

Editors' Preface

Producing a single volume on language, mobility, and knowledge production in the new era, sailing across a sea of languages, fed by rivers of histories and cultures, is no mean feat. The contributors' diverse specialties add yet another dimension. We were not unaware of the challenges we faced, and we hope that the wide-ranging perspectives bound together in this volume will serve their purpose: a broader and deeper understanding of how knowledge production in our increasingly global, connected, and technological era requires navigating *across*, *between*, and *within* rapidly changing linguistic fields.

The six chapters gathered here draw on ethnography, media and cultural studies, comparative reflection, sociology, and philosophy. One describes a nomadic school producing remarkable scholars as it traverses the Sahara; another a neural network whose competence in every language is the accumulated labor of generations of human translators, absorbed without citing their names. What binds such distant neighbors into one book is a single question, put in one form or another to every page we edited: When knowledge moves across languages, what is it that moves, what carries it, what does the crossing cost, and who answers for what arrives on the other side?

The title, "Language, Mobility, and Knowledge Production in the New Era," which the volume inherited from the symposium where it was born, names the terms of that question. Language is the medium. Mobility is the condition under which knowledge now lives. Production insists that someone, somewhere, in some tongue, is doing the making; and the new era, as we understand it, began the moment that the carriers of meaning started to change faster than the traditional processes that readers had learned to trust.

The background to this book's birth deserves an explanation. On

July 11, 2023, the NUQ-RU Global Symposium met under the very title this volume carries; organized in cooperation with the Institute for Advanced Study in the Global South at Northwestern University in Qatar, it was the seedbed of everything printed here. This symposium was the culmination of a chain of academic cooperation between the Asia-Japan Research Institute of Ritsumeikan University and Northwestern University, particularly its campus in Qatar, conducted under a partnership agreement between the two institutions within the framework of their membership in the Meridian 180 network. A joint academic meeting held in 2022 had been an earlier link in the same chain; this book is the fruit of a later one. Its appearance was delayed until 2026. The years the manuscript waited were, as it happened, the years in which machine translation left specialist literature and entered the daily life of scholarship, and this volume gained a new chapter in response to this new dimension.

Thus we have published this work at a peculiar hour, an hour when scholarship is passing through a renewal and a trial simultaneously. A researcher may now consult, albeit with some loss, works written in dozens of languages, and a draft can cross a linguistic border in minutes. The gain is real, but the process has loosened old certainties about who is speaking in a translated sentence, and about who remains answerable for “what is attributed to whom” when the mediator has no name and the route between languages leaves no trace. Neither celebration nor alarm strikes us as the appropriate editorial response. We record the conditions in which the book was completed, and we leave the arguments to the chapters that convey them in detail, with their evidence and in their own voices.

The arrangement of the chapters is the order of an argument. The book moves from the oldest register of linguistic mobility toward the newest, and from the ground upward: the first three chapters stay close

to persons who carry languages in their own biographies, while the remaining three step back to ask what the crossing has become now that machines perform it, then where concepts come from and who gets to make them, and at last what the self that speaks and knows might be. Three of the six are by the editors. We have tried to weigh them here exactly as we weigh the rest.

Toshiyuki Takeda opens the volume in Mauritania, and the choice of opening is itself a statement. For most of recorded time, knowledge moved because people moved. The *maḥḍara* he describes is a school in motion: a tent, a teacher, students who followed him from pasture to pasture, a curriculum copied by hand onto wooden boards and recited until it settled in the memory, where it traveled free of luggage. Takeda follows the scholars this institution formed, the Shinqīṭīs, out of the Sahara and across the modern Arab world. One of them appears in Ṭāhā Ḥusayn's memoir of al-Azhar, remembered for his formidable learning and memory; and when the Gulf and the Arabian Peninsula, building new schools and institutions, went looking for masters of Arabic and the transmitted sciences, it was often these desert-trained teachers they found. In the society he describes, a confident command of the standard, literary Arabic is taken as a sign of learning. Mastery of that more erudite language has long worked there as a credential; it opened al-Azhar to one generation and the Gulf to another, and it gives the book its first answer to the question of carriers: for centuries, knowledge moved inside trained human memory, with a name and a lineage attached.

In the second chapter, with Clovis Bergère, the book crosses to Guinea, and the scale changes from the caravan to the interview. His chapter begins, disarmingly, with a Taiwanese historical novel that disguises itself as a translation, footnotes, afterwords and all. The disguise turns out to be an argument: nothing in the passage of words between languages is innocent, least of all the apparatus that pretends

to be technical. Bergère then turns to his own practice. For thirty years he has done fieldwork in Guinea, interviewing in French while daily life around him runs in Pular, with Susu and Maninka crossing into both. Out of this he draws an ethics of the crossing. Translation is an encounter between languages, and an encounter can be conducted as domination or as hospitality; the Fula code of *Pulaaku*, which teaches a host to leave the guest alone with the offered meal, gives him a figure for what hospitable translation might be in scholarly practice. He practices what he proposes. Rather than bend a Mande word to a Greek-derived concept, he lets the word *dundunba* stand untranslated in his prose and asks his readers to come to it, an ordinary act of writing in which the whole argument is contained; and whereas colonial order produced diglossia, with one language ranking above another, he asks what working multilingualism would require of scholarship.

The third chapter carries the question into a stranger pairing, and it is the second of the three that belong to the editors. Ammar Khashan writes from a life conducted between Arabic and Japanese, languages with no family relation and scripts that run in opposite directions, and he asks what a meaning must survive in order to pass from one shore to the other. The chapter's working concept is anchorage. Arabic, moored to a fixed and constantly recited scripture, holds its central words fast; a word so held, *ribā* is his example, cannot cross languages without shedding the history that is the whole point of its meaning, and must instead cross as itself, visibly foreign, to be explained rather than replaced. Nor is the point confined to scripture. Even the name of a science can refuse to travel intact: what English calls economics, a neutral management of scarce things, Arabic calls *iqtiṣād*, a Qur'ānic word for right measure, and Japanese calls *keizai*, an old Confucian compound about ordering the world and saving the people, so that to express Islamic economics in three languages is to express three subtly

different things. Meanwhile, things and their labels cross lightly; the Arabic *qahwa* reached Japanese as *kōhī*, coffee, with most of its history left at the border. The deep settings of a language, the station of the self inside the sentence or the rule deciding who belongs among its speakers, hardly cross at all; they can only be inhabited, slowly, from within. Readers of Takeda will pause at that rule of belonging. The door through which the Shinqītīs entered the Arab east, the tongue itself, is here weighed from the inside. The chapter ends by pointing at its own successor.

That successor is the hinge of the volume. Khashan's second chapter asks who is speaking when a machine translates, and it refuses to answer quickly. First, it reconstructs, at length, what the crossing of a sacred text used to require: the Bible and the Qur'ān reached the Japanese language along slow roads of named translators, declared relay languages and committees whose labor is measured in years, where an error — the first missionaries preaching about the Christian God for roughly two years under the name of a cosmic Buddha — could at least be found, owned, and reversed. Against that record, the chapter sets the new instruments, in which the slowness has been abolished, the route hidden and the responsibility left to no one. It ends with proposals addressed to institutions, and with a personal resolution we leave for the reader; the three test words, *khamr*, *waqf* and the name of God, deserve to be met face-to-face in their own chapter rather than in this brief summary.

In the fifth chapter, Hasan Mahmud lifts the question from words to concepts. Sociology, he observes, has learned to take its evidence from everywhere while continuing to take its concepts from a few places, so that evidence and concepts move through the discipline in opposite directions. He accepts the postcolonial critique of this arrangement and declines to stop there. Drawing on his own research on Bengali Muslim

identity in Bangladesh, he offers some suggestions as to what a different path might look like, showing that binaries which the historiography had treated as settled — Bengali against Muslim, religion against language — kept failing to explain the evidence until the inherited categories themselves had to give way; his field, in his own words, became a “theoretical site,” a place where concepts are no longer merely applied but produced as required. His later pages on remittance as a form of belonging carry the same conversion forward across his research. The exchange with the fourth chapter is audible, and we did not plan it: both reach, from different disciplines, for the same warning of epistemicide, the potential destruction of a culture’s knowledge system, met by one inside the training data of machines and by the other in the long habits of an academic discipline.

Nobuyuki Matsui closes the book at its deepest point. Every chapter before his asks, in one register or another, who speaks; his asks what a speaking self is, and answers from the history of Japanese philosophy. The way in is grammatical. Japanese lets its sentences travel without an explicit subject: the opening line of Kawabata’s *Snow Country* names neither the train nor the passenger whom every reader nevertheless perceives. The novel’s English translator had to install a subject before the first verb could stand. That seemingly missing subject has been taken to indicate a supposedly missing subjectivity, but Matsui refutes this. Reading Nishida, the philosopher for whom subject and object arise within basho, the place that makes both possible, and after him Nakamura on embodiment and the *Noh* stage, he draws out a subjectivity that emerges within relations and consists in the capacity to re-form them; where the third chapter had observed the quiet self of the Japanese sentence from a non-native resident’s distance, this chapter shows what a century of philosophy made of it from within. Following the machine’s authorless fluency, the book ends with an account of the

one who speaks: a self formed in its relations and still able, on Matsui's reading of this tradition, to change them.

A word on method, because the reader will meet several. Some chapters rest on fieldwork and interviews; others are interpretive through and through, their arguments conducted among texts and the histories of scholarship. An interpretive chapter may still count things and cite figures without becoming an empirical study in the process; its claims stand or fall with readings rather than with samples. We made no attempt to iron this out. It has become usual, and rightly so, to say that a research field is more than a source of data, that it is a ground on which concepts take form. This book stretches the point past the field. Concepts are also born from texts, from languages themselves, and from archives, and a volume about the movement of knowledge would have been poorer had it admitted only one approach to method.

It remains to give thanks. The contributors bore a long schedule and our repeated queries with patience, and each of them shaped this volume beyond the pages that carry his name; the book is theirs. To the Asia-Japan Research Institute at Ritsumeikan University and to the Institute for Advanced Study in the Global South at Northwestern University in Qatar we owe the frame within which the original meeting, and everything that has followed from it inside these covers, took place. To the former we owe more than the frame: it hosted that meeting, and it publishes this book under its AJI BOOKS imprint. Encounters of this kind do not arrange themselves. Professor Yasushi Kosugi, Director of the Asia-Japan Research Institute, has for years built and kept open the channels along which scholars from distant fields and distant places are brought together in the same room, and this volume is one result among many; we thank him for that work, and for his support at every stage of this one. Toshiyuki Takeda organized and hosted the symposium from which this book grew, and we thank him for it. Anthony Brewer

prepared the English of the manuscript with a care that improved every chapter, our own included. In the Editorial Office, Mr. Tahei Okamoto saw the book through production and made the many small adjustments on which a finished volume silently depends. The faults that remain are ours.

Ammar Khashan and Clovis Bergère
Kyoto, July 11, 2026

3. Dr. Ammar Khashan



Chapter 3. Beyond the Ocean of Cultural Differences: Arabic, Japanese, and the Mobility of Meaning

Chapter 4. Who Speaks in the Age of Machine Translation? Language, AI, and the Ethics of Knowledge Production

Dr. Ammar Khashan is an Associate Professor at the Ritsumeikan Asia-Japan Research Organization. He graduated from the Faculty of Sharia at Damascus University in 2004 and completed his master's program in Hadith studies there in 2011, with a thesis on the *Musnad* of Abū Ḥanīfa in the recension of al-Ḥārithī. He received his Ph.D. in Area Studies from the Graduate School of Asian and African Area Studies (ASAFAS), Kyoto University, in 2017.

His recent research reads the social and economic institutions of Islam, above all *zakāt* and *waqf*, together with *takāful* in its general sense: the principle of mutual responsibility under which these institutions stand. Drawing on the classical sources of Islamic law, he follows mutual aid and mutual responsibility in Islamic society from early Islamic history to their contemporary revivals in Muslim societies, with fieldwork in Indonesia and Malaysia. Writing in Arabic, Japanese, and English, he has turned increasingly to what happens to Islamic legal and economic concepts when they cross languages and cultures. With Universitas Islam Internasional Indonesia (UIII), he is compiling a dictionary of Islamic economic terminology in English, Japanese, and Indonesian that records how each language and culture has received, used, and at times coined these terms.

His books include *Portraying the Islamic Economy in its*

Primordial Grand Design: From its Birth in the Prophetic Period through its Legal Formulation to the Contemporary Innovations (in Japanese; Nakanishiya Shuppan, 2022) and *Islamic Social Finance and the Architecture of Mutual Responsibility: Zakat and Waqf in the Digital Governance of Islamic Welfare* (Asia-Japan Research Institute, Ritsumeikan University, 2026). He is the editor of *The Development of Islamic Economics for Social Welfare: Reassessing Waqf, Zakāt, and Takāful in Asia* (Asia-Japan Research Institute, Ritsumeikan University, 2024).

2. Dr. Clovis Bergère



Chapter 2. From Diglossia to Multilingualism in Global South Research: Reflections from Guinea

Clovis Bergère is the director of the Institute for Advanced Study in the Global South at Northwestern University Qatar. His research examines youth as a contested social and political category in Guinea, West Africa, with a focus on digital media and urban

life. In addition, he has also written on street corners as nodes of youth sociability and politics in Guinea. Prior to joining Northwestern University in Qatar, he worked at the Center for Advanced Research in Global Communication at the University of Pennsylvania, where he also completed a postdoctoral fellowship. He holds a Ph.D. in Childhood Studies from Rutgers University-Camden (2017) and has taught at Rutgers University in Camden, the University of the Arts, and the University of Pennsylvania. His work has appeared in the *Public Culture*, *International Journal of Communication*, *African Studies Review*, the *Journal of Childhood Studies*, and *American Anthropologist*, as well as several edited volumes, including *Southern Digitalities: Reimagining Digital Studies from the Global South* (2026, University of Illinois Press), which he co-edited with Marwan Kraidy and Marina Krikorian. Prior to returning to academia in 2011, he worked as a project manager in Children's Services in London, where he oversaw the building of over thirty playgrounds and youth centers, focused on natural play and collaborative design.