# *'Commodities move easily, as can people… but ideas and cultural practices are easier to transplant than translate' An interview with Nile Green*

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**Nile Green** is a historian of the multiple globalisations of Islam and Muslims. After beginning his career as a historian of India and Pakistan, he has traced Muslim networks that connect Afghanistan, Iran, the Indian Ocean, Africa, Japan, Europe, and America. He has published ten books on the subject, including the award-winning volumes *Bombay Islam: The Religious Economy of the West Indian Ocean, 1840-1915* (Cambridge University Press, 2011) and *How Asia Found Herself: A Story of Intercultural Understanding* (Yale University Press, 2022). He serves as Professor & Ibn Khaldun Endowed Chair in World History at the University of California, Los Angeles. This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

***Your first books focused on early modern South Asia, but more recently, you've come to redefine yourself as a broader scholar of global Islam from Asia to Europe, working also on the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. What accounts for your intellectual trajectory? And how do you understand your evolution as a scholar over the past twenty years?***

I'll start with my intellectual formation. My late teens to my early thirties were a period when my interests were shaped by traveling and spending increasingly longer periods wandering around places overland. By the time I got to India at the age of twenty, I'd already travelled a fair bit through the Middle East. This was my connecting link to India. So, I found my way to India first in my actual life and then intellectually through my studies. Moreover, whereas the 1990s was a period when the word 'globalisation' was being used a great deal, I was interested in the very opposite of globalisation. I was interested in what I came at that point to think about as local Islams, local expressions of Muslim cultural life and religious tradition in small towns and rural areas of Pakistan, India, Iran, and other places where I began visiting.

So, the places where I chose to spend more time were always outside of big cities. Sometimes, I would spend a few weeks traveling with some of the last nomadic communities in Western Iran or going to lots of small towns and villages throughout the Arab Middle East. What eventually took me to Aurangabad in India for my PhD research were the Sufi shrines that I initially considered as expressions of local Islam and that, as I

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wrote about in one of my early books, were mechanisms for 'making Muslim space', or as Lefebvre would say, 'place'. That is, shrines functioned as the institutional anchors of community memory through rituals, texts, and architecture working together in a memory-making continuum over time. So, my formation as a scholar of global Islam actually came out of really searching for the opposite: local Islam. This still shapes how I think to this day. Though I've come to theorise and describe 'global Islam' and even written a book called *Global Islam*, I'm very interested in describing the sites, communities, and mechanisms of globalisation as processes that are actually very distinct, particular, and embedded in (and between) different locales.

Another aspect of my intellectual formation to which I repeatedly come back in my writing is the centrality of geography: of physical geography, of historical geography, of conceptual geography, and of processes and cycles of connection and disconnection between different geographical regions. In many ways, I think that disconnection or separation has been much more of a historical norm than its more familiar and fashionable opposite and that it is only by recognising that persistent norm—the local, disconnected lives of most of human history—that we can properly contextualise supra-local or 'global' phenomena.

Perhaps another thing I'll add is my approach to primary sources. Whether it comes from a British empiricist tradition or is merely an idiosyncratic bibliomania, my decisions about what to write about are really driven by primary sources. Over the decades, over my twenty years as a scholar since my PhD, finding different genres and different combinations of sources has allowed me to ask different kinds of questions that, for me, always emerge from such material. However, the kinds of questions I see in my sources are also shaped by my intellectual formation: trying to read textual sources in relation to material, ritual, and architectural contexts, with physical geography as a constant factor in the background.

***What new intellectual questions have intrigued you?***

To answer this question, it might help to identify my core drive since this is the through line for the many different things I've written about. My core drive, not only as a historian but as a human being, has always been to try to understand how other human beings know what they know. Starting from my own earlier life, certainly from before I became a scholar, my interest was in how humans understand ultimate reality, the basis of knowing about the really big things. And it was this, of course, that drove me to study mysticism, specifically Sufism, the Islamic tradition of asking and framing those big epistemological questions. As I gradually threw in my lot with historians rather than theologians or philosophers, I turned to questions about how humans understand their social reality, how they understand their own history, and how they understand other people and cultures.

And, the specific humans about whom I've asked these questions are Muslims from communities and traditions whose languages I studied.

And that takes us again to primary sources. So, to ask how different Muslims understand other cultures, I've looked at many Persian and Urdu ethnographic accounts and travelogues; and in doing so, tried to see what more finely grained questions, or problems, those sources present in turn. The travel writings on which I've worked in, let's say, the Persian-speaking world led me to questions about how different Muslims have understood the past of other societies and how Muslim authors then adapted methods or sources of historical knowledge from those other parts of the world in order to reinterpret their own past. I edited a volume on Afghan history writing, which reflected my interest in archaeology and its reception in the Islamic world, as material evidence and deep time recalibrated many Muslim understandings of history. My more recent work, for example, in *How Asia Found Herself*, has concerned Middle Eastern and South Asian attempts to understand the deep history of China and pre-Islamic India. This required new systems of historical time-reckoning that in effect resulted in the Muslim adaptation of the BC/Before Christ timeline (as *qabl-i masih* and so on), even as a way of describing the ancient Chinese past. I think there is more to this than mere Westernisation, European discursive hegemony, and so on.

These interests have also touched on the history of science and the Muslim encounter with modern scientific ways of knowing. That aspect came up in my book, *The Love of Strangers,* which was a sort of microhistory of the early Middle Eastern encounter with the *ʿulum-i firangi*, the 'European sciences'. Then there is my interest in Islamic book history, whether printing or the bit of work I've done on the reception of manuscripts and practices of manuscript reading. This, too, is driven by my interest in the media of knowledge and mediated knowledge, whether through books, in printed or manuscript form, or through text, genre, and language.

In sum, as a world historian, I could say that I'm interested in Muslim peoples in contact with other peoples. Beyond the Muslim-Christian encounter, I've looked at the Muslim attempt to understand Buddhist regions, whether in Burma, Japan, or China. Some of my older work—and my current book manuscript on the Indian Ocean—looks at Indian and Middle Eastern encounters with Africa, particularly through Zanzibar and Kenya. And again, always working out of my source materials, I'm interested in the issue of language, whether the terminology of ethnographic difference or the emergence of functional pidgins for different people to communicate in the absence of an established lingua franca. Basically, how do people with one language, one set of linguistically embedded concepts, understand another society, even at the minimal practical level so as to be able to exchange trade goods with some of its members? Even for a region so routinely described as 'cosmopolitan', such as the Indian Ocean, we have a very limited

understanding of these truly fundamental processes that underpin the movement of the material goods that have left a clearer historical record.

***I think that was very clear in your most recent book,* How Asia Found Herself*. I found particularly striking the story of the north Indian Muslim missionary ʿAbd al-Khaliq in Burma, who tried to describe to readers back home the essential tenets of Buddhism that he had acquired with no background knowledge or set categories.***

***Part of your development as a scholar has been an embrace of global history, a field that has grown immensely over the past thirty years. What changes to the field have you witnessed as a participant in recent decades? In which direction or directions does the future of the field lie? Have all the low-hanging fruits already been picked? Is it time to move on?***

I think maybe it's become clear that, in some ways, I'm a reluctant or at least a critical global historian because my instincts have always remained and still remain for the particular, the local, the distinctive, the individual. This has led me into the sub-genre of the global microhistory. At least one book I wrote, *The Love of Strangers,* might be called such a thing, and perhaps also *Terrains of Exchange,* in which I tried to develop a methodology for tracing global interactions upwards and outwards from very particular local 'terrains'. This is because I believe all history, including global history, is microhistory in aggregate, and so we should develop lenses and methods to grapple with these processes of aggregation.

Hence, I've always felt that I have a critical stance on much of how the writing of global history has developed. Its formative methodology was one of starting out with commercial and economic or political economy-type questions that are in many ways top-down. For me, history that loses sight of the human being in the realm of action ceases to be history in a really crucial way and ceases—and I think this is particularly germane in the period in which we live now—to have the specific explanatory value that historians can add to conversations whose parameters are increasingly defined by scientists using non-human datasets over which they inevitably have greater mastery than historians.

What do I mean by that? Well, over the last twenty years, so many influential books on history have been written by non-historians, whether people coming out of the material sciences, the biological sciences, cognitive science, or geology and geography. Or, increasingly, there are environmentally-inflected histories of the Anthropocene, working on scales of history and data in which human experience, let alone agency, becomes little more than a colourful anecdote with no centrality to either the narrative, method, or process at large. The embrace of digital technologies and digital histories will likely further the risk of taking human action, comprehension, and even consciousness out of the pictures that historians paint of the world which we still must necessarily inhabit as

humans… So, though I am certainly not a Marxist, such digital mechanisation of the work of history surely at some point risks alienating not only historians but also their public from the products of historical labour—that is, alienating us from the world we must all necessarily inhabit and whose ways and workings 'historians' have in all societies explained for their communities.

***Interesting. I had always considered environmental histories, works on the Anthropocene, or studies of materiality as representing a different and separate response to the previous paradigm of cultural history, one that was quite different from global history.***

Indeed, the kinds of commodity or material-driven history have again come out of that early coding of global history as a history of economic processes and things that move, leaving material traces that can be mapped and interpreted without necessarily dealing with the question of local meaning (though of course some archaeologists, anthropologists, and others have long been concerned with the local meanings of traded objects).

One other thing I will throw in is that the global history that interests me tries to see the ways in which there are specific 'grids', or infrastructures, of connectivity. Just as I've said that globalisation always happens in specific locales, it can also be added that globalisation never happens everywhere. In every interaction or era, globalisation is always patchy, begging 'grid' questions of who, what, and where were connected, and how. From my *Bombay Islam* book onwards, my intervention in studies of human interactions around the Indian Ocean, or along the Eurasian 'Silk Road', or elsewhere has been to examine port cities and other classic synecdoches of connectivity to question whether commercial connection necessarily delivers cultural comprehension. Commodities move easily, as can people—goods and labour—but ideas and cultural practices are easier to transplant than translate.

***Speaking of which, when we read your most recent book* (How Asia Found Herself) *in my graduate seminar, some of the students objected by stating that it disregards mobility and movement across Asia before the nineteenth century: sailors were on ships, Islam transplanted itself into Southeast Asia, etc. Isn't this an example of, if not cultural understanding, at least cultural interaction?***

Of course, people have moved around, commodities moved around. But in writing *How Asia Found Herself,* I became interested in a basic question of global intellectual history: how is intercultural information transferred from one place to another?

Let me give a concrete example. Let's say our notional Indians are Tamil-speaking Muslims who go from southeastern India and settle in various places in Southeast Asia. That's great on the spot. They're going to develop variable and, in some cases, superb cultural-linguistic capacity, surely. But to what extent could they transfer that on-the-spot,

and in some respects tacit, understanding to other people in other places or later times? Did they write it and transfer it? Sure, you might be an Indian Tamil who has settled in Sulawesi, or Shanghai, and gained an extraordinary degree of linguistic or otherwise intercultural competence. But how would they explain that to people back in the old country in India by translating local linguistic concepts into Tamil? What is the preexisting ethnographic or philosophical linguistic repertoire in Tamil to describe such Southeast or East Asian others? What I tried to do in *How Asia Found Herself* was to find primary sources—not only travelogues and histories of other Asian cultures but also inter-Asian language guides and translations—that documented how such a process could actually work in practice. There is an oft-quoted old Italian adage *traduttore, traditore* ('translator, traitor'). But even setting aside the epistemological scepticism voiced in such folk wisdom, how intercultural understanding took shape on the ground in one Asian 'terrain of exchange' after another remains a question for global historians that can only be answered in the linguistic (indeed, interlinguistic) and philological nitty-gritty. For this, we need textual source materials that allow us to trace the degree to which cross-cultural comprehension does or doesn't keep pace with the cross-cultural movement of commodities. This takes us back to my earlier critique of the formative methods of global history…

***Let me jump to another question here regarding* How Asia Found Herself*. One of the things that I noticed was that part of its purpose was to gauge intercultural understanding among Asians. Why is that? Why is intercultural understanding the marker of what makes Asia a discrete entity?***

I certainly don't think this is the only way we can gauge interactions across Asia. But my intervention has been that, again, so much of global history, or, rather, the interregional history of Asia, is predicated on the movement of goods. It's what I've called, often very critically, the 'Silk Road paradigm', which paints trade as the perpetual partner of cultural exchange and which also often projects the continuity of such intercultural connections across the long durée. Yet, when I think of global history, I see interconnectivity waxing and waning across periods and between places, just as we now see with this most recent historical period of globalisation. Again, I think what is much more the norm of human historical experience is disconnection and separation, as well as the distinct intellectual horizons this shapes. By this, I don't mean that most of humanity has thereby historically been parochially narrow-minded because 'connection' and 'cosmopolitanism' are by no means universal requirements for the life of the mind, still less the imagination. I think that so much that is valuable, unique, and worthy of preservation by historians in our role as what Peter Burke called 'remembrancers' consists of such disconnected lives and lifeworlds. But the forces of history have often pushed such lives and lifeworlds together—forcibly connecting them.

But to get to the heart of your question, I certainly don't think that intercultural understanding is the most important way of gauging interactions across Asia. But I think it's a crucial one that has remained startlingly underexamined for the early modern and modern periods.

The way I tried to gauge the transfer of inter-Asian understanding was not simply by looking at source texts (travelogues, translations, etc.) on their own. I also tried to trace what was printed, where such texts were distributed, and who might have read them because it's only then that we can say that such and such an item of information wasn't merely known to one person—to that notional Tamil migrant on the spot in Sulawesi. So, I tried to find evidence of print runs as well as distribution networks. If I have an Urdu history of China that was issued in 2,000 copies by an organisation with an established membership, well, I can say that maybe more people learned from its contents. So, there are ways to demonstrate, or at least postulate, the transfer of cross-cultural knowledge by putting the close reading of texts together with the study of the informational infrastructures through which specific items of knowledge moved from one place to another.

***One of the things that I enjoy the most about your work is that you're able to take conventional, established narratives about the nineteenth century—say, for example, the inexorable rise of a centralising and modernising state based on European models, technology and disciplinary mechanisms—and turn them on their head. You find these completely different stories in this period. In* Bombay Islam*, you dismantle Weberian notions of the disenchantment of modernity by looking at how people actually used steamships, railroads, and printing. In* How Asia Found Herself*, you transform the well-worn story about Saidian power-knowledge relations and the creation of Orientalist knowledge into a different story of the creative font of Asian self-discovery. Has anything in particular inspired you to challenge these meta-narratives of the nineteenth century?***

What drew me into the nineteenth century originally was simply the sources: finding forgotten lithographs and thinking, 'Now this is interesting!' Moving into the nineteenth century allowed me to answer certain questions in sufficient detail that I felt I couldn't for earlier periods on which I'd worked. Whatever distinction my work has in the simple sense of being a bit different from other scholarship is, I think, because my core works have been drawn from and built on previously ignored primary sources. Only after a source has caught my attention do I say, well, I'd better find out what the professionals, what the historians have written about the themes dealt with in this work. So, whereas the historiography of colonial Bombay was all about factory labour, communal conflict, and so on, the corpus of hagiographies that drew me to Bombay allowed me to depict a very different place from the 'disenchanted' city of labour historians.

There's also an instinctive or perhaps principled issue here. I'm not a Marxist historian. And I'm not a nationalist historian. As one gets older, as one reads more subtly, one increasingly recognises the intellectual consequences of certain axioms of Marx through Gramsci, through Foucault, through Said, and through to scholars writing today. The same might be said for the subtle ideology of (neo)liberalism that has shaped so much of the writing of global history. So, I try to avoid unconsciously replicating these paradigms, which is the work of ideology, since, as the old saying goes, ideology is when ideas have you rather than when you have ideas. Moreover, when you recognise the ideological script, a work of scholarship becomes utterly predictable, and monotonous. The human past is infinitely more plentiful, contradictory, and other than such normative scripts can capture.

There are things that I still value from the interpretive currents that surrounded Said and Foucault. The linguistic turn influenced the way I work with texts a great deal and it still does with its emphasis on the interplay of words and reality since that deals with my driving concerns as a historian with how people have understood the worlds they experience. Likewise, the series of twentieth-century debates in history and in the humanities over the relationship between ideas and objects, which again go back to my core concerns as a human being as much as a scholar: how do people know what they know? Yet, even though I remain driven as a scholar by these basic epistemological questions (which, as a historian, I consider in relation to the material factors I've called intellectual infrastructures, which are inevitably products of capital and labour), I try hard not to unconsciously replicate the claim of Gramsci, Foucault, Said, etc. that human knowledge is an arbitrary replication of power relations. I think world history has many other lessons to teach us.