Consuelo López-Morillas, professor in the departments of Spanish and Portuguese and Near Eastern Languages and Cultures, IUB, was awarded a Fulbright research grant to Spain. She describes her quest to authenticate a 1606 manuscript of the Koran translated into Spanish.

Manuscript 235 of the Library of Castilla-La Mancha in Toledo, Spain, is an important text for the history of Spanish Islam in its latest, Morisco or Crypto-Muslim, period. It contains a complete translation of the Arabic Qur’an into Spanish, in a copy made by a Morisco between April and July of 1606. It is one of the last extensive manuscripts to be produced by the Moriscos before their expulsion from Spain in 1609. Unlike all other Morisco translations of the Qur’an—all of which are in aljamiado, i.e. Spanish written in the Arabic alphabet—the Toledo text is the only extant version in Latin letters and also the only one that contains the entire Qur’an—all aljamiado versions being abridged versions. Its date also is later than that of any other manuscript. The anonymous scribe of 235 informs us that he copied it from a borrowed Qur’an that was in aljamiado; he notes the date of his copy, but nothing else was known about the history of this translation.

In 1994, a Dutch scholar, Gerard Wiegers, proposed an origin for Manuscript 235, suggesting that it could be a late copy of a work that had always been considered lost: the first translation ever made of the Qur’an into Spanish by the leader of the Mudejar community of Segovia, Yṣa ibn Jabir, in 1456. We know that this translation existed, but no trace of it had been found until Wiegers believed he could identify it with the Toledo manuscript. This suggestion intrigued me enough that I decided to edit the manuscript in full and study it in depth. If Wiegers’s conjecture were correct, we would have recovered one of the fundamental texts of Spanish Islam: the Mudejar Qur’an.

On earlier trips to Toledo, I had already worked on 235 and completed most of the transcription of the almost 700-page text, using a photocopy verified against the original. I had even proposed a name and place for the anonymous scribe. During my Fulbright stay from September 1998 through May 1999, I completed the transcription and established the criteria for...
What about your living arrangements and getting around?
Initially I had a flat located about 30 minutes from campus by trolleybus. These were always so crowded that I often missed my stop simply because I could not get through to the exit! So I finally moved to within walking distance of campus. The accommodations reminded me of Aunt Marge’s apartment in the inner city on the west side of Chicago! Everything is old, in need of repair, and I truly believe someone could make a fortune if they introduced nonstick pans to the Russians. But the food is much more healthful than in the United States; they do not use preservatives, bread is baked fresh daily, and most of the fruits and vegetables are grown without artificial pesticides. As for clothing, the Russian winter coat, fur hat, and mittens that I bought in the bazaars were the best purchases I ever made.

What are the library and other resources like at the university?
Kazan State is a small university, with about 3,000 students. The libraries, both on and off campus, are woefully inadequate for proper teaching and research—but great places to read and write. But if you ship your own teaching materials, it will take months to arrive. In St. Petersburg, where I guest lectured, I stumbled onto a British bookstore where the manager said she could order U.S. books for me, but she, too, warned of delays. As for other resources, Kazan State has a VCR player and monitor, but it is located in the main office. Everyone must preview tapes there and that can get difficult if the room is scheduled for other things. My best advice is simply not to expect using teaching aids such as audiovisuals, computers, and overhead projectors.

Which courses did you teach and how would you compare the classroom experience to that at home?
Upon my arrival, no one seemed to know what I was going to teach although I had earlier proposed several courses. But you shouldn’t be alarmed by this—this is pretty much “the Russian way!” So after meeting with the heads of the departments of International Relations and of International Law where I was assigned, we decided that I would teach one course on race and ethnic relations and another course on basic human rights. That is similar to what I teach here at IUB, except that they are year-long courses there. However, Kazan students signing up for courses offered by Fulbright grantees do not receive credit for these courses. Such courses are not listed as credit-bearing. Students take them because they are either intrigued enough to take a class taught by an American, or they are genuinely interested in the subject matter.

Attendance in my Race and Ethnic Relations class was very good, though small in terms of number of students. I tried to engage them in discussions and debates, which is very unusual for most of them because they are used to the very traditional lecturing format. But they eventually warmed up to the method and our classes often went past their regularly scheduled times. Students gave both oral and written reports, and overall they were great. And their English was up to the task.
the edition. But I devoted most of my time to identifying and examining all extant manuscripts in Europe, written in Latin letters or in aljamiado, that could bear some relation to 235, about 30 in all, found in three Madrid libraries, as well as the university libraries of Bologna, Italy, and Uppsala, Sweden.

The object of this research was to try to find the missing link that could demonstrate that Manuscript 235 does, in fact, descend from the 1456 translation of Yc;a of Segovia, made and then lost, but of whose contents we have some knowledge through other sources. Since the copyist of 235 asserted that his original was in aljamiado—whereas Yc;a’s translation would have been in Latin letters—one must assume the existence of at least one aljamiado version of Yc;a’s work if the latter were to be the ancestor of the 1606 manuscript. I have tried to identify, among all the extant aljamiado Qur’ans, this presumptive intermediate version. So far I have not found it. No aljamiado translation of the Qur’an is complete like Yc;a’s; none corresponds to 235 in language; none incorporates the same passages from Arab commentators. There are three or four aljamiado manuscripts I have yet to examine, located in the National Library in Paris.

Even if I cannot establish whether or not Manuscript 235 is a copy of Yc;a’s translation, this does not mean that the text lacks significance. On its own, it is a very extensive sample of Spanish prose, contemporary with the first part of Cervantes’s Don Quijote but coming, as it were, from another world: Islamic, as opposed to Christian Spain. As such it is one of the most significant products of what has sometimes been called the “underground” literature of the Moriscos.

In the meantime, I am working on the next stage of the project, writing the introductory study for the edition, which will include the history of this particular manuscript and its scribe; the nature of the translation itself—how the Spanish author rendered the Arabic of the Qur’an; the Qur’anic commentaries in Arabic on which the author would have relied; and the language of the text, which is clearly more archaic than the date, 1606, would suggest. I expect to complete a draft of the whole book by the end of summer 2000.

The only problem was locating adequate resources for much of their work. Attendance in my Basic Human Rights course, in the International Law department, was not as good, I think, because they had so much other work to do. Overall, I established very good rapport with my students and both classes were a success.

As for the students themselves, it was sometimes difficult to stay on track because they just wanted to hear more about American culture in general. Of course, I was the first African American they had ever met. They had their own stereotyped notions, based on old TV reruns of the “A-Team” and what they saw and heard about U.S. sports figures. In Kazan, they are at least two decades behind the times in what they know about America culturally. But the students were very receptive and enthusiastic to learn something new. As for me, being probably the first African American most people in Kazan had ever seen, I learned not be put off by the staring I first got. I had a wonderful experience and learned so much.

Will you continue your interest in Russia?
I definitely plan to go back to Russia to continue some of questions about ethnic relations there that I had begun to develop during the year. The situation is very interesting because among the Russians and the Tatars there are many subgroups based on factors such as religion, history, cultural traditions, language, etc., that influence their relations with each other. I feel I have opened a new door to this subject for myself and hopefully for others as well. In the meantime, I continue my general interest in Russia by attending some of the REEl seminars and keeping up my contacts.