition in the Arabic script, most Arabic loanwords are borrowed from classical Arabic rather than from Arabic dialects, and many references that can be found in oral literary texts addressing a wide audience, including the illiterate, have a clearly scholarly origin. To make sense of this, one has to keep in mind that in local traditional Islamic education, Arabic books, starting from the Qur'an, are usually paraphrased and explained orally in the local vernaculars. This, as highlighted by scholars like Tamari (1996; 2002; 2005; 2008; 2013a; 2013b; 2013c; 2019a; 2019b; 2020, and others), who devoted extended fieldwork and close textual analysis to the subject, was the main avenue through which these lexical and literary borrowings entered these languages. Besides, while their presence is massive in the jargon of local Muslim scholars, over time they also crept into the language of ordinary people who were illiterate in Arabic, and even into folk culture. Hence, even in this case, we can still speak of a bookish influence (popularized, again, through a process of top-down osmosis), but its main channel is what I have suggested to call "learned" or "scholarly orality" Zappa (2004, 38; 2009a, 170; 2011, 231).

3. The relevance of this theoretical framework to the study of contemporary Muslims

Moving to the relevance of the notion of Islamic languages to present-day Muslims, I will start by recalling that according to Bausani (1967, 153-5; 1981, 15-18), the impact of colonialism on the contemporary Muslim World and the ensuing rise of nationalisms caused an epistemic break in the cultural network connecting the disparate languages spoken by Muslims worldwide. This break took place through the adoption of Western notions of "national languages", entailing a rediscovery of the "indigenous" lexical stock and a gradual elimination of loanwords that had previously been drawn from the most prestigious Islamic languages. In many languages, the Arabic script was also dropped and replaced by the Latin script, for both practical and ideological reasons. Even when coining new words for new objects (or new ideas) related to modernity, national language academies preferred to resort either to the indigenous lexical stock or to European languages, rather than to Arabic or Persian. In addition, while it was rather common for precolonial Muslim intellectuals to be proficient in several Islamic languages, at least in some areas of the Muslim world, this kind of multilingualism has become increasingly rare since the late colonial era.[12]

[12] This point was also raised by Ahmed 2016, 524-525.

However, more recently (i.e. mostly after Bausani's lifetime), the decline of nationalist paradigms and the rise of a globalized (political) Islam seem to have triggered a wave of re-Islamization of the languages of Muslims, which has become the subject of conscious theorization by engaged Muslim intellectuals, as a well as a source of concern for some outside observers. Islamic religious vocabulary and formulas have become ubiquitous in the current uses of any language throughout the Islamic World, including those languages in which they were not (or no longer) of widespread use (see e.g. Hassane 2012). Thus, though mostly limited to the religious vocabulary, borrowing from Arabic has restarted to increase. In many African languages, there is also a growing tendency among some speakers to showily rectify the current pronunciation of Arabic loanwords, including anthroponyms of Islamic origin, which had previously undergone a process of phonological adaptation to the target language. Those engaged speakers are now eager to have them sound as close as possible to their original pronunciation in classical Arabic. Even script has become again a bone of contention, with occasional calls for a return to the Arabic alphabet in languages that had previously abandoned it. Despite appearances, however, what is at stake is not a revival of old usages, but rather a new, militant approach to the relationship between languages and Islamic identities. Within this framework, the growing influence of Arabic is no more shared by other, historically prestigious languages of Islamic culture, like Persian, and is mostly limited to the religious sphere, while in precolonial times, it extended to the whole learned register, whatever the subject at stake.

The languages of the former colonizers, in their turn, have also been increasingly used by Muslims for religious purposes, first to reach out to those sectors of society that had received a purely secular education and can only read French[13] or English (as is frequent in many African countries, as well as among Muslim minorities in the Western world), and more recently also to address a global audience. Thus, in their uses as vehicles of Islamic communication, education or proselytism, even Western languages (or, more accurately, nascent Islamic religiolects therein) have undergone some of the abovementioned recent processes that are affecting the uses of traditionally Islamic languages, and have started to attract the attention of some reform-minded Muslim scholars.[14]

It is within this framework that, independently from Bausani, and starting in the final years of his life, highly prescriptive understandings of what an Islamic language is, or indeed of what a language *should* look like in order to be considered as properly Islamic, have been elaborated and promoted by a transnational network of Muslim intellectuals gravitating around the International Islamic University of Malaysia. Thanks to the far-reaching prestige of the latter institution, this highly globalized recent trend in Islamic thought, revolving around the slogan of "the Islamization of knowledge", is increasingly influential among educated Muslims worldwide.

As far as language is concerned, their main concern is to warn against what they deem "inappropriate uses" of Arabic loanwords, including inaccurate pronunciation and spelling and, most notably, semantic shift of the religious vocabulary from religious to secular meanings – which, to be sure, has been a recurrent phenomenon throughout the history of Islamic lan-

[13] For a preliminary investigation of the possible emergence of an Islamic variety of French, see Zappa 2020.

[14] A case in point is al-Fārūqī 1982.

guages. In the words of the leading scholar of this group, the Malaysian Muhammad Naquib al-Attas (2005, 36),

> many major key terms in the Islamic basic vocabulary of the languages of Muslim peoples have now been displaced and made to serve absurdly in alien fields of meaning, in a kind of regression towards non-Islamic worldviews: a phenomenon which I call the *de-Islamization* of language.

Likewise, Arabic neologisms like *'ilmānī,* which had been introduced to translate the term "secular" from Western languages, are held responsible by al-Attas (2005, 27-33) of the deplorable adoption of the corresponding concept by modern Muslims. An Arabic transliteration of the 'original' term (*sic:* from English), instead, would have helped them readily identify it as alien to "the Islamic worldview." In this perspective, in order to preserve (or restore) the untamed Islamic character of a language, a high level of vigilance is required. Conversely, any language is liable to be properly Islamized, by injecting into it a "basic vocabulary" mostly made of Qur'anic keywords, which may project "the Islamic worldview" onto the whole language, provided that these keywords are used correctly and consistently (al-Attas 2005, 24). The main concern of this trend is, accordingly, to ensure uniformity in the usage of this fundamental vocabulary in all Islamic languages, thereby "reflecting – in al-Attas' (2005, 25) words – the intellectual and spiritual unity of the Muslims throughout the world."

Such a normative understanding of the notion of "Islamic languages" is clearly distant from the flexible analytical tool with the same name elaborated by Bausani;[15] but also from the diverse, creative multilingual language practices of premodern Muslim intellectuals, as well as from their main concerns when reflecting theoretically on multilingualism. Thus, it shows to what extent the relation between language and religious identity has become an increasingly ideological issue, often charged with confrontational overtones. A feeling of insecurity in the face of the challenges of Western culture (identified with both secularism and Christianity), at times almost a siege complex, can be easily detected behind normative understandings of the concept of Islamic languages as the ones proposed by the "Islamization of knowledge" trend. Likewise, the emulation of Christian missionary models, often in a spirit of stiff competition, underlies most contemporary Muslim efforts to translate the Qur'an or inaugurate a religious literature in languages that had never been exposed to Islamic uses before.

To be true, the degree of "Islamicity" to be ascribed to different languages had already been the subject of heated debate (with strong ideological overtones) within Muslim intellectual and political circles at least one generation before al-Attas, in the wake of the Partition of the Indian Subcontinent. Bausani, who, as an enthusiastic reader of Muhammad Iqbal, had been a fervent supporter of the project of Pakistan in its early stage, only to be gradually disillusioned with it in the subsequent decades, had followed that debate carefully, and arguably, to some extent, had been even influenced by that debate in one way or another. It is indeed "not coincidental at all", as remarked by Salvaggio (2020a, 151), that, when arguing that

[15] To be true, Salvaggio (2020, 19-20) tends to emphasize similarities and elements of continuity between the approaches of Bausani and al-Attas, and it should be recalled that some works published by the latter scholar (though on different subjects, mainly related to literary criticism) were mentioned with respect by the former. However, in my view, differences are more significant than similarities in the respective understandings of this notion.

his own notion of Islamic languages corresponded to some emic metalinguistic representations (as we would call them today), well rooted, at least implicitly, in the consciousness of Muslim peoples, he repeatedly quoted as a proof an article in a journal published in Brahui (a Dravidian language spoken in a region of Pakistan) in the aftermath of Partition. The author of that article paradoxically objected to the classification of Brahui as a Dravidian language, considering it more closely connected to Arabic on account of a number of loanwords and loan phrases of clearly religious Islamic origin that were currently used by its speakers.

While stressing "the rather naive and non-scientific character" of such an argument, Bausani considered it particularly telling of the way in which Muslims perceive their languages as culturally related to each other as a result of deep exposure to a common superstratum. More recently, from a socio-linguistic perspective, but also building on Bausani's ideas, Salvaggio (2020a) has shed more light on the post-Partition debate on the issue of which language was most suitable to enjoy national status for the newly founded State of Pakistan. Within that debate, since the identity of the newly founded country was entirely based on Islam, "the degree of 'Islamicity' of a specific language was frequently invoked as a major criterion to establish its suitability as a candidate to the role of national language of the 'land of the pure'" (2020a, 151-2). And indeed, the criteria by which Urdu was quickly identified by the political and intellectual leadership of the nascent country as the best option, while Bengali was discarded – so to speak – as not quite Islamic, seem to correspond to a significant extent with Bausani's parameters, although framed in an ideological idiom. Particularly disturbing to the founding fathers of Pakistan was the fact that Bengali was traditionally written in characters derived from *Devanagari* (an alphabet "full of idolatry", in Fazlur Rahman's words) instead of the Arabic script. A further undesirable feature was, in their eyes, the high rate of words, in the abstract and scholarly vocabulary (including even the Islamic religious vocabulary), derived from Sanskrit instead of Arabic or Persian, and closely associated with the Hindu religious tradition. These features, which make Bengali, not unlike Malay, "a quasi-Muslim language" or, in Salvaggio's words, "a sort of 'exception that proves the rule'" (2020a, 163), thus leading us back to the issue of partial, incomplete processes of linguistic Islamization, are in turn explained by Salvaggio in historical terms or, more precisely, by looking at the peculiar linguistic strategies adopted by the first preachers who introduced Islam to native speakers of Bengali. He thus shows how Bausani's theoretical framework can help us make sense of "the occasionally naive, at times apparently nonsensical, and often non-scientific linguistic arguments proposed in favour or against the adoption of specific languages", uncovering "the inherent logic, the implicit assumptions and the ideological charge behind those statements."

Still more interestingly, however, Salvaggio shows that this linguistic ideology was far from universally shared by the debating parties in post-Partition Pakistan – as well as, arguably, in so many other contexts. In particular, among those who advocated the adoption of Bengali as a national language, and the keeping of its *Devanagari*-derived script (which eventually fed into the successful movement for the independence of Bangladesh), there were also established religious scholars. Their arguments did not rest solely on practical considerations, but also on an alternative view of the Islamic identity of their cultural and linguistic heritage. For instance, a concern that the classics of Bengali Islamic literature (including religious literature), together with a host of invaluable historical documents, might become unreadable to

new generations of Bengali Muslim intellectuals, thus severing their ties to their own local Islamic traditions, features among the main arguments of a reputed philologist and religious scholar like Muhammad Shahidullah. This – I contend – is, in turn, an important caveat against any temptation at essentializing the linguistic ideologies and imagination of modern Muslims: indeed, the more the issue of "Islamic languages" becomes charged with ideological, political and normative overtones, the more liable it is of being contested from within.

Conclusions: the emic open field of language ideologies

To conclude, although Bausani's thought-provoking suggestions on Islamic languages and literatures have been revived, and sometimes rethought, in the past few years by several (mainly Italian) scholars, much remains to be done in order to explore the multiple research paths they opened. In some domains, their scope has been somewhat enlarged or, maybe more accurately, their perspective has been rethought: such is the case, for instance, with the shift from a focus on classifications and labelling (Islamic vs. non-Islamic languages) to a focus on processes of linguistic Islamization. New domains of investigation have also emerged, for instance the dynamics of Islamic languages in post-nationalist local and global contexts. In other cases, however, it seems to me that Bausani's ideas on this subject have been picked up in a more restrictive perspective, that does not allow for the unfolding of their full potentialities: such is the case with the notion of "Islamic literatures", that is too often restricted to the religious literary output, thus risking to cut the latter off from its larger, multilingual but also encyclopedic literary culture.

One specific field that has been considerably enriched and explored in recent years, mostly thanks to Salvaggio's contributions, is the emic side of Islamic languages and literatures, i.e. whether and how these notions actually correspond to something present, more or less implicitly, in the mindset of premodern and modern Muslims. To be true, more has been done on the linguistic than on the literary side, although the two are so intertwined that they are often hard to separate from one another. Research in this field is still ongoing; however, as a provisional appraisal, I would say that, while the existence of a bond uniting the languages of Islamic culture seems to have been identified, from an emic standpoint, by some modern Muslim scholars in terms relatively similar to those of Bausani (albeit, over time, in an increasingly ideological and normative way), the state of research about the linguistic imagination of premodern Muslims has brought less conclusive results, at least so far. In this respect, while it has been compellingly shown that some premodern Muslim scholars elaborated a theology of multilingualism, making room for the possibility to convey the meanings of the Revelation and, more generally, Islamic religious meaning in any human language, it is not clear how distinctly they perceived their own languages as related to one another and quite apart from "non -Islamic" languages.

Salvaggio's (2020, 19) following remark is already an important step in that direction:

> The recognition by the authors of macaronic poetry (be it explicit or implicit) that the various languages they mastered shared innumerable lexico-semantic convergences (fundamentally related to the expression of core Islamic values) must have ultimately affected the way

they conceptualised language affinity and diversity and must have had an impact on their engagement in plurilingual practices.

However, it might be objected that those experiments also involved languages like the Iberian Romances, which had been fairly little exposed to Islamic top-down influences, and could thus hardly be labelled as Islamic. At the same time, the fact that, as Salvaggio (2020, 14) observes, languages with a previous non-Islamic religious literary heritage were often considered more problematic to use for Islamic religious purposes than languages bereft of any written tradition is arguably a further clue to a premodern sense of the existence of an Islamic Sprachbund. Research in this field is, however, well on its way, so we can confidently expect more conclusive evidence to be uncovered.

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