

Doctoral (PhD) Dissertation

**Intellectual Encounters across the Mediterranean: A Decolonial
Reading of Moroccan Islamicate Ambassadorial Narratives in Early
Modernity**

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2024

I. The antecedents and objectives of the doctoral dissertation, the delimitation of the dissertation topic

This dissertation explores Moroccan ambassadorial narratives during the early modern period (17th-18th centuries) from a decolonial perspective. It does not claim that these texts or their authors were concerned with issues of decoloniality. It rather argues that the way in which these narratives have been interpreted by scholars from the Global North and South needs to be decolonized so as 1) to unravel the intellectual and diplomatic merit of Moroccan diplomatic travelogues; 2) and to deflate the proclivity of rendering religion as a limiting interpretive prism when dealing with the non-Muslim Other. Moroccan ambassadors evoke various concepts and intellectual acuties which were formulated in parallel with Enlightenment modalities of diplomatic conduct, yet by virtue of having been fermented in non-European geographies, they were discounted for having been developed in a space of coloniality, not modernity. As such, I introduce ‘decolonial hermeneutics,’ which is a conceptual and interpretive praxis intended to explore the Self within its own epistemic and intellectual realities before engaging with the Other to establish the comparative framework.

The first chapter contributes to decolonial theory a hermeneutical approach that is epistemically embedded within the intellectual contours of the Self before it opens its horizon to encounter the Other. It brings into conversation various hermeneutical traditions and argues for an interpretive approach, which considers the Self within its intellectual and religious rubric, and in relation to the modern/colonial epistemic hierarchy, to be a necessary initiatory venture before we expand our horizon into cross-intellectual and cross-confessional dialogues with other traditions. I have called this approach decolonial hermeneutics. The following chapters of the dissertation demonstrate the analytical value of decolonial hermeneutics by investigating four Moroccan ambassadorial narratives to Europe: Qasim al-Hajari’s (Kitab) *The Supporter of Religion against the Infidel 1611-1613*, Mohamed ben Abdel Wahab al-Ghassani’s *The Journey of the Minister to Ransom the Captive 1690-1691*, Ahmad Ibn al-Mahdi al-Ghazzal’s *The Fruit of Struggle in Diplomacy and War 1776*, and Ibn Uthman al-Miknasi’s *The Elixir Liberating the Captive 1779-1780* and *The Traveling Full Moon Guiding the Traveler to the Liberation of Captives from the Hands of the Infidel Enemy 1781-1783*.

With a focus on the *rihla* (travelogue) genre, the dissertation establishes a decolonial reading to underscore the intellectual merits of these texts as well as to argue that Islam was not a limiting interpretative prism for early modern Muslim diplomats. Within the theoretical rubric of the New Diplomatic History, this dissertation traces back Moroccan diplomatic thought in the works of these four actors arguing that their intellectual and diplomatic movement across the Mediterranean allowed them to engage with and draw on their local intellectual traditions as well as on European imperial and contemporary history to construct a diplomatic thought and praxis which was endemic to the space of encounter from which they were operating. I analyzed their accounts to shed light on how Moroccan Islamicate diplomatic ethics were forged by evoking conceptual acuties from within the Islamic jurisprudential and legal traditions.

My primary objective has been to showcase how Moroccan ambassadors utilized their awareness of Europe's imperial incursions in the Atlantic as well as its inter-religious Catholic/Protestant rivalries to configure their diplomatic praxis and intellectual engagements within an era characterized by the emergence of Enlightenment-inspired ideals of reason/rationality, and the professionalization of statecraft and diplomacy. Read within a decolonial historical framework, these actors display an astute awareness of European regional and international affairs and exhibit the complex itineraries of imperial histories, repurposing them into means that serve the advancement of different diplomatic ends. As the project has aspired to shed light on Islamicate diplomacy in early modernity, this dissertation has advanced a decolonial reading that aspires to pluralize our understanding of modern diplomatic thought and cross-intellectual exchange, and as such contribute to the integrative approach which the practitioners of the New Diplomatic History have argued for vis-à-vis early modern Mediterranean and Cross-confessional diplomacy.

II. An overview of the methods used

My first historical objective has been the rethinking of the significance of the date 1492, which has been acclaimed by decolonial theorists to be the birth of modernity/coloniality, from the perspective of the Islamic Maghreb. This approach serves to contextualize Moroccan intellectual and diplomatic traditions within the broader modern and colonial world system. By bringing decolonial theory and Moroccan intellectual and ambassadorial thought into conversation, I have endeavored to unravel, from Modernity's exteriority (Mignolo 2011), the hitherto unrecognized

non-Western dimensions of intellectual and diplomatic history, and challenge the prevailing historical bias that construes diplomacy as an inherently European enterprise. In so doing, this dissertation has shed light on the conceptual and ethical formulations that underpinned what we have termed ‘Islamicate Diplomacy’ from a Moroccan perspective.

To achieve this end, this dissertation has fundamentally relied on decolonial studies, New Diplomatic History, and Hermeneutics. I have aspired to bring these theoretical acuties into a dialogue within the rubric of a long durée historical approach which aspired to read Moroccan ambassadorial thought within the larger framework of Modernity/Coloniality. I have invoked Gadamerian philosophical hermeneutics and initiated a theoretical dialogue with decolonial theorists (Mignolo, Dussel, Khatibi, Nishtani) to configure a decolonial hermeneutics through which I aspired to temper the Cartesianism which underpins Subject/Object, Self/Other interpretive relations through constructing an embodied hermeneutic formation able to read Moroccan ambassadors within their own epistemological rubrics before I emphasized the overlapping histories that characterize Mediterranean intellectual encounters and cross-confessional diplomacy. Such a dialogue has yielded what I have called decolonial hermeneutics.

My articulation of decolonial hermeneutics does not propose isolating the Self as an analytical unit unaffected by the influence of the Other. Instead, I argue that when engaging with knowledge as subjects who are dwelling in exteriority, we inherently grapple with knowledge shaped by the coloniality of power. Mapping the pathways of such asymmetric epistemic relations is crucial to understanding the Self’s position within the epistemic hierarchy of the modern/colonial world system and our ability to temper and re-accommodate other knowledge to speak the languages of particular non-universal experiences. Decolonial hermeneutics, thus, originates within the contours of the Self. It does not assert a pure ‘mythical origins’ of selfhood but rather unveils the ‘secular worldly beginning’ (in Saidian terms), illustrating how dominant and subaltern cultures are perpetually intertwined. Claims of mythical purity are inherently undermined by the saturated epistemic hierarchy of the modern/colonial world. Decolonial hermeneutics underscores the creation of interpretive spaces where knowledge transcends a center/periphery axis, existing instead through a multiplicity of interconnected centers. Its emphasis on situatedness does not merely prioritize local spaces over imperial knowledges but seeks to articulate the outcomes of their encounters. However, these interactions are not mystified by positing a symmetric plane of knowledge production. Through a meticulous analysis of

asymmetric power relations, I aspire to disclose how modernity/coloniality persists in our reading practices, regardless of our social location. It is in this sense that my analysis of various scholars from the Global South and North becomes pertinent as it showcases that while aspiring to shed light on the understudied Moroccan ambassadorial thought, many scholars ended up obfuscating their merit by not breaking away from the dichotomy of enchantment/castigation.

Furthermore, to compliment decolonial hermeneutics, I have evoked the theoretical underpinnings of the New Diplomatic History (Dakhliya, Krstic, Van Gelder, Watkins, Alloul and Auwers) to argue against how various scholars from the Global South and North have for a long time approached diplomatic history from a top-down prism focusing on Sultans or Kings and neglecting how various state and non-state actors immensely contributed to the formulation of diplomatic cadres and influenced early modern international affairs and statecraft. To generate an equilibrium between the two, I have read Moroccan ambassadorial accounts as endeavors underpinned by a larger national vision, usually administered by the Sultan, but not completely determined by its bureaucratic ligatures. In other words, the New Diplomatic History approach has allowed the project to underpin the agential praxis of Moroccan diplomats as they traverse foreign geographies and encounter various phenomena that were not already mapped out into a familiar religious, political, or cultural inventory.

III. The new academic results of the dissertation

Firstly, from the perspective of intellectual and diplomatic history, this dissertation has showcased the paradigm of decline which has frequently been imposed on the Islamic world as a narrative depicting Islamic history deterministically descending into decadence and decline is epistemologically biased. It has showcased how the dichotomy of European Modern progress and Islamic decadence has formed a crucial framework for comprehending how Europe has historically framed and perceived the trajectory of Islamic civilization, reflecting the enduring impact of these contrasting narratives on scholarly discourse. Having gained a more nuanced understanding of the linguistic as well as the intellectual undercurrents that underpin Muslim Moroccan ambassadors, now we can speak of Islamicate diplomacy from a Moroccan framework. It is possible to understand the history of Muslim diplomacy in terms of how actors drew on and reformulated their intellectual, legal and jurisprudential traditions to formulate a distinctively and contextually

attuned diplomatic ethics and eventuate an ethical praxis to encounter the Other and to orient the Self.

Secondly, these insights have come to fruition through an interpretive praxis which I have conceptualized as ‘decolonial hermeneutics.’ I have aspired through theorizing such an approach and demonstrating how it ought to sensitize and orient our reading praxis to display how an interpretive venture from within the contours of an embodied, i.e. historically and epistemically embedded Self can yield different and more sophisticated insights into narratives which have thus far been read, consciously or unconsciously, with an epistemological bias, that of rendering the understanding or lack thereof of modernity as the evaluative yardstick of non-Western intellectual and diplomatic ventures. More importantly, I have underscored the point that the way in which Muslims have related to the sacred in their interpretive practices does not hinder but rather facilitates cross-confessional and cross-intellectual engagements across the Mediterranean. It must be accounted for in literary as well as historical compositions which concern themselves with the Muslim world.

Historically, decolonial Hermeneutics has afforded us a fresh perspective, prompting a reconsideration of the pivotal year 1492 through the lens of the Islamic Maghreb. My objective has been to intricately delineate the nuanced narrative surrounding the birth of modernity/coloniality along the Southern Mediterranean shores. By immersing ourselves in the historical events that both preceded and succeeded 1492, I not only unveiled the colonial conditions that underpinned global transformations but also elucidated the Muslim experience, drawing parallels and distinctions from the Native American narrative, especially in the intricate interplay between religion and race within the modern/colonial world system. My exploration spotlighted the shared experiences between these two realms, illustrating the transference of certain imperial and colonial practices across the Muslim world and the Americas. I aimed to reveal how individuals marginalized within the epistemic hierarchy of the modern/colonial world system engaged with the imperial, historical, intellectual, and diplomatic facets of European modernity. This engagement occurred within a dynamic space of encounter, undergirded by local and global intellectual traditions. In tracing this argumentative thread, I hope to have uncovered significant insights, particularly regarding the Islamic world's awareness of European imperial ventures in the Americas—a dimension hitherto either overlooked or dismissed as inconsequential.

Furthermore, I have aspired to showcase the different facets of what I termed Islamicate diplomacy through the experiences of Moroccan ambassadors in the 17th and 18th centuries unraveling the dynamic interplay of religious, intellectual, historical and diplomatic dimensions within the early modern Mediterranean. The Moroccan Andalusian ambassador Qasim Al-Hajari, whose community fled Spanish persecution, unveiled the legal implications of Spanish imperial actions in the Americas. His diplomatic endeavors were not merely geopolitical; they were rather informed by European and Islamic histories and sought to form alliances against Spain through inter-religious diplomacy, strategically emphasizing commonalities between Islam and Protestantism.

Abdel Wahab al-Ghassani and Ahmad Ibn al-Mahdi al-Ghazzal, both navigating the aftermath of Andalusian dispossession, contributed unique perspectives and showcased the paradigmatic shift of their epistemes. Al-Ghassani's Khaldunian analysis of Spain challenged prevailing declinist paradigms, offering a nuanced understanding of the impact of Spanish imperial wealth on societal dynamics. Then, jurisprudentially, he managed to establish the political economy of ransom as an ethical enterprise undergirded by Islamic precepts. Al-Ghazzal, operating in the Enlightenment era, seamlessly integrated diplomatic acumen with Islamic jurisprudence, particularly emphasizing the concept of *al-Manfa'a* (common good) in navigating ethical dilemmas associated with waging Jihad. Last but not least, Al-Miknasi, an advocate for ethical diplomacy, went beyond conventional practices by scrutinizing his own entourage to define the ideal diplomat and establish the ethical conduct that ought to guide Muslim diplomats. His emphasis on truthful testimony, mutual benefit (Maslaha), and cultural awareness underscored the intertwining of ethics, religion, and geopolitics in Islamicate diplomacy.

Moroccan diplomatic practices in the early modern period have often been dismissed as *ad hoc* and unstructured in contrast to the perceived organization of European diplomacy during the Enlightenment. This dissertation challenges such characterizations, offering a comprehensive exploration of the conceptual and ethical discourses embedded in Moroccan diplomatic negotiations. Rather than mere casual expressions, these discourses emerge as profound concepts harmonizing political ambitions with religious convictions. Moroccan ambassadors actively define and incorporate these ideals within a discursive intellectual framework, demonstrating an unwavering commitment to principles of justice, trust, welfare, and integrity. This alignment of

political realities with religious duty reflects the distinctive intellectual and affective dimensions of Islamicate diplomacy, transcending the notion of diplomacy as a premodern endeavor.

Lastly, this dissertation unveils a shared diplomatic nomenclature evident in diverse examples, transcending the treatment of these concepts as mere ad hoc references. It not only clarifies their meanings within the intellectual framework of Moroccan ambassadors but also explores their significance in the context of encounters with European modernity. Historically denied contemporaneity and agency, Moroccan diplomatic actors, on their own terms, actively shaped a distinct early modern model of Islamicate diplomacy in the Mediterranean. This work illustrates the pivotal role played by Moroccan diplomacy within the Islamic Maghreb, challenging the perception of the region as modernity's exteriority. It highlights how Islamicate diplomacy adapted to and engaged with a modernizing world while maintaining a significant position within the confines of the Islamic Maghreb.

PUBLICATIONS

- Idrissi, Achraf. "Itinerant Diplomatic Precedent: A Spanish Colonial Encounter with Native Americans within an Islamic Context, al-Hajari's Kitab 1611–13". *Diplomatica* 6.1 (2024): 11-43.
- Idrissi, Achraf. "Colonial Spanish America through Arab Christian Eyes: Al-Mawsuli's Travels, 1668–83." *Viator* 53.2 (2023): 355-381.
- G. Idrissi, Achraf. "Shifting the Telos of Travel and Intercultural Brokerage through Islamic Diplomacy: Ahmad ben Mohamed al-Kerdoudi's Embassy to Nineteenth-Century Spain." *VTU Review: Studies in the Humanities and Social Sciences* 6.2 (2022): 29-36.
- Idrissi, Achraf. "Pluritopic Hermeneutics, Polycentricity and Islamic Diplomacy – Rethinking the Praxis of Modern Diplomacy In Light Of Al-Ghazzal's Embassy To 18th Century Spain, 1766-1767." *THE NEW POLIS*. <https://thenewpolis.com/2021/02/18/pluritopic-hermeneutics-polycentricity-and-islamic-diplomacy-rethinking-the-praxis-of-modern-diplomacy-otherwise-al-ghazzals-embassy-to-18th-century-spain-1766-1767/>. Accessed 5 Oct. 2023.
- Book Review: Idrissi, Achraf. "Anglo-Saxon and Arab Encounters." *HJEAS: Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies* 27: 1 (2021), pp. 198-202.

Under Review:

- "Ethicizing Diplomacy: al-Miknasi's Islamicate Diplomacy" (*Journal of North African Studies*)
- "Competing Claims of Legitimacy: al-Tamaghrouti in Light of Sultan al-Mansur's Caliphal Vision in the Early Modern Mediterranean" (*International History Review*)

Forthcoming Publications:

- "Decolonial Ventures in Early Modern History: Al-Ghassani's Khaldunian Reading of Spanish Modernity and Islamic Diplomatic Ethics" (Forthcoming: *Medieval Encounters: Brill 2025*)

CONFERENCE PARTICIPATIONS

- **"Beyond Religious Incommensurability: a Morisco's Strife to Align Muslims and Protestants against Catholic Spain's Aggression in the Atlantic and Mediterranean worlds (1611-1613"** at EMoDiR (Early Modern Religious Dissents and Radicalism) Workshop

“Rethinking Religious Otherness: Constructing Genealogy and Memories between Aggression and Resilience in the Early Modern Period” at Goethe Universität, Frankfurt, 30/11- 02/12-2023.

- **“Philosophy in Times of Uncertainty: Lyotard’s *Differend* and the Epistemic Question”** at the International Conference “Perspectives on Philosophy and Philosophical Education,” St. Cyril and St. Methodius University of Veliko Tarnovo, Faculty of Philosophy, Bulgaria, November 16-17 2023.

- **“Al-Ghassani’s Khaldunian Reading of Spanish Modernity and Islamic Diplomatic Ethics”** at the NYU Abu Dhabi, Humanities Research Fellowship Center for the Study of the Arab World, entitled “Thinking in the ‘Multi-verse’: The Many Layers of Islamic Diplomatic History.” NYU Abu Dhabi, October 2-3, 2023.

- **“Mediterranean Entanglements: Islamicate Diplomatic and Intellectual Ventures in Early Modern Europe”** at the 2023 Studia Mediterranea Conference entitled *A Cross- Cultural Mediterranean*, taking place at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Split, Croatia, September 15-16, 2023.

- **“Obfuscated Epistemologies: Moroccan Intellectual Ventures across the Mediterranean and beyond”** at the Käte Hamburger Research Center global dis:connect, LMU, Munich. The Theme of the Summer School **“Sea of absence? Globalization, The Mediterranean and beyond”** – 24–27 July 2023, Munich.

- Summer School: at the Research Training School **“Late Medieval and Early Modern Migration Routes and Identity Spaces in the Mediterranean.”** It was Organized by COST ACTION CA18129 *Islamic Legacy: Narratives East, West, South, North of the Mediterranean (1350-1759)." Tunis June 15th-17th, 2022.

- **“Native Americans through Hanna Al-Mawsuli’s Travels 1668–1683: An Arab Christian in Colonial Spanish America”** at the 11th World Congress of the International American Studies Association University of Silesia in Katowice, Poland 07–10.09.2023, entitled *Journeying (the) Americas: The Paradoxes of Travel (and) Narratives*.

- **“Encountering Modernity in 17th century Spain: A Decolonial Venture of a Muslim Ambassador”** at the Networks Conference on 25th Nov 2022 in Oradea, Romania.

- **“Rethinking Intercultural Mediation through Polemical Encounters: Intrareligious Dialogue and Cultural Brokership in Light of al-Hajari's Kitab 1609-1611”** at the

International and Interdisciplinary Online Conference “Narratives of Intercultural Mediation,” St. Cyril and St. Methodius University of Veliko Tarnovo, Bulgaria (11-12 March 2022)

- **“Pluritopic Hermeneutics and Islamic Diplomacy: Re-thinking the Praxis of Travel and Modern Diplomacy, al-Ghazzal's Embassy to 18th century Spain (1766-1767)”** at the Symposium "Travel in a modernizing world (1700-1840)" University of Manchester
- **“Remembering Across Borders: Decolonial Memory, and Nostalgia in North Africa”** at the Networks Conference 2020 in Oradea, Romania
- **“Colonial Spanish America Through Arab Christian Eyes: Hanna al-Mawsuli's Travels 1668-1683”** at Debrecen Postgraduate Symposium and Workshop in English and American Studies on January 31, 2020, at the University of Debrecen, Hungary.



Registry number: DEENK/207/2024.PL
Subject: PhD Publication List

Candidate: Achraf Idrissi

Doctoral School: Doctoral School of Literary and Cultural Studies

MTMT ID: 10072293

List of publications related to the dissertation

Foreign language scientific articles in international journals (1)

1. **Idrissi, A.:** Itinerant Diplomatic Precedent: A Spanish Colonial Encounter with Native Americans within an Islamic Context, al-Hajari's Kitab 1611-13.
Dipl. 6, 11-43, 2024. ISSN: 2589-1766.
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/25891774-bja10124>
IF: 0.8 (2022)

List of other publications

Foreign language scientific articles in Hungarian journals (1)

2. **Idrissi, A.:** Anglo-Saxon and Arab Encounters.
Hung. j. Eng. Am. stud. 27 (1), 198-202, 2021. ISSN: 1218-7364.
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.30608/HJEAS/2021/27/1/17>

Foreign language scientific articles in international journals (3)

3. **Idrissi, A.:** Decolonial Ventures in Early Modern History: Al-Ghassani's Khaldunian Reading of Spanish Modernity and The Burgeoning of Islamicate Diplomatic Ethics.
Medieval Encounters. accepted for publication (-), 1-40, 2024. ISSN: 1570-0674.
4. **Idrissi, A.:** Colonial Spanish America through Arab Christian Eyes: Al-Mawsuli's Travels 1668-83.
Viator. 53 (2), 355-381, 2022. ISSN: 0083-5897.
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1484/J.VIATOR.5.135772>
IF: 0.1





5. **Idrissi, A.:** Shifting the Telos of Travel and Intercultural Brokerage through Islamic Diplomacy:

Ahmad ben Mohamed al-Kerdoudi's Embassy to Nineteenth-Century Spain.

VTU Review. 6 (2), 31-38, 2022. ISSN: 2603-3070.

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.54664/HMVX5035>

Total IF of journals (all publications): 0,9

Total IF of journals (publications related to the dissertation): 0,8

The Candidate's publication data submitted to the iDEa Tudóstér have been validated by DEENK on the basis of the Journal Citation Report (Impact Factor) database.

02 May, 2024

