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Translation as a Dialogue between Cultures: Interrogating Arabimalayalam and Literary Networks in Kerala

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Abstract

There are different types of networks which are often interlaced and traverse the Malabar regions and Arab regions forming bonds among individuals and communities. The networks of travel, Sufi brother-hoods and trade are normally understood as the paths through which Islam got spread and prospered. Along with these, here in this paper, my attempt is to propose the literary networks that made Muslims across space and boundaries of Malabar and Arabian continent to be mutually associated in a way that resulted in emergence of Arabimalayalam, which is a unique dialect written in the Arabic script, with Malayalam grammar and vocabulary drawn from Malayalam and Arabic mainly, and Tamil, Persian, Urdu and Sanskrit occasionally. Literary networks comprised of shared texts, including stories, poems genealogies, histories, and treatises on a broad range of topics, as well

as the readers, listeners, authors, patrons, translators, and scribes who created, translated, supported, and transmitted them.

Keywords

Arabimalayalam; Literature; Translation.

The concept of translation in the case of Mappila Muslims in Kerala can be seen as cultural representation or negotiation. The concepts about practices of rewriting and endeavors of reproducing texts have fluctuated in Arabimalayalam to a great extent in time and space. The translation activities of Malabar Muslims and the texts produced show how translation was the overarching figure standing for the spectrum of cultural mediation among the Arabs and the natives.

Arabimalayalam was one of the everlasting legacies of the cultural synthesis between the Arab traders and the indigenous converts of Kerala that was prevalent till the first half of the 20th century and feebly till now in the primary religious schools. Though the beginning of Arabimalayalam is not marked, the first text that has been found is *Muhyadheen Mala* (1607) by Qadi Muhammad. When two communities were connected by a common religion i.e. Islam they must have felt alienated by two different languages and that resulted in the emergence of a link language which was later called Arabimalayalam. Even without taking a position in the ongoing debate on whether Arabimalayalam is a separate language or not, one can declare that the script used by Muslims was separate and it existed for centuries from a time when Arabs landed in Kerala.

Beyond attention to particular texts and individuals, thinking about literary networks also requires one's exploration into the multilayered histories of contacts, selection, interpretation and serendipity that shaped the networks in particular ways. Across Malabar, orally transmitted materials as well as

performative traditions complemented and enriched written literatures through a complex matrix of interaction and exchange. Large numbers of people could be considered as highly literate in their tradition of Arabimalayalam, despite being illiterate by modern day standards, since they lived in environments where texts were recited out loud for various occasions and familiar stories were performed through different types of performances. Such overlap and interaction between written and oral forms of production means that any discussion of cultural or religious transmission in Malabar must remain keenly aware of its non-inscribed aspects as well.

Since Malayalam as a language did not have a sophisticated script for writing, it was necessary on the part of Muslim settlers to invent a new method in order to facilitate their economic activities such as recording transactions, names of commercial goods, locations, names of dealers, articles of food, clothing and so on. On the other hand, as the age reflects, Arab merchants who were staunch supporters of Islamic faith, seemingly thought that the vernacular language was not able to carry certain elements of belief systems and practices accurately. In order to overcome this problem they adopted a new script which fits into the local language form. This facilitated the birth of Arabimalayalam script using Arabic alphabetical orders with its own Malayalam sounds. But it should be noted that Arabimalayalam retained almost the basic and essential aspects of the then existing Malayalam and put on the beautiful garb of the Arabic script. At first, each individual Arabic speaker would do the transliteration on his own. But later, this coding of Malayalam words in Arabic became standardized with the contribution of scholars like Vakkam Abdul Qadir (d.1932), Makthi Thangal (d. 1912) and Chalilakath Kunjahammad Haji (d.1919). (Koya 1983; Kareem 1983; Kunju 1989).

Despite the fact that Arabs carried their language along with them as they spread from one country to another for different purposes whether for

religious propagation or trade, it was only with the help of natives that they could extend these processes encompassing formation of new script, elementary teachings and all other social transactions. Arabic, having possessed an incomparable prominence among Muslims that goes beyond just being another form of human speech, made these endeavors much easier. For them Arabic was the means of expression through which God had chosen to deliver his final revelation to mankind.

Any attempt to identify this process of transliteration among Muslims in Malabar shouldn't fail to realize their socio-cultural and sociopolitical dilemma. Keeping a distinguished identity in terms of script as they had already a separate dress code, style and worship etc., the ethnic particularism of Muslims didn't pose any menace to the smooth endeavor of state/nation for a united script that pervaded Kerala entirely. Consequently many religious terms and phrases were borrowed from Arabic and freely used in their missionary activities and many works were produced in abundance over centuries. This literature, despite being out of mainstream attention after dominance of Malayalam and Malayalam script which was endorsed by print modernity, still posits great historical and religious value for the community.

In a similar way, if we look into the history of Islam in South India, we can see a greater cultural shift. Islam addressed cultures utterly distant and diverse from those of the Middle East when it got expanded into these parts and integrated them into a pre-modern globalized community of great linguistic, geographical, and social diversity. Written texts had a vibrant role in spreading ideas and beliefs within Islamic world long before print and mass communication became so popular and prevalent. It was mainly the translated works that played major rule in the initial stage of this process of spreading ideas as it was these kinds of texts that they used to propagate their religion and disseminate their ideas. The survey of literary inter-connections of

Arabimalayalm is possible only by a thorough investigation of its multiple genres of literature and translations.

The history of translation into and from Arabimalayalam is long and complex. Addressing even some of their elements—ideas about translation and practices followed—offers a better understanding of the translation movements that have had profound effects on the societies concerned and allows a more nuanced theorizing of translation as a culturally specific practice. In addition, studying the multiple meanings of translation points us to the similarities and continuities between the Sanskrit cosmopolis and the Arabic one and between the ways these two cosmopolitan languages were combined with local languages through a kind of assimilation of meaning and sound (Ricci 260).

Different kinds of texts such as Quran, hagiography, poetry, jurisprudence, and scientific writing were there to bear the new religion and way of life both in Arabic and Arabimalayalam. When stories and ideas are translated, a familiar language—including its vocabulary, idioms, syntax—is converted in the process into something that is somewhat foreign. A certain balance arises between what is translated and what remains untranslatable. It is instructive to consider not only the ways that texts were translated but also the ways those texts evolve. This process must be understood within a context in which the spread of Islam in Malabar however distant from the Middle East culturally and geographically, cannot be fully understood without seriously considering the role of Arabic, including ideas about its sanctity, its resulting untranslatability, and the range of ideas and stories it carried along as its legacy. Still, Arabic's incorporation—at many levels—into local vernaculars has brought about profound and long-lasting transformations. *Muhyadheen Mala* (1607), by Qazi Muhammad, the first text found in the genre of *Malappattu* is the first example in this genre. The theme of the text was borrowed from the pan Islamic history, the hagiography of Sufi Saint Shaikh Muiyadheen of

Bagdad, Iraq. Interestingly, Qazi Muhammad has also written many works in Arabic such as *Fathul Mubeen* (1579)¹.

As I mentioned, all of the texts that were written in Arabimalayalam were profoundly influenced and shaped by the influx of Arabic. Arabic throughout this study possesses an expanded definition and is understood as the bearer of new stories, ideas, beliefs, scripts, and linguistic and literary forms. Muslims from across linguistically and culturally diverse regions shared inscribed texts as well as oral sources, poetics, and genres derived from or inspired by Arabic models. These shared texts formed a common repository of images, memories, and meanings that in turn fostered a consciousness of belonging to a trans-local community. The two-way connections many literary works had—both to a larger Islamic world and to the very local communities—made them dynamic sites of interaction, contestation and the negation of boundaries. Some of the authors as well as translators seem to be well versed in Arabic and most of them have written many books in Arabic too.

In fact, translation is in nature a cross-cultural communication rather than a mere handling of languages. As is known to all, language, as a cultural phenomenon and a major carrier of culture, can't survive once separated from the cultural background in which it is deeply rooted. So, translating itself is a process in which cultural intercourse is conducted through the very cultural carrier of language. Every language was born of culture and draws nutrition from it. Therefore, translators should not just concentrate on how to convey the message in one language by the means of another language but should endeavour to display the differences of the two cultures' modes of thinking and the habits of expressing feelings. (Bassnett 1980; Niranjana 1992; Snel-Hornby 2006 and Venuti 1998) Thus, in a paradigmatic departure, the translation of a literary text became a transaction not between two languages, but rather a

¹ Abdul Qadar Fal fari was the first to publish the primary text of Fath ul Mubeen in his Anthology of Poems named as Jawahir ul Ash`ar. The hand written copy of *Al fath ul Mubeen* is kept in Indian office library which is situated in London. The poem deals with the historical war of Chaliyam between Portuguese and the king Zamorine which occurred in 1570.

more complex negotiation between two cultures as they are culture of Arabian Muslims and that of Kerala in this context.

Literary texts of various kinds played an important role in enhancing and shaping the process of “Islamization”² by introducing those who converted to Islam to their newly acquired faith, history, practices, and genealogies, as well as by reaffirming the truths of Islam for those who were already members of Islam. As Muslim societies expanded, additional texts were translated and composed, further enhancing Islamization. Literature produced within local Muslim communities, and the literary networks that extended across and beyond the local— especially when studied comparatively—provide new insights into the history of Islam in these regions, the fluctuating balance between local and global elements privileged by particular Muslim authors and societies, and the roles played by literary transmission and translation in their histories.

The translation of many texts in Kerala has been caused by the religion. The universal character of many religions especially Islam in the context of Malabar made texts an impetus and a big vehicle for disseminating knowledge and at times brought about a curiosity in texts that were written in various languages and places. This process of translation of different Islamic texts into multiple vernacular languages can be seen wherever Muslims continued living. “Given the importance that translation had for making ideas, notions and precepts available to diverse populations , an understanding of the processes involved in translating texts in Muslim cultures has significant implications for our understanding of historical , religious , and literary developments in these cultures”(Tschacher 27).

Apart from the treatises on diverse subjects we can see examples of translations of verses of the Quran, prophet’s sayings etc in a way confirming

² Quoted in Ricci 2011, 245-46. Ricci 2011 draws heavily on Becker’s notion of “prior text” as she explores the process of Islamization in what she calls the “Arabic cosmopolis” of South and Southeast Asia.

to a customary way of commenting Arabic texts in Arabimalayalam. The fabulous oeuvre of Arabi Malayalam writing that caught our attention since the beginning of the seventeenth century onwards evidently illustrates that Arabimalayalam entails relevance as the literary language used by Mappila Muslims of Kerala from early modern period up to the first half of the twentieth century (Ferguson 1982).

The stiff of prose writing in Arabi Malayalam prose largely consists of translations and commentaries on the Quran and Hadith, accounts of Islamic history, biographical explanations of the prophets of Islam, treatises on Jurisprudence, instruction manuals on medicines, Sufi literature, fictional narratives, magazines and newspapers, works on grammar and lexicons. To a large extent the writing in Arabimalayalam is caused by translations—mainly, even if not completely—from Arabic and from Persian, Sanskrit, Tamil and Urdu occasionally. The total body of the prose collection in Arabimalayalam also is known as *tarjamakal*, translations (Moulavi and Kareem 1978; Kunhi 1982). The works in Arabimalayalam began to be written and flown on a comparatively enormous scale with great enhancement in the number of Mappila printing presses subsequent to the establishment of the foremost “Muslim” printing press which was started by one Theeppoothil Kunhammad in 1868 at Thalasseri, one of the commercial settlement in Kannur district of Northern parts of Kerala, (Abu 1970; Moulavi and Kareem 1978).

To our notice, most of these printed Arabimalayalam works hardly show the name of author and date of composition even though we can see the complete details of printing such as the name of the press and the name of its owners and place and date of printing. Notwithstanding the deficiency of details, the meanings of translation in Arabimalayalm can be reconstructed through a close reading of the term *tarjama*, the local translation terminology. Before printing, there existed a number of professional copyists or scribes who would copy, reproduce and circulate Arabic and Arabi Malayalam manuscripts

in large numbers, and this professional group remained active even after the spread of printing in Mappila heartlands in Malabar (Moulavi and Kareem 1978).

Even though the word “translation” is often heedlessly employed in intellectual discussions to take account of theories and practices that are not condensable to homogeneous implications, a lot of translation traditions of the world particularly those that are prevalent in the non west world need to be acutely analyzed and interpreted. These traditions seem to be not conventional with the prospects of contemporary, erudite, European experts have imagined as the central aspect of translation. Enforcing ordinary explanations of translation on texts in miscellaneous literary cultures seems to be showing that these kinds of shades of practice stay behind unnoticed, with meticulous cultures presumed to have accomplished little or no translation.

Tarjama in Arabimalayalam is one of these kinds and the introduction of which is one of the prime aim of this presentation. There were numerous people who were professionally scribes or copyists and who were able to copy, replicate and circulate manuscripts in Arabic and Arabimalayalam in big numbers before the implementation of printing. The vibrant tradition of producing books together with the multifarious activities of “writing, reciting, reading, copying, printing, and circulating texts” (Pollock 593), and much later, printing Islamic religious books in Kerala among Muslims is indeed a prolific field of investigation that hardly researchers have come across. In this circumstance, it owes to be highlighted that the vigor and vitality that Arabimalayalam got in Kerala was due to the performative aspects of various literary forms such as *moulid*, *mala*, and *pattu*, *dafmuttu*, *Kolkkali*, *Oppana* etc. The practices of composing, circulating, and singing and reciting of the various *malas* by Mappilas at the heart of which lies Islamic devotional piety helped fashion a Mappila literary formation.

Beyond its apparent meaning and even its authorial inventions, every literary text holds multiple dynamic significations within its deep linguistic and compositional structures. On close reading, one might find a literary text enlightening one further than its stated purpose, unleashing “warring forces of significations”, or revealing hidden contexts (Johnson: 05). Only by tracing importance of translated works in Arabimalayalam and by placing them in the historical contexts of the Mappila Muslims of Malabar, a researcher can explore the aesthetic aspects, the sociopolitical undercurrents, and the religious, spiritual and philosophical significance of these texts.

Terminologies of translation—whether a text has been considered a translation or adaptation for example—play a role in defining, categorizing, and assessing phenomena and have consequences for the way texts are studied, described, presented, and judged. As several scholars have noted, translation is not a universal concept but is historically and culturally determined. Many academics have emphasized on the culturally definite terminology of translation. Quating Pistor-Hatam (1996), in his analysis of translations from Persian to Ottoman Turkish from the fourteenth century onwards, Ricci says that he opines that Arabic *tarjama* meant to interpret, to treat by way of explanation, rather than to translate from one language to another as it does in its modern usage. Hagen (2003), writing of a similar period and place- Persian-Ottoman translations in the fifteenth to seventeenth centuries - states that “the problem of translation into Anatolian Turkish starts with terminology, since translating the ArabicTurkish term *tercume* as ‘translation’ does not fully render the concept”. In local usage *tercume* covered a much wider scope, of transferring a text or parts of it into another language. Some works were translations combined with commentaries on a scholarly text; others integrated translations of several distinct works and, by today’s standard, might be considered independent works inspired by their prior sources (ibid. 99). Jedamski (2014) lists a range of terms that seem to have been used almost

synonymously for translation in Malay, including *terkarang* [written, composed], *terkutip* [quoted, copied] and *dituturkan* [arranged], indicating that no single term was sufficient to depict the multiple and creative activities of telling a story anew. In similar way *tarjama* in Arabimalayalam also raises similar issues of the inappropriateness in contrast to of the modern Anglophone use of “translation”.

Another important fact that we can see in the characteristics of the translated works in Arabimalayalam is that the translators hardly mention about the personal achievement in the texts. Many works don't even show the names of the author. This may be because of their piety and thrust to remain unknown. A persistent cultural code, prescribed humility and selfdisapproval can be seen to pervade among the authors. Some of the authors including translators, time and again sought apology for their deficiency of style, lack of knowledge of the languages both the source and the target in some cases. It is very difficult to find a text without seeking apology for the presumed inaccuracies in the texts. Some of the texts hardly mention the reason of translating them into Arabimalayalam. In some instances a motivation is mentioned. In a general way, the translation of a text is believed to impart blessings, fortunes and good rewards on the people accomplishing the task as well as those who make use of it by reading and listening or recitation. The real challenge for the researcher here is to clearly differentiate between the motivations for translation and those for copying or composing an existing text, as they are often the same, pointing into the possibility that *tarjama* was not seen as a separate literary endeavor that owes to be mentioned as distinct from other writing practices.

Most of the translated texts whether related to theology, hagiography or rituals have some didactic goals and such texts include fables about the lives of the prophets, *sahaba*, and saints; installments from the biography of prophet Muhammed and guidance for leading an straightforward life, being a good

Muslim wife, following the path of prophet Muhammad and performing the five times of prayers. An analysis of the books that mention the languages from which they have been translated helps us in mapping the cultural bonds taking place at particular periods between Malabar and foreigners, relations that led to associations with new ideas, concepts and other literary engagements.

Another feature that we can see in Arabimalayalam is that some of the texts show the source texts also in the interlinear translated texts. There are instances of texts written in Arabic but replete with translations, explanations and notes when the teacher takes classes. A small collection of such manuscripts were seen in the library of C.H chair at the University of Calicut. These kinds of manuscripts are mainly related to Hadeeth and Jurisprudence in which the Arabimalayalm notes appear beneath the Arabic lines intentionally written with big margins and spacing. This kind of texts also exemplifies the tradition of *dars* system, local tradition of teaching Islamic lessons in masjid. The copy of *Fathhul Mueen*³ by Zainudheen Makhdoom Alswageer (d.1583) by Karingappara Muhammada Musliyaar is a very good example for this.

Apart from written exegesis and translation of Quran that started with Mayin Kutti Elaya⁴ in 1855 it would be of more interest to look into the nuances of effects that entailed in the social and cultural life of Muslims in Kerala. *Yusuf Nabiye Kothicha Sulaikha ie Yusuf Kissa* by C.H Muhammad Thirurangadi is a text that presents the story of prophet Yusuf in the lights of Quran. The popularity of this books and later versions of this story have

³ Fathul Mueen is a revised version of his early work named Qurratul Ain. Published in different parts of the Islamic world with many editions, Fathul Mueen has been translated into many languages. It is a standard textbook of Fiqh in Sri Lanka, Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, Egypt and other countries.

⁴ The first translation of holy Quran in Malayalam was published in the last decade of 19th century. A scholar named Muhiyudheen-ibnu Abdul Khader (Mayin Kutty Elaya) of the Arakkal Palace, Kannur began the works of a Malayalam translation of Quran in 1855 (Hijara 1272) which was named '*Tharjamathu-thafseeril Quran*'. It took 15 years for him to complete the work and it was published in hijara 1294. It was in Arabi- Malayalam script and had 6 volumes and was based on *Thafseer Jalalaini*.

influenced the Muslims in Malabar to the extent that the name Sulaikha was one of the leading names to name for the new born babies among Mappila community. The tradition of reciting Quran written in Arabic language didn't contribute much in extracting the meanings of such stories. But these types *tarjamas* facilitated in helping people in this regard that ended in the shaping of a new genre of *katha-prasangam* (Sing and speak) on the stories of Quran. This became a part of the tradition of Muslims in Kerala and they enlivened the nights by enjoying sing and speak programmes on multiple topics such as *Yusuf nabi and sahodarangalum* (Prophet Joseph and his brothers), *Sulaiman nabiyyum jinnukalum* (Prophet Solaman and jinnu), *Moosa nabiyyum Ferovayum* (Mosa and Pharaoh) etc.

When we study commentaries and translation of Islamic texts, very few people focus on the users of these texts and specifics of them because of the engagements with these texts. Since this presentation is not exclusively for that, I prefer not to delineate more on that. But, when we analyze this process we can raise certain questions which are still unanswered: How are Quran's ideas explained to adherents on the ground? What styles of discourse are employed in these Quran classes? Which ideas are emphasized and which are marginalized, and what kinds of techniques are used to do so? Do lesson circles actually shape how individual members feel, think, express themselves, and act? If so, how, and to what extent? Which groups are reading which texts or selections from texts? In this way Islamist lesson circles can be a key site for the production of a particular form of Islamic subjectivity. In fact, I will argue that lesson circles play a central role in the sustenance and expansion of Islamic movements in Malabar. They do so by helping reshape activists' conceptions of self, religious duty and others through a rhetoric that deploys specific notions of religiosity and religious identity, culture, state, the global Muslim community or *ummah* .

A careful observer of the history of Malayalam literature may note that how the generic form of social Arabimalayalam developed through a process of cultural deliberation, and had been gradually taken over by the mainstream Malayalam language. A whole set of works both the original and translated, and both the secular and the religious can be seen in this regard. If we consider Arabimalayalam phenomenon just as a script that helped in building up of the religious consciousness of Mappila Muslim it does a reductionist kind of understand that is resulted out of the mainstream history built upon the omissions/ exclusions/ silences that happened in the past. Needless to say, today, this area of study has evoked considerable interest among linguists and experts on culture to the extent that some of the new researchers especially from this region of Malabar have started to embark on working on the issues related to culture and language in different ways. The questions of identity, religion, culture and language that are abounding in the contemporary literary field have been creeping to the hearts of the newly emerging scholars. I hope this paper will be a torch light in the long process of taking Malabar and the Script of Arabimalayalm and discourse around them to the forefront of academic domain. This Paper doesn't aim at bringing the entire edifice of Arabimalayalm, instead some of the nuances that interface between the language, culture, script and translations especially between Arabia and Kerala.

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