

The forgotten fruits of migration

(based on the manuscript CONFLUENCE by Ranjit Hoskoté and Ilija Trojanow)

In times of crisis the rhetoric of conflict blossoms. The ongoing, seemingly never-ending “War On Terror”, powered by deliberately vague justifications, has metastasised into a clash of canons, cultures and civilizations. We are on the edge of disaster (to quote the title of an apocalyptic CNN programme), we have to close ranks and defend our values and traditions. The foreign is an antagonistic force that needs to be repelled. These doomsayers seem to believe in a homogenous, home-grown culture that has developed from the core of a certain nation, a certain tradition, a certain religion. They define difference as static and unbridgeable, they are oblivious to common ancestry and local variations. Theirs is a flawed conviction, for it is blind to history. Reacting to the threat of the Other, this ghetto mentality constructs walls and guards entrances. It negates the creative effects of previous migrations, both of groups and of individuals, and it vilifies the in-between, the traditional home of all migrants.

But what if the values and cultural achievements of the so-called West were the result of awakenings and rebellions made possible by what we today regard as non-European sources, my movement and migration? What if core Western values, technologies and cultural expressions were decisively formed by confluence, by an intensive exchange between Islam and Christianity, by a vibrant culture of debate amongst scholars working in Granada, Baghdad, Palermo, Damascus, Bologna, Paris,

Venice and Cairo? What if all that we perceive as canonical and classical is a hybridity that we have forgotten? Or have been persuaded, encouraged, conditioned to forget?

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The greatest rivers bear the most misleading names. The canon of geography dictates that the source furthest away from the mouth is the river's point of origin, and the entire watercourse takes on a single name. But no great river would reach the ocean without being fed by tributaries: the brooks, streams and rivulets that join its flow, often bringing with them more water, alluvium, minerals or fish than the source stream. By the time the great river has reached the ocean, the source is no more than a faint memory; the flow has been defined by a series of confluences along the way. But the river's official name conceals the truth of its composition; while the nametag passes into legend and lexicon, the ancestry of confluences becomes invisible. To understand the true identity of the river, we would have to pinpoint the occasions of confluence, examine the dynamics of addition and innovation played out at the merging of the waters.

Our history, regulated by concepts of singularity and pure origin, is as much of a cartographer's invention as the great river. By taking a certain tableau of it to represent culture's form and essence, it mistakes a snapshot of the river for its whole course. By the time cultural achievements become sufficiently established in public consciousness as to be taught in school, the turmoil of their evolution has been forgotten. The confluences of every culture are concealed, and homogenising foundational myths are installed in

their place. Instead of the many pasts that have produced our present, we put on the dark glasses of amnesia and see a singular past. The timeless stability of our culture guarantees the security of our identity. Therefore, we have to preserve the purity of our culture against contamination by the Other. By a circular argument in which the contemporary political purpose shapes its own background, this singular Past is established as testament to the uniqueness and superiority of a particular culture or nation. Although globalisation is currently depicted as a celebration of diversity, the dominant elites of every tribe continue to define cultures in opposition to one other. After all, the hybrid threatens the stability of society and State, subverts the gospel truth of ‘one people, one nation, one culture’.

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Take ancient Alexandria: Located at the pivot of many trade routes that connected Asia, Europe and Africa, Alexandria played host to Greek philosophers, Jewish commentators and Indian yogis. In this harbour-city, Ptolemy mapped the world and Eratosthenes measured its diameter, Euclid composed his treatise on geometry and a team of seventy-two Hellenised Jews produced the Septuagint, the first Greek translation of the Old Testament. The Septuagint was a memorable triumph, not only for Biblical scholarship, but also for Greek literature. In the Septuagint itself, we have shining examples of multi-ethnic and multi-religious civilisations such as Nebuchadnezzar’s Babylon and Cyrus’s Persia.

There were times when the Mediterranean region was not the

seam of Europe, to be double- and treble-folded and sewn firmly against the rest of the world --- but rather, a creative and productive zone of crossings, where networks of relationships flowered and fresh creations came to birth. The foundations of European culture would not have been possible without the permeable, mutable and sometimes even symbiotic qualities of its borders. All the same, we have come to regard fluid forms, unstable identities and blurred definitions as a problem. The public discourse on Europe inclines increasingly towards a demand for clear categories of membership, coherent clarifications regarding the distinguishing marks of belonging. It also allows for the rise of a border-checkpoint mentality, to differentiate European from non-European. In preparing for the future, we ought to grasp that borders are playing fields of hybrid cultures, which have played a defining role in the development of continents. Because what we regard as alien, at any time, is always only the result of a momentary difference, a fleeting gesture of history.

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Venice in the 11th century. The bride of Domenico Selvo, groomed to be the future Doge, shocked the Venetians. Daughter of a high official of Constantinople, she actually had the nerve to refuse to eat with her fingers at the wedding feast. Instead, she had ordered her fawning eunuch to cut her food into morsels, so that she could spear each morsel with golden fork she held between her fingers, carry it to her mouth, lips touched metal ... no more, it was disgusting beyond belief. Everybody in the grand chamber was scandalised. No one more so than cardinal bishop Peter Damian, a

man of God if there ever was one, who lost no time in warning his flock against this abomination: “God in his wisdom has provided man with natural forks – his fingers. Therefore it is an insult to Him to substitute artificial metallic forks for them when dining.” Besides, as he pointed out, it was useless for eating spaghetti. No wonder that this Byzantine princess, Maria Argyropoulina by name, died before very long of some wasting disease. The future saint, Peter Damian, sermonised grimly over “the Venetian Doge’s wife, whose body, after her excessive delicacy, entirely rotted away”.

Verily, the fork and the West did not hit it off well. After this early censure from the pulpit of the Church, the fork vanished into the kitchen cabinet, not to emerge again until three centuries later. When necessary, food was cut and speared with the knife. It was not until the 16th century that the fork asserted its culinary presence in Italy. By then, the upper class had developed a new preoccupation with hygiene; it was proper for a guest to bring his own fork and spoon to the banquet, elegantly kept in a box called the *cadena*. The rest of Christian Europe was oblivious to the blessing of this utensil, until Catherine de Medici married – weddings seem to be focal points of cultural dissemination – Henry I of France in 1533. Her dowry included silver dinner forks wrought by Benvenuto Cellini, the famed Italian goldsmith. The French court continued to distrust this dangerous innovation, right up to the time of King Louis XIV, who relied on his fingers and a knife.

In the East the fork had passed into polite usage at some point in the 4th century in Byzantium, and was common amongst the affluent of West Asia from the 7th century onwards. Even the

Tartars were versed in the art of the fork, as a letter by a Franciscan monk to Louis IX of France testifies. Today, the fork marks a cultural boundary, and people who continue to use their fingers are marvelled at, as at best charmingly quaint. As if to vindicate the long-ago bishop's warning, a recent study has established that the fingers exude a certain enzyme that helps digestion. But of course, we would not even dream of forsaking this utensil, which is not only essential to our eating habits, but is also an integral part of our lifeworld. The foreign is first met with suspicion and treated as a mixed blessing. Then follows a wary provisional acceptance. And finally, there is a rapturous embrace, to the point that its alien origin is forgotten. This is a necessary and healthy process. Were it not for the fact that the tines of the fork are used to jab at the Other. Often, the potted histories purposely erase the foreign influence. To remember where something came from is to acknowledge the many sources of culture and the many debts that each civilization owes others. And the vivid awareness of our formative hybridity reminds us that we will always need cultural provocation and enrichment from foreign sources. The fork certainly does not symbolize a parting of ways, but a continuous anticipation of the new.

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Confluence depends on a certain mobility of people, ideas, goods and services, as it relies on the presence of meeting places, junctions, nodes where everyday interaction with the Other is a fact of life, and you cannot ignore difference because you are surrounded by it, you live, eat and breathe it. It requires an

interweave of mercantile complicity, where each side needs the other to complete itself economically. A third precondition is an element of freedom from complacent dogma, and a basic curiosity and intellectual generosity: an interest, over and above the motives of gain and advantage, in that which is not the same, shared, or identically conditioned. In one word, we are describing an open system.

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Take Petrus Alfonsi. Born a Jew in al-Andalus in 1066, he received the education customary for a member of the cultivated Muslim-Jewish elite. At the age of forty, he was baptised in a highly public ceremony presided over by his patron, King Alfonso I of Aragon. In the process, he seems to have alienated himself from family and community. He left his Spanish homeland to journey north, going first to Normandy and then to England. There, he must have felt like the one-eyed man in the land of the blind. The education he had received back home placed him in a position of great advantage in a society that was, in scientific as well as in literary matters, decidedly primitive. Petrus made the most of the situation. He became a physician at the court of Henry I, and also its leading resident man of wisdom. Publishing on a variety of learned subjects, he soon achieved literary fame. His books were widely read in England and translated throughout Christian Europe; they were the 'bestsellers' of their times. His writings are forgotten, with the exception of his single work of fiction, published in 1115. Titled *Disciplina Clericalis (Tales of the Priest)*, this was an anthology of 34 stories, translated from the Arabic into

Latin: a small and representative selection from the vast reservoir of stories to which he was heir, but impressive enough to excite generations of readers and listeners in Christian Europe. For this was the first story-collection of Latin literature in the Middle Ages.

These stories were drawn from an ocean of fables, parables, allegories and adventures. Most famous of all is the Arabic *Alf Laila wa Laila*, the *Thousand and One Nights*. But there are precedents: the Sanskrit *Vetala-pancavimsati*, the ‘Twenty-five Tales of the Vampire’, the *Katha-sarit-sagar*, the ‘Ocean of the Rivers of Stories’, and above all the Sanskrit *Panchatantra*, which had travelled westward in numerous disguises, appearing in Persian and Arabic as the *Dastan Kalilah wa Dimnah*. This 8th-century translation made in Baghdad was then conveyed into Syriac, Greek, Hebrew and Latin, and eventually – through the efforts of Petrus – infused even the Welsh and French repertoires of narrative. La Fontaine paid it explicit homage in the introduction to the second volume of his *Fables* (1678).

Petrus’ narratives were bursting with tall tales and curiosities, audacious exaggerations and caveats pressed home, figures from the daily life of castle, cottage and field, as well as alchemists and sorcerers from beyond the horizons of the known. But how were these stories to be held together, Petrus Alfonsi must have asked himself. The solution was near at hand. He had grown up in the tradition of the frame story, where one narrative was nested inside another, each ivory box opening to reveal yet another, smaller and more exquisite. All the great story collections mentioned above operate on this principle. That is also how Petrus Alfonsi

intertwined his stories with the conversation between a father and a son serving as a frame. That is how the stories are introduced in the *Panchatantra* – a sage named Vishnu Sharman is asked to counsel five young princes, to instruct them in the manners of the world and about how to survive in this tricky world. That is exactly how the very first West European fiction writers organised their imaginary material: Boccaccio's *Decameron* and Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, the two most influential prose works of the Renaissance, fountainheads of a vast literary sea. Nothing like this had previously existed in Latin literature. Christian texts were pretty much all the Latin literature that anyone had read or studied ... for a very long time. But Arabic brought with it treasures that had little to do with religion ...". All the central aspects of these two epochal works are familiar to a literary traveller: the story in a story in a story; the idea of a story-telling contest, whether to pass time, as in Chaucer, or to survive a deadly threat, as in Boccaccio. As raconteurs, the pilgrims journeying to Canterbury and the Florentine *jeunesse dorée* are descendants of Vishnu Sharman and Scheherazade.

But the close similarities do not end with the structure. The stories themselves are retellings of a narrative heritage that goes all the way back to ancient India. Boccaccio reads like a DJ who is remixing evergreens: the second tale of the second day, the loss and recovery of Rinaldo's property, is from the *Panchatantra*, as is the second tale of the third day, in which the tactful King Agilulf matches wits with the groom who has seduced his Queen, a charming story from the *Panchatantra* that is beloved throughout India even today. The fifth tale of the third day about a young man

infatuated with a married lady, who offers her husband his beautiful horse in exchange for a few words with her, is from the *Hitopadesha* (Sanskrit: 'The Instruction in Well-Being'), a parallel to the *Panchatantra* that was translated into Arabic and Persian, from where it entered a collection titled *The Fables of Sinbad*, widely circulated in Latin at the time of the Florentine master. The ninth tale of the third day, telling of the vexed love between Gilette and Bertrand, is based on one of the greatest of the Sanskrit plays, Kalidasa's *The Recognition of Shakuntala*, available at the time in an 11th-century French version. On the fourth day, Boccaccio breaks the pattern, offering a defence of his work by telling a story himself, of the hermit Filippo Balducci and his son. At the age of eighteen, the son leaves the retreat and enters the city, where he is fascinated with the female. This story originates in a legend nested within the great Indian epic *Ramayana*, where the lad is called Rishyashringa, which means 'the young sage with the single horn'. Incidentally, this is the origin of the topos of 'The Virgin and the Unicorn', well known in Christian legend and iconography; it also fed into the Andalusian Ibn Tufayl's philosophical allegory, *Hayy Ibn Yaqzan* ('Alive, Son of Awake').

The first tale of the fifth day leads us back in time into Buddhist lore. The story of the two young Cypriots, who brave adversity to win their brides, appears in *Barlaam and Josaphat*, an 8th century Greek Christianisation of the life of the Buddha and the stories of his previous births. The translator was none other than St John of Damascus, a leading figure in Umayyad Christianity. These stories circulated so widely and became so popular – they were also current in an Arabic version, *Bilawar and Buddhasaf* – that Josaphat (a well-attested corruption of Bodhisattva) was

“canonised by the 14th century, and worshipped as a saint in the Catholic Church”, as was Barlaam. It is a comforting thought that a Catholic praying to Saint Josaphat on his feast day of November 27 is also invoking the grace of the Buddha.

Both in their exotic content and the novel manner of their telling, Boccaccio and Chaucer revolutionised literature in Christian Europe. Petrus Alfonsi’s little stories would be told and retold, adapted and embellished. Caxton’s version of Aesop’s fables contained many Alfonsi stories, as did the *Gesta Romanorum*, which was to inspire generations of European writers, even contributing plot elements to the plays of Shakespeare and Marlowe. At the end of the day, the convert had converted those who converted him, to the culture that he had deliberately left behind.

But then again, stories have no quantifiable worth, the extent of their influence is unmeasurable. So let us take, in times of financial fallibility, an example from a more precise field. Leonardo Fibonacci hailed from Pisa, but grew up in the Maghrib. He is famed for the number sequence named after him. Every number in it, except the first two, is the sum of the two preceding ones, all the way to infinity (1, 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 13, 21...). The sequence is manifested in many natural contexts – the branching of trees, the spiralling of shells, the arrangement of pine cones – and Fibonacci’s speculations on it would have been informed, through Arab sources, by the work of Sanskrit grammarians researching quantitative prosody called it *mātrā-meru*, the ‘great mountain of metre’. But at the dawn of the 13th century, Fibonacci had more on his mind than shells, pine cones and poetic metres.

He triggered off a revolution with his book, *Liber abbaci*, in which he argued convincingly for the introduction of Hindu-Arabic numerals and explained the advantage of using them for accounting. The North was now the ‘fast-developing world’ and the adoption of modern mathematical and banking skills had become necessary, if its merchants were going to transact efficiently with their shrewd and experienced counterparts from the Arab lands, from Persia, India and Ethiopia. Perhaps the Fibonacci sequence is not so irrelevant to the process of intercultural learning, after all: it demonstrates, with all the abstract refinement and compelling precision of a mathematical model, that any process of growth aiming for infinity gathers strength from summations that have gone before.

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Today, with the crisscrossing of cultural impulses across the physical world and the Internet, every individual is a potential Alexandrian; an intercultural existence is the most productive form of existence. So that, when the custodians of national, civilisational or religious purity proclaim the end of the multicultural society, they are proclaiming the end of culture itself. The predicament of these custodians is most pathetic in Europe: for, by closing the gates of an open system, they are betraying the same great European traditions, advertised by Karl Popper in his influential writings, that they claim to represent.

The harbour-city is the archetypal image of confluence: it is the place where the river, the sum of numerous tributaries, meets

the ocean. In our turbulent times, cosmopolitanism and cultural diversity are necessary conditions of existence – of being with others, of meeting the Other. Flowing with confluence, the individual realises gradually that the Other is not an enemy, not a stranger, not an alternative, and at times not even an Other, but just a mirror of the various possible faces, the multiple understandings of human existence, the varied definitions of belonging that can be arrived at. We must look into this mirror, not to lose ourselves in confusion, but to see ourselves and our options with greater clarity.

The Buddhist image of the world captures this vision beautifully in the ‘Net of Indra’. Every knot in this net, where strings cross, is an individual; and each of these individuals reflects all the others around him or her. Individuals come into an awareness of themselves through their relations with each other, and not in a limbo of exaggerated self-importance to the exclusion of the needs of strangers. When we look at ourselves in the Net of Indra, we are not only the selves who inhabit our own bodies, but also a series of reflections and possibilities – all the minds we could savour, all the bodies we could transit through, all the imaginations that could enrich ours. The citadel is a safe place to be on occasion, but eventually it will suffocate you: it is the ghetto that you make for yourself, when you force others into ghettos. Far better to be on the routes of the pilgrims and traders, storytellers and troubadours, there to find humankind’s true inheritance of wisdom: which is the realisation that cultures do not engage in conflict but flow together, which is why we must reject those who whip up our passions in the name of difference and conscript us

into the global machine of war.

To embrace confluence is to renounce conflict; to renounce conflict is to embrace confluence.