The Envoy

A Muslim in the Dutch Golden Age, in his own words

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Introduction

In the summer of 1613 a Muslim walked through Amsterdam. He admired the ships, stayed with a professor in Leiden and sat four times beside Prince Maurice of Orange. His name was Ahmad ibn Qasim al-Hajari. In Spain, where he was born around 1570, he had been called Diego Bejarano.

He was a Morisco: a descendant of the Muslims whom Spain had forced to become Christians a century earlier. His family remained Muslim in secret. He secretly learned to read Arabic, became an interpreter for the Archbishop of Granada, fled to Morocco around 1599 and there became interpreter and private secretary to the sultan. In the sultan's service he travelled to France and to the Dutch Republic. After his pilgrimage to Mecca he wrote down his memories in Cairo. He died in Tunis some time after 1640.

His great travel account has been lost. What survives is a summary he wrote at the request of a friend at the mosque of al-Azhar: *Nasir al-Din*, "The Supporter of Religion". It has come down to us in manuscripts in Cairo and Paris. There are also a few letters in his own hand, in Leiden and Manchester, and a short afterword he wrote in Tunis in 1638.

This book contains only his own words, translated from the

Arabic and arranged in the order of his life. I have added nothing to what he says. Where I leave something out, you will see [...]. Where a word is needed to make a sentence clear, it stands between [ ]. At the end of the book I tell what became of his text after him, and which source belongs to which passage.

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1. A Muslim in the Land of the Unbelievers

In the name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful. From Him we seek help.

It is one of God's favours to me that He made me a Muslim in the land of the unbelievers, for as long as I can remember, through the blessing of my parents, may God have mercy on them, and through their guidance.

The language I spoke first in Spain was Arabic. Spanish we learned to read through our dealings with them.

They practised two religions: that of the Christians openly, and that of the Muslims in secret. When anything of the practices of the Muslims came to light in someone, the unbelievers passed a heavy sentence on him, and some of them they burned. That is how I saw it, for more than twenty years, before I left.

Because of that great fear the Andalusians were afraid of one another. They spoke about religion only with someone they trusted. Many of them wanted to learn something of the religion of God, but they found no one to teach them.

And God placed in my heart the longing to leave al-Andalus, emigrating to God and His Messenger, and to go to the land of Islam.

I came to understand later that through the study I had undertaken, to draw nearer to God and to be able to reach the land of the Muslims, through this forbidden knowledge, the doors of princes were opened to me that were closed to most people.

2. Granada

Know, may God have mercy on you, that around the year nine hundred and eighty-six of the Hijra the great priest of the city of Granada ordered an old tower to be pulled down, which stood beside the great mosque, after they had built a new tower close to it that was very high.

When they pulled down the old tower, they found a chest in its wall. When they opened it, they found inside a large parchment, written in Arabic and in the Christian language spoken in that country, and a veil of the holy Mary, the mother of our lord Jesus, peace be upon him, and a bone of someone they held to be a saint.

What was in the Christian language was read. For what was written in Arabic they called the leading Andalusians: [the man] who was an interpreter by licence, and the shaykh El Chapiz, and other old Andalusians who could read Arabic. The priest had each of them translate the parchment separately, and sometimes all of them together. But they did not truly understand it.

[...]

About ten years later some Christians went into a cave, about a mile east of the city, at a place that in Arabic was called the

Ditch of Paradise. They went into the cave to look for treasure, as there are people in every country and in every nation who do. In a corner of the cave they found ashes, and a plate of lead written in the Christian language. On it was written: "In this place the great priest Cecilius was burned."

When they saw this, they went to the great priest, and he rejoiced greatly. [...] When they searched further in the cave, they found stones. They broke them open, and inside each stone was a book with leaves of lead. Each leaf was the size of the palm of a hand, or a little larger, and they were written in Arabic.

One of the priests who were close to the great priest wanted to learn to read Arabic. He often went to the physician Muhammad ibn Abi l-'As, the grandson of the shaykh El Chapiz I mentioned, who translated the books. He read aloud, in the presence of the Christians, from a book called *The Delight of Him Who Longs to Cross the World*.

I was present, but I did not let the Christians see that I could read, because of the sentences they passed on anyone in whom this came to light.

When, reading the book, they got stuck on certain words, I would say to them: "Perhaps it says this or that." And so it turned out to be.

The priest looked at me and said: "You can read Arabic. Do not be afraid. The great priest is looking for someone who can read something of what is written in Arabic."

He took me to his house. He had books in every field and in every language. He brought out the Arabic books, and we read,

and I translated for him a few words he was stuck on.

Then he came to me and said: "The great priest has ordered that you come with me to him."

I said to myself: how do I get out of this? The Christians burn anyone with whom they find an Arabic book, and of whom they know that he reads Arabic.

On the way the priest said to me: "Tell the great lord that the translators understood nothing of it."

I said to myself: I will say exactly the opposite.

When we came in to him, he received us. The priest told him that I could read Arabic well.

He said to me: "Where did you learn it?"

I said: "Know, my lord, that I am an Andalusian from such-and-such a village, where we speak Arabic. Afterwards I learned to read the Christian language. Then I went to Madrid, the city of the king, and there I found an Andalusian physician from Valencia, called so-and-so, and he taught me to read Arabic. It came easily to me, because I am an Arab by origin."

He said to me: "And where is your teacher, that physician?"

I said: "He died, may God have mercy on him, about two or three years ago."

Everything I told him about my learning and about that physician was a lie, and he believed me. I told him the physician came from Valencia because in that land in particular the reading of Arabic was permitted, and in the other lands of al-Andalus it was not.

Al-Ghazali, may God let us benefit from him, writes in his book *The Revival of the Religious Sciences*: if a good man passes you while fleeing, and an oppressor comes after him asking about him in order to harm him, you may say that he went the other way, so that the one pursued escapes his pursuer. Lying in such a case is permitted by the Law.

And I noticed that whoever usually speaks the truth is believed even when he lies where necessity permits it.

Then the great priest had the parchment brought. In the margin was written in Arabic, in letters without dots:

"O seeker of riddles, combine! If you do not combine, you will not grasp the secret."

He asked me what it meant, in the Christian language, and I told him. He said: "Come back tomorrow, God willing."

When I came back, he gave me the parchment and said: "Sit down and write what you read in it."

[...]

We needed a dictionary to understand it. He gave me al-Jawhari, in two volumes, in old Andalusian script.

[...]

Each time I took something from the Christian text, and looked in the Arabic commentary for what belonged to it, so that the words matched and could be understood. That is what is written in the margin: "O seeker of riddles, combine." To combine is to bring two different things together.

Everyone who had translated it before me, and among them

were men more learned than I, had translated only the commentary and had understood no meaning from it. I was told that some had read it as "in the name of the threefold essence", because the letters had no dots.

The great priest rejoiced greatly at what I had translated, and they knew that it was the truth. He gave me three hundred reales, and also a letter granting me licence to be an interpreter, from Arabic into the Christian language and from the Christian language into Arabic.

The news spread among the Christians, until they pointed me out.

End of the sample. For the complete book, contact info@j-evers.com