

TRANSLATABILITY OF THE QUR'AN IN REGIONAL
VERNACULAR: DISCOURSES AND DIVERSITIES
WITHIN THE MAPPILA MUSLIMS OF KERALA, INDIA

BY

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ABSTRACT

Engagements of non-Arab Muslim communities with the Qur'an, the Arabic-specific scripture of Islam, are always in a form of improvement. Although a number of theological and linguistic aspects complicate the issue of translatability of the Qur'an, several communities have gradually embraced the practice of translating it. The case of Mappila Muslims of Kerala, India, the earliest individual Muslim community of south Asia, is not different. There is a void of adequate academic attention on translations of the Qur'an into regional vernaculars along with their respective communities in general, and Malayalam and the rich Mappila context, in particular. Thus, this research attempts to critically appraise the Mappila engagements with the Qur'an focusing on its translatability-discourses and methodological diversities. In order to achieve this, the procedure employed is a combination of different research methods, namely, inductive, analytical, historical and critical. The study suggests that, even in its pre-translation era, the Mappilas have uninterruptedly exercised different forms of oral translation in an attempt to comprehend the meaning of the Qur'an both at the micro and macro levels. The translation era, which commences from the late 18th century, witnessed the emergence of huge number of Qur'an translations intertwined with intense debates on its translatability. The Mappila version of translatability-discourses is particularly remarkable for its outstanding intensity and peculiar detachment from the discourses of global Muslim scholarship. After examining the standpoint of major Islamic factions within the Mappila community, the researcher categorizes them into four camps: pro-translation, inclination towards pro-translation, anti-translation, and inclination towards anti-translation. It has been also identified that Malayalam, the official language of Kerala, possesses 40 translations of the Qur'an, an astoundingly high proportion for such a Muslim-minority regional vernacular. Furthermore, almost all these works are highly influenced by certain ideological premises including the traditional, modernist, Salafi and Ahmadi orientations. An assessment of such translation works puts forth that, rather than conveying the true message of the Qur'an, the endorsement of specific ideological interests comes among the priority of many translations, which in effect leads to distorting the message in target language. Accordingly, the study proposes a framework for systematically translating the Qur'an into Malayalam. In examining a largely unexplored area of the Mappila Muslims, the study has given insights into the development and diversity of translations of the Qur'an in a regional vernacular, as well as its remarkable contribution to the burgeoning Mappila Studies.

مُلخَصُ البَحْثِ

لارتباط المجتمعات الإسلامية العجمية بالقرآن الكريم شكل من أشكال التطور. فعلى الرغم من أن عددًا من الجوانب الدينية واللغوية يُعقّد قابلية القرآن الكريم للترجمة؛ اعتنقها تدريجيًا عدد من المجتمعات الإسلامية كل على حدة. ومنها مسلمو مايبلا في ولاية كيرالا في الهند. فهي أول مجتمع مسلم في جنوب آسيا. ولا اهتمام أكاديميًا كافيًا بترجمة القرآن الكريم إلى اللغات المحلية وجوانبها الاجتماعية بعامه، ولا سيما اللغة المليالمية وسياق مايبلا الغني. لذا؛ يسعى البحث إلى تقييم نقدي لالتزامات مايبلا بالقرآن الكريم، مع التركيز على خطاباتها في قابلية الترجمة والتنوعات المنهجية. ولتحقق هذا؛ توسّل الباحث جمعًا من أساليب البحث العلمي المختلفة؛ هي المناهج الاستقرائي والتحليلي والتاريخي والنقدي. مقترحًا أنه في عصر ما قبل الترجمة؛ مارس مجتمع مايبلا أشكالًا مختلفة للترجمة الشفوية التواصلية في محاولتهم فهم معاني القرآن الكريم جزئيًا وكليًا. وقد شهدت حقبة الترجمة التي بدأت أواخر القرن الثامن عشر الميلادي؛ ظهور عدد هائل من الترجمات القرآنية المتداخلة مع نقاشات حادة حول قابليته للترجمة. وتُعدّ هذه النقاشات رائعة لتمييزها وانفصالها الغريب عن خطابات علماء الإسلام العالمية. وهكذا؛ فحص الباحث وجهات نظر المنظمات الإسلامية الرئيسة في مجتمع مايبلا، وصنفها في أربع هي: تأييد الترجمة، والميل نحو تأييد الترجمة، ومكافحة الترجمة، والميل نحو مكافحة الترجمة. وتبيّن أن المليالمية؛ اللغة الرسمية في كيرالا؛ تمتلك ٤٠ ترجمة للقرآن الكريم. وهي نسبة عالية جدًا لمثل هذه اللغة المحلية التي ناطقوها معظمهم من غير المسلمين، فضلاً عن أن هذه الترجمات تتأثر بمقدمات أيديولوجية معينة أبرزها التوجهات التقليدية والحداثيّة والسلفية والأحمدية القاديانية. وأن تقييم هذه الترجمات يشير إلى أنه بدلاً من نقل الرسالة الصحيحة للقرآن الكريم؛ يأتي تأييد المصالح الأيديولوجية المحددة ضمن أولويات عدد من الترجمات، مما يؤدي في الواقع إلى تشويه الرسالة القرآنية في اللغة الهدف. وعليه؛ يقترح الباحث إستراتيجية جماعية لترجمة القرآن الكريم إلى اللغة المليالمية. ولأنه يتناول منطقة غير مستكشفة إلى حدٍّ ما؛ قدّم البحث إضافات قيّمة إلى تطور ترجمات القرآن الكريم وتنوعها في لغة محلية، فضلاً عن إسهامه الملحوظ في الدراسات المليلمية الناشئة.

APPROVAL PAGE

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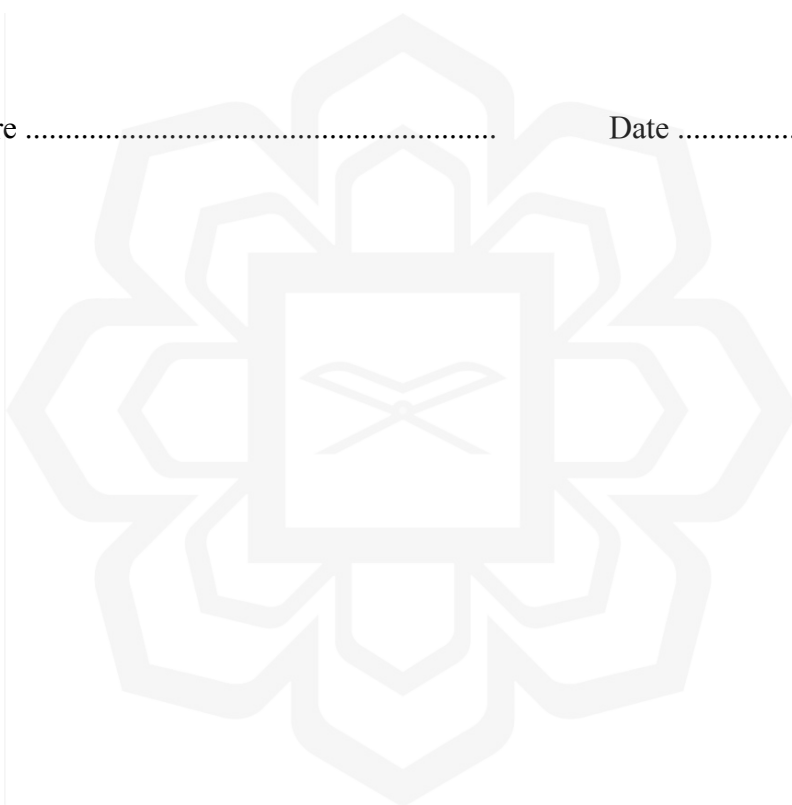
DECLARATION

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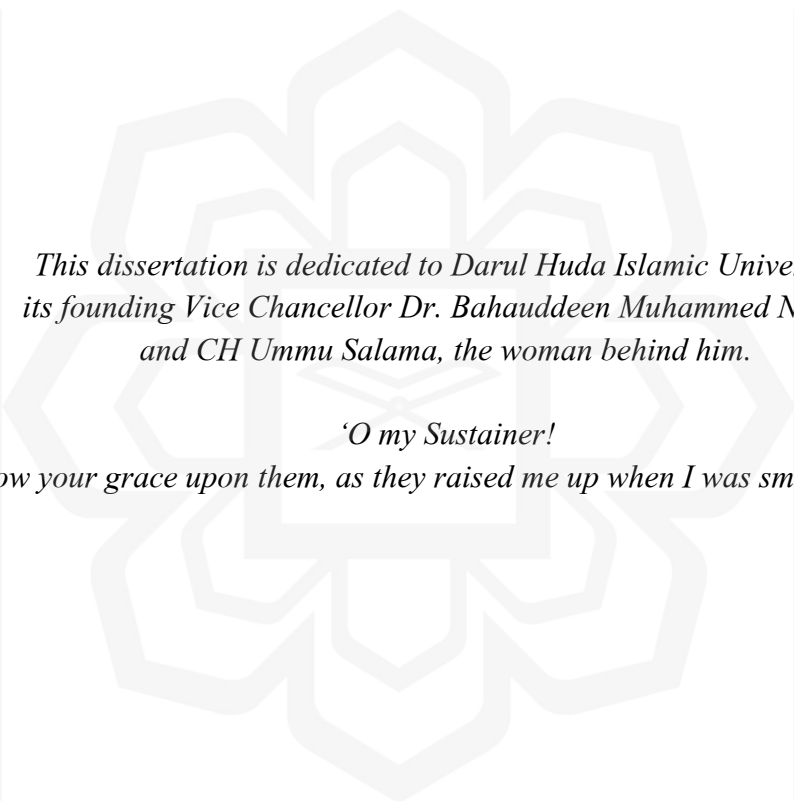
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*This dissertation is dedicated to Darul Huda Islamic University,
its founding Vice Chancellor Dr. Bahauddeen Muhammed Nadwi,
and CH Ummu Salama, the woman behind him.*

‘O my Sustainer!

Bestow your grace upon them, as they raised me up when I was small!’ (17:24)

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TRANSLITERATION TABLE

ء	'	خ	kh	ش	Sh	غ	Gh	ن	N
ب	B	د	D	ص	ṣ	ف	F	هـ	H
ت	T	ذ	dh	ض	ḍ	ق	Q	و	W
ث	Th	ر	r	ط	ṭ	ك	K	ي	Y
ج	J	ز	z	ظ	ẓ	ل	L		
ح	ḥ	س	s	ع	ʿ	م	M		

Short Vowels	
ـَ	a
ـِ	i
ـُ	u

Long Vowels	
ا + ـَ	ā
ي + ـِ	ī
و + ـُ	ū

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

The Qur'an lies at the heart of Islam and naturally, it is central to all individual Muslim communities. As the final divine message revealed to the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) in Arabic, it is the founding document and scripture of Islam, from which Islamic worldview, ethics, law and practices are meticulously drawn. Unlike many other scriptures throughout the centuries, the Qur'an has never been a mere religious or legal text read and understood by some religious scholars alone. From its revelation in the seventh century to the present day, it has been regularly recited, memorized, interpreted and understood by a large number of people at all levels of the Muslim society. Towards this end, one can see various individual Muslim communities having instituted their own styles and ways of approaching the divine text.

Since the Qur'an is revealed and, more importantly, has been meticulously preserved since then in Arabic, while majority of Muslims and human beings¹ are dominantly non-Arabs, rendering its meanings into different vernaculars bears crucial importance. However, its translatability is quite controversial. Both the proponents and opponents of the concept share a consensus that Arabic is unique in its literary function. In addition, the Qur'an repeatedly emphasizes its own 'Arabicity.'² The principle of inimitability of the Qur'an (*i'jāz al-Qur'ān*), which suggests a linguistic

¹ According to the Qur'anic point of view, it is a source of guidance from Allah, the Creator and Sustainer of the universe, not only for the Muslims alone, but also for the entire humanity. Rather than Muslims alone, the Qur'an addresses the whole of mankind which has been declared in many verses in the text such as al-Baqarah:2,185; al-Nisā':70,79,80; al-Ḥajj:5,6; al-Zumar:41; Yūnus:57 etc.

² The Qur'anic verses mentioning the Arabic attribute of the text include: Yūsuf: 2; al-Ra'd:37; Ṭāhā:113; al-Zumar:28; Fuṣṣilat:3; al-Shūra:7; al-Zukhruf:3; al-Aḥqāf:12, etc.

and structural uniqueness that is divine in origin, has also contributed extensively towards the discourses on its translatability. All these theological features along with other relevant linguistic ones inherent in the Qur'anic diction pose considerable challenges to the possibility of its translation. On the other hand, the scope of the text beyond any specific language constantly necessitates the very same rendering mission. As a result, the possibility, permissibility, necessity and legitimacy of the Qur'an's translatability have always been contentious. In the case of individual Muslim societies whose vernacular is not Arabic, discourses on these aspects have far-reaching implications as well.

Although there were some arguable interests³ in partially translating the Qur'an at the time of the Prophet Muhammad himself (pbuh),⁴ one can see that, for centuries, the mainstream Muslim world remained obviously reluctant to its translating mission. Many contemporary scholars have attentively highlighted the evident discrepancy in the translating mission of the two holy books, the Qur'an and the Bible; during the early Islamic centuries, translations of the Qur'an did not enjoy the similar significance that translations of the Bible had during the spread of Christianity.⁵ Interestingly, some modern scholars have even proposed that it is more accurate to compare the position of the Qur'an in Islam not to the Bible, but to that of Jesus in Christianity.⁶

A number of theological and linguistic concerns were the key contributing factors in the development and existence of this Muslim paranoia of Qur'an

³ This is referred to the translation of the first chapter of the Qur'an into Persian by Salmān al-Fārisī (d. 656 AC), one of the prominent companions of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh).

⁴ Muḥammad 'Abdul Aẓīm al Zurqānī, *Manāhil al-'Irfān fī 'Ulūm al-Qur'an*, (Bayrūt: Dar al-Fikr, n.d), 2:114-115.

⁵ Hartmut Bobzin, "Translations of the Qur'an" in *Encyclopedia of the Qur'an*, edited by Jane Dammen McAuliffe (Leiden: Brill, 2006). 5:340.

⁶ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *The Heart of Islam: Enduring Values for Humanity*, (New York: Harper Collins, 2004), 23.

translations. Social and political interests also might have been influential in the formulation of this early Muslim mindset. Mastering Arabic and engaging with the original revealed text was always prioritized and recommended by each individual Muslim community than approaching the divine text through the intermediaries of translation. History provides ample evidence to suggest that global Muslim attention towards translating the Qur'an was greatly influenced by the polemic translations by many non-Muslim scholars, mainly the orientalist, and the sectarian interpretations by some renegade groups such as the Ahmadiyya. Hence, extensive efforts initiated by Muslim scholars to translate the Qur'an into different languages were widely apparent only from the nineteenth century onwards. Consequently, the genre of Qur'an translations was well established and flourished globally only in recent centuries. As a matter of fact, this was accompanied by extensive discourses on even seemingly minute facets of its translatability.

Owing to the multilingual populations of Islam, a significant number of individual Muslim societies have developed different translations of the Qur'an in their respective regional vernaculars. These translations contribute a considerable part to several non-Arab individual Muslim community initiatives towards understanding the message of the Qur'an. However, despite the worldwide collections of the Qur'an translations among different individual communities and regional vernaculars, it is a matter of fact that common academic attention mostly revolves around some monolingual nations and dominant communities. In other words, some Western languages such as English, French and German along with some dominant Eastern ones like the Persian, Turkish and Urdu were given more importance while ignoring the innovative developments that took place in further regional vernaculars. This is obviously true in the case of Mappila Muslims of Kerala, the first individual Muslim

community of South Asia, and their discourses and diversities in approaching the Qur'an and its translations.

Malayalam, belonging to the Dravidian family of languages and being predominantly spoken in the southwest Indian state of Kerala,⁷ is one of the regional Indian vernaculars in which there are significant numbers of Qur'an translations. Spoken by some 38 million people, this language has forty complete translation works.⁸ Although there are diverse historical views on the exact timeframe of the advent of Islam into Kerala, the dominant view is that it was during the life time of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh).⁹ Hence, it could be assumed that the Qur'anic discourses of the Mappila Muslim community are as old as the Malayalam language itself; arguably, the former might have started in the seventh century whereas the latter emerged in the sixth century of the Common Era.¹⁰ The centuries-long experiences of the Mappila Muslims with the Qur'an advanced into the materialization of a complete translation in their own vernacular in the nineteenth century, when a Mappila scholar named Mayin Kutty Elaya started the *Arabi-Malayalam*¹¹ translation of *Tafsīr al-Jalālayn*, in 1855. Once he completed his mission in the following two decades, Mappila discourses on the translatability of the Qur'an had also intensified.

When the Mappila language evolved from Arabi-Malayalam into Malayalam, the community's translating mission also instantly reflected the shift. In the twentieth

⁷ Malayalam has an official language status in the State of Kerala and in the Union Territories of Lakshadweep and Puducherry (formerly known as Pondicherry) in India. In addition, it is also spoken in the neighbouring states of Tamil Nadu and Karnataka with some speakers in the Kerala boarder areas.

⁸ A detailed table of Qur'an translations in the Malayalam language is included in chapter three of this dissertation.

⁹ A brief analysis of the diverse opinions on the advent of Islam into Kerala is made in Chapter Three, Section 3.2.1

¹⁰ Malayalam language is believed to be originated from Middle Tamil (Sen-Tamil) in the 6th century. R. E. Asher, T. C. Kumari, *Malayalam*, (London: Routledge, 1997).

¹¹ *Arabi-Malayalam* is a linguistic combination of both Arabic and Malayalam. Using a variant form of the Arabic script with special orthographic features, it uses the grammar and syntax of Malayalam. The vocabulary is mainly taken from Malayalam, Arabic, Tamil, Urdu and Persian.

century, especially during its second half, there was a remarkable expansion of Qur'an translations in Malayalam. The first complete translation of the Qur'an in Malayalam was published in 1953. Translated and interpreted by C.N. Aḥmad Moulavi (1905-1993), this four-volume work is considered highly controversial with regards to its modernistic approach in construing the divine words. In the Malayalam script, the first single volume work, translated by Muttanisseril Koya Kutty Moulavi (1926-2013), was published in 1960. Within half a century, the Mappila community witnessed a steady increase in their collection of Qur'an translations with a considerable amount of methodological diversities. The latest one in the series, Dr. Bahauddeen Muhammed Nadwi's translation was published in 2015. Furthermore, two comprehensive and voluminous interpretation initiatives, started by M.P. Muṣṭafā al-Fayzī and T.K. 'Ubayd,¹² are still in progress. As one could see in the case of global development of Qur'an translations, an extensive quantity of various discourses on its translatability had also advanced parallel to the development of Mappila translations.

It will seem astounding that, in addition to the huge amount of partial translations, currently the Mappila community has 40 complete translations of the Qur'an in its regional vernacular. Various factors including the continuation of extensive discourses on the translatability of the Qur'an, diversity of translating and interpreting methodologies, involvement of Muslim as well as non-Muslim scholars, availability of voluminous works and single volumes, and the presence of prosaic and poetic ones make the field of Mappila engagements with translations of the Qur'an a significant interest of research.

Analyzing the Mappila community's engagements with translations of the Qur'an, the current study presents a critical appraisal of their discourses on the

¹² Seven volumes of the former and six volumes of the latter have been published so far. (September 2017).

translatability of the Qur'an and the methodological diversities employed while translating and interpreting it. The term "Translatability of the Qur'an" in the title of the research is intended to characterize the questions of possibility, permissibility and legitimacy of translating the Qur'an into any target language. The "Regional Vernacular" refers to the local language of the Mappila Community, which emerged with Arabi-Malayalam and eventually evolved into Malayalam. The term "Discourses" stands for the scholarly debates of the Mappila Muslim scholars on the translatability of the Qur'an; the possibility and permissibility of translating the Islamic scripture. After the discourses, "Diversities" represent the various methodological approaches and orientations employed by the Mappila translators of the Qur'an. These include different ideological methods, namely, the Modernist, Traditional, Salafi and Ahmadi. "The Mappila Community" refers to the Muslims of the "Kerala" State, a province situated in the southwest India. It is of particular significance that the Mappila Muslims are widely considered as the first individual Muslim community of south Asia, which enhances the historical relevance of inquiring their engagements with the Qur'an.

1.2 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Engagements of non-Arab individual Muslim communities with the Qur'an, the Arabic-specific scripture of Islam, are always in a form of improvement. Although translatability of the Qur'an is controversial, a substantial number of non-Arab individual Muslim communities have emerged with their own discourses in approaching the Qur'an among which translating its meanings into their respective regional vernaculars is considered paramount. There are numerous translations of the meanings of the Qur'an in different vernaculars and within them, a significant range

of diversities exist. Evaluating and appreciating them are considered deeply significant since “the first book that many non-Arabic speakers will encounter in their attempts to understand Islam and its holy text is a translation of the Qur’an.”¹³ Being aware of this, a considerable number of Muslim societies have paid much attention towards translating the meanings of the Qur’an into their respective regional vernaculars.

Being the ever-first individual Muslim community of south Asia, this is true in the case of the Mappila Muslims of Kerala, a state situated in the southwest India. Currently having forty complete translations of the Qur’an in Malayalam, Mappila Muslims are arguably the richest individual Muslim community of India with an extensive number of Qur’an translations. In addition, as far as Malayalam is concerned, this is an extraordinarily high proportion for such a Muslim-minority regional vernacular.¹⁴ Many of these works are noticeably diverse in their orientations, which are basically intended to address certain specific ideological denominations prevalent within the Mappila Muslims. In addition, intensive and enduring discourses of Mappila Muslim scholars on the translatability of the Qur’an make the historical background of these translations worthy to explore.

In most of the standard account of any engagements between the Qur’an and non-Arab individual Muslim communities, regional vernaculars along with their respective societies get scant attention. The mainstream academic inquiries on the topic appear to revolve around some monolingual nations and well-dominated individual societies. This generates a dire need to explore the available translation-

¹³ Abdullah Saeed, *Qur’an: An Introduction*, (London: Routledge, 2008), 120.

¹⁴ As of the 2011 Census of India figures, Muslims come only a quarter of the Kerala population; 25.56%. The majority of Malayalam speakers are Hindus; 54.73%.

attempts in regional vernaculars and evaluate them within the academic standards, for “translations in each language should be studied individually.”¹⁵

Although there have been a few attempts to analyze some translations of the Qur’an in Malayalam from a general point of view, none of them has approached the issue with a special focus on Mappila engagements with the Qur’an, investigating their discourses on its translatability, and inspecting the methodological diversities employed therein. Therefore, both issues call for an academic inquiry from a critical perspective. Furthermore, a proposed collective strategy which could be employed in translating the Qur’an into Malayalam language is supposed to facilitate the potential Mappila rendering attempts in order to systematically and effectively convey the possible meanings into the target language. This is particularly imperative to enhance a better understanding of the meanings of the Qur’an not only for the Mappila Muslims alone, but also for the entire Malayalam-speaking populace, since the Qur’anic guidance is intended to address non-believers of Islam as well.

1.3 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The present study attempts to answer the following questions:

1. What are the major theoretical perspectives on the issue of translatability of the Qur’an and how has the practice of its translations developed?
2. How did the Mappila Muslim community engage with the Qur’an and how did the translatability-discourses and different translations evolve within them?

¹⁵ Ekmeleddin Ihsanoglu (ed.), *World Bibliography of translations of the meanings of the Holy Qur’an: Printed Translations 1515-1980*, (Istanbul: Research Centre for Islamic History, Art and Culture, 1986), xi.