

Ibrāhīmkutṭī Musliyār’s  
Muhyuddīn mawlūdinre  
tarjuma

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## Translators' Preface: Translating the Translated

This translation work introduces an important yet underexplored textual genre of prose translation from Malabar's rich Arabi-Malayalam literary culture.<sup>1</sup> Our work presents selected excerpts from *Muhyuddīn mawlūdīnre tarjuma* (The translation of Muhyuddīn's hagiography), authored in 1887 by the eminent Islamic scholar Koññānamvīṭṭil Ibrāhīmkutṭi Musliyār (1849–1905). Musliyār's translation, or *tarjuma*, holds a significant value as one of the earliest prose compositions in modern Arabi-Malayalam, a still extant Muslim vernacular literary language that is prevalent among the Muslims of Malabar.<sup>2</sup>

The *tarjuma* is a commentarial translation of the Arabic prosimetric panegyric work *Muhyuddīn mawlid*, composed by Tamil Muslim scholar Maḥmūd Ṭībī (d. 1727).<sup>3</sup> Ṭībī's original text celebrates the spiritual life and miraculous feats (*karāmāt*) of Shaykh 'Abd al-Qādir al-Jīlānī (d. 1166), a revered 12th-century Baghdadi Sufi saint. Musliyār's translation of the original text into Arabi-Malayalam prose highlights an outmoded mode of translation, which is translation as an act of commentary. In this pursuit of translating a translation, we direct our readers' attention to the nuances of the translation process itself, particularly the matter of what is and what is not translated in the Arabi-Malayalam translation. We ask readers to pay close attention to the unique ways in which Arabic vocabularies are retained in Arabi-Malayalam. This is well portrayed in Musliyār's commentarial translation from Arabic to Arabi-Malayalam as well as reflected in our own translation of the *tarjuma* for Anglophone

<sup>1</sup> We have used a lithographic print of the text from a private collection. See Koññānamvīṭṭil Ibrāhīmkutṭi Musliyār, *Muhyuddīn mawlūdīnre tarjuma* (Mahādar al-'Ulūm Press, 1889).

<sup>2</sup> For some state-of-the-art discussion about Arabi-Malayalam, see P. K. Yasser Arafath, "Polyglossic Malabar: Arabi-Malayalam and the Muhiyuddinmala in the Age of Transition (1600s–1750s)," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 30, no. 3 (2020): 517–39; and Ihsan Ul-Hithisan and Simi K. Salim, "Persianate Malabar: Muhammad Shah's *Takiyya* and the Composition of an Arabi-Malayalam Sufi Romance-*mathnawī* in Southern India," *Postmedieval* 15 (2024): 875–902.

<sup>3</sup> Tayka Shu'ayb 'Ālīm, *Arabic, Arwi, and Persian in Sarandib and Tamil Nadu: A Study of the Contributions of Sri Lanka and Tamil Nadu to Arabic, Arwi, Persian, and Urdu Languages, Literature, and Education* (Imam-ul-Arus Trust, 1993), 489–90.

readers. To help readers take note of sections that were not translated, we place our translations of the lines *Musliyār* did not translate in parentheses.

The concept of *tarjuma* here transcends the standard model of translation, which typically focuses on verbatim equivalence between source and target language vocabularies. Drawing on the perspectives of Thibaut d'Hubert and Torsten Tschacher on translations within South Asian Muslim vernaculars, our translation also highlights how premodern Muslim authors understood translation as more than just replacing words. Instead, they saw it as a complex stylistic process of trans-reproduction that involved creative literary and exegetical work.<sup>4</sup> In Arabu-Tamil and Arabi-Malayalam literary culture, translation often took the form of a commentary, where Arabic/Persian and the vernacular languages (Tamil/Malayalam) played complementary, not substitutive, roles of meaning-making. Translation here involved significant creative reworking of formalistic and aesthetic elements. As Tschacher suggests, it also compels us to reflect on the modes of “translatedness” that were lost with the emergence of the notion of “literal translation” in the early 20th century.<sup>5</sup> The practice of seamlessly weaving prose and verse allows *Musliyār* to shift fluidly between scholastic and non-scholastic styles, thereby employing the strategies of both narrative forms.

To showcase the devotional, aesthetic, and formalistic qualities of the *tarjuma*, we present two carefully chosen sections from the text that reflect distinct dimensions of its structure and intent. The introductory section (pages 1–6), including the colophon, functions as a translator's preface by *Musliyār*, addressed both to the ritual readers and to the scholars among them. At the beginning of the *mawlid*, *Musliyār* expounds on the divine names of God,

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<sup>4</sup> Thibaut d'Hubert, *In the Shade of the Golden Palace: Alaol and Middle Bengali Poetics in Arakan* (Oxford University Press, 2018), 219–23; and Torsten Tschacher, “Islam and Sanskritic *imaginaires* in Southern Asia: Mount Meru in Arabia,” in *Routledge Handbook on Islam in Asia*, ed. Chiara Formichi (Routledge, 2021), 60–61.

<sup>5</sup> Torsten Tschacher, “Commenting Translation: Concepts and Practices of Translation in Islamic Tamil Literature,” in *Translation in Asia: Theories, Practices, Histories*, ed. Ronit Ricci and Jan van der Putten (St. Jerome Publishing, 2011), 27–44.

the significance of praise, and the devotional logic behind invoking specific names. This opening is not merely formalistic; rather, it serves as a doctrinal initiation, embedding the *mawlid* within a Sufi cosmological framework for both scholarly and ritual readers. Musliyār’s theological reflections on the unknowability of God’s names, along with his classification of divine praise into four types, exemplify how translation in this context becomes a gateway to scholastic discourse. It also tells us that the act of reading/recitation and the pursuit of translation is a devotional practice. The latter section of our translation (pages 92–95) shifts to a different section of the *tarjuma* with hagiographic poems narrativizing the exalted status of Shaykh ‘Abd al-Qādir Jīlānī, his biography, and the wider reception of his miracles. The embodied divination of the friend of God (*walī*) is conveyed through widespread reports of mystical experiences and miraculous interventions, as promised to the readers of hagiographical works such as the *tarjuma/mawlid* under discussion. Musliyār then explicitly seeks to promote Jīlānī’s Sufi order, of which he is a part, promising rapid spiritual advancement and the fulfillment of desires.

In a notable passage (p. 94), Musliyār openly reflects on the labor of his commentarial translation, inviting readers to offer corrections or further insights, particularly in relation to the interpretation of poems. Our translation retains certain key Arabic terms in transliterated form to allow readers with knowledge of Arabic a sample appreciation of the original text. This approach follows Musliyār’s own practice in the Arabi-Malayalam translation, where some Arabic lexicons, phrases, and prayers are preserved without translation for both scholastic and devotional purposes. To help readers identify the sections that were not translated by Musliyār, we have placed our own translations of those lines within square brackets. This allows readers to sense the importance of Arabic as a language of liturgy and scholarly engagements in Islamic Southern Asia. Through our translation and annotation, we provide readers with other cases to better understand the diverse ways in which multilingual textual practices have taken shape—both ideologically and stylistically—across South Asian languages and literary traditions.



**From *Muhyuddīn mawlūdinre tarjuma*  
by Koññānamvítti Ibrāhimkutti Musliyār**

**Colophon**

This is the translation of *Muhyi al-Dīn Mawlūd*, which contains eight poems that are both marvelous and magnificent.

*Page 1*

With the name of Allah, the most merciful and compassionate.

All praise is due to God, the Sustainer. May Allah's peace and grace be upon our master Muḥammad, his family, and all his contemporaneous companions. With that said, what follows is my translation of the *Mawlūd* of Shaykh ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Jīlānī—my helper, my supporter, my master—that is recited in his praise, consists of eight poems imbued with profound metaphysical depth. In some places, I have occasionally included brief but important glosses.

I have not produced anything here aside from the original text.

To facilitate the personal acquisition of sacred knowledge; to discern spiritual truths; to comprehend the states and ranks of the friends of God (*awliyā’*); to reflect on the marvels of their miracles (*karāmāt*); to encounter the experiential love directed toward them and understand the lived reality of affiliation with their Sufi orders; to help one receive the full—rather than partial—spiritual rewards associated with reciting and encouraging the recitation of this text; to become aware of the proper etiquette and boundaries to be observed during its recitation; to cultivate reverence and humility in the heart; and finally, to contemplate whether such experiences are limited to those who recite the text with an understanding of its meanings.

Therefore, by acquiring knowledge through its recitation and by living in accordance with the principles it sets forth, one may be rewarded in both this world and the hereafter, and may also be moved to offer prayers for good on behalf of this humble translator, by the grace of the saint Muhyī al-Dīn. Yours sincerely, Ibrāhīm al-Funnānī. Peace be upon us and upon you. Written in the year 1304 after the Hijra of the Prophet Muḥammad (peace and blessings be upon him).

Notice [publisher's note, the note and the poem below are originally in Arabic]:

May God reward the one who edited this [book]; nothing in it is from me except the corrections

This is a great translation about the Great Succor  
The secrets and the fruits of that is illuminating  
O' God, reward the author of the *Qutbiyya*<sup>6</sup>  
a lofty position of victory befitting his station<sup>7</sup>  
supplicating with this [work] the desired Mīrān  
of the Vaññanakkāṭ country, for his [endeavor]

*bismillāh al-raḥmāni al-raḥīm*. This blessed name [Allāh] is revealed to creation as a means of supplication. All virtues and good deeds are brought forth, afflictions are warded off, and desires are realized to the prophets—Ādam,

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<sup>6</sup> *Qutbiyya* is a well-known prayer manual compiled by Koññānām Vīṭṭil Ibrāhīm Musliyār, widely received in Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Sri Lanka, and the Lakshadweep Islands. The lion's share of the manual consists of the poem *Qaṣīdat al-Qutbiyya* (praise poetry about Shaykh 'Abd al-Qādir al-Jīlānī) composed by the renowned Tamil Qādirī scholar Shaykh Sadaqatullāh al-Qāhirī (d. 1703), who was also the teacher of Maḥmūd Ṭībī. See Koññānām Vīṭṭil Ibrāhīm Musliyār, ed., *Qaṣīdat l-qutbiyya enna bayt* ('Āmir l-Islām Power Press, 1982).

<sup>7</sup> We extend our gratitude to Thufail M. for his help with the translation of this Arabic poem.

Nūh, Ibrāhīm, Mūsa, Sulaymān, ‘Isā (peace be upon them)—and our Prophet Muḥammad (peace be upon him) through this name. As an aid for those who recite this *mawlūd* to fulfill their desires, this name [Allāh] is placed at the very beginning. (*al-ḥamdu lil-llāh*) All kinds of praise making are related to God (*al-‘Alīyy*) He is the Most Exalted (*al-‘Aẓīm*) He is the Mighty (*al-Walīyy*) He is the Guardian (*al-Karīm*) He is the Generous. In order to receive what you have asked from God in abundance, praise is invoked before the supplication.

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Praise making is of four types: those based on the Creator’s (God’s) being, qualities, nature, and name. To encompass the above-mentioned praise within these four categories, the *mawlūd* includes phrases such as *lil-llāh*, *al-‘Alīyy al-‘Aẓīm*, *al-Walīyy al-Karīm*, and *al-ladhī lā yudraku ilā ākhirati*. This categorization is based on the hidden and manifest elements in the Creator’s qualities and nature, and thus two names are provided for each of these qualities. The four terms of praise mentioned here convey the message that God will bestow an abundance of generosity upon those who follow the path of the man of this *mawlūd* and upon those who achieve that path through the followers of his Sufi order. Remarkably, since this *mawlūd* contains verses derived from three Prophetic sayings (*hadīths*) related to esoteric knowledge,

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If we analyze the praises from the perspective of the people of esoteric wisdom, the name *al-‘Alīyy* of God invokes the meaning of His power to bless with nobility; *al-‘Aẓīm* invokes His power to bless with greatness; *al-Walīyy* invokes His power to bestow the status of a “friend of God”; and *al-Karīm* invokes His power to empower with miracles. (*al-ladhī*) He is someone (*lā yudraku*) It is impossible to reach (*li-asmā’ ihi*) in his name (*nihāyatun*) exhaustion. Indeed, it is impossible for anyone to count or fully comprehend the number of God’s names. The names He has assigned to Himself, as revealed in His scriptures and through His chosen messengers and divine knowledge, are beyond enumeration. It is impossible for anyone to know the full extent of these names until their ultimate limit is reached. Prophet (peace be upon him) says: *Bi-l-ismi al-ladhī sammayta bi-hi nafsak aw anzaltahu fī kitābik aw ‘allamtahu aḥadan min khalqik ista’tharta bihi fi ‘ilm al-ghaybi ‘indak* ([I

supplicate] by the name with which you named yourself, or revealed in your book, or taught to one of your creatures, or the selected ones [with] the hidden knowledge from you).

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From the above reference and other supplications, it is evident that no one knows all of his names, and that some names remain unrevealed in his hidden knowledge. While certain sources mention that God has 99 or even 1,001 names, these numbers are not definitive or exhaustive. God says: (*wa-li-llāhi al-asmā' al-ḥusnā*). Allah has the most beautiful names.<sup>8</sup> (*wa-lā yablughu*). Can not be reached. (*lahā*). To those names. (*ghāyatūn*). It is impossible to fully comprehend or exhaust the esoteric meanings of God's names. While some qualities associated with these names can be known, the vast metaphysical knowledge embedded within them remains beyond human grasp. Just as His essence, attributes, and nature cannot be entirely known, neither can His names be fully enumerated or understood in their totality. The four categories of praise have been outlined above. This *mawlūd* now turns to a friend of God (*walī*) known as the Great Succor (*Ghawth al-A'żam*). All that occurs in this world unfolds in accordance with the divine laws and patterns revealed through the names of God. Since the reality of the *walī* is likewise governed by these divine principles, the specific names of God that align with the manifestations, attributes, and functions of the *walī* are invoked at the outset of this *mawlūd* to guide the reader.

Page 92      *fa-qaddara minhu lahū nuwwuban | li-ba 'din khuṣūṣin  
li-ba 'din 'umūmin ||*

(*fa-qaddara*) He has appointed, (*minhu*) from the Prophet's being (*lahu*) for the Prophet (*nuwwuban*) as deputies (*li-ba 'din khuṣūṣin*) some special ones and (*li-ba 'din 'umūmin*) some for all. That is to say, while prophets (*anbiyā'*) were sent to specific communities, the friends of God (*awliyā'*) are appointed for all people, and they all serve as deputies of the Prophet Muḥammad and are created from his radiant light.

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<sup>8</sup> Excerpt from the 180th verse of Surah Al-A'rāf (7:180) in the Qur'an.

Apart from the Prophet Muhammad, other prophets and messengers were not sent to all of humankind. However, since the friends of God possess an omnipresent status, it may be said that they are appointed for the guidance of all humanity.

*wa-ba 'dun atā qabla irsālihi | wa-ba 'dun badā ba 'dahu mustaqīmun ||*

(*wa-ba 'dun*) Some [people] are (*atā*) they came (*qabla irsālihi*) before sending of the Prophet [Muhammad] (*wa-ba 'dun*) some people are (*badā*) they have appeared (*ba 'dahu*) after the Prophet (*mustaqīmun*) they are on right path. That is to say, among the deputies, some came before and some after the Prophet Muhammad, those who came before were prophets, and those who came after are the friends of God, and all of them remain within the bounds of the straight path.

*ajall al- 'ulā ba 'dahu shiblu shāh | abī šāliḥin turjamāni al-kalīmi ||*

(*ajall al- 'ulā ba 'dahu*) One who is most exalted after the Prophet is (*shiblu shah abī šāliḥin*) the dear child of the great Khwāja Abī Sāliḥ (*turjamāni al-kalīmi*) [who] speaks the language of prophet Mūsā, the Kalīm (one who spoke to God).<sup>9</sup> It can also be the [in the intention of] one who spoke to the God, the Kalīm. It seems like a reference to the Sultan of saints, Shaykh [Jīlānī] or his father, or both of them. Any useful information related to this can be added here in writing.

*wa-dhāka al-waliyy al-ladhī qad fashat | karāmātuhu kulla qutrin 'amīmin ||*

(*wa-dhāka*) That great being is (*al-waliyyu*) the friend of the true and almighty God,

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<sup>9</sup> To us, the reference to Kalīm appears to be a symbolic allusion to the name Mūsa (derived from the prophet Mūsā, known as Kalīm [the one who spoke with God]), thus completing the name Abū Šāliḥ Mūsa Jangī Dōst.

(*al-ladhī*) he is a man (*qad fashat*) has spread widely (*karāmātuhu*) his miracles (*kulla qutrin ‘amīmin*) in all regions extensively. That is to say, there are many who acknowledge that there is no one greater than our master Muhyi al-Dīn. His miracles, which are remarkable enough to amplify his renown, have spread across nations. Especially when we examine some of the spiritual and mystical practices distinctive to his name, qualities, and praises—such as invocations, chants, prayers, and the physical gestures associated with them—it becomes clear that they prompt profound mystical experiences. Many mystical elements found within the Sufi orders of other masters can also be found in the Sufi order of Jīlānī. To accommodate followers with diverse temperaments, capacities, and levels of spiritual strength, his order offers a variety of loud and silent chants, prayers, and litanies. When practiced correctly, these spiritual exercises swiftly fulfill the desires of the soul. What followers of other Sufi orders attain at the end of their spiritual journey, followers of this order reach at the very beginning. In this regard, many individuals from various corners of the world have reported miraculous experiences related to both worldly affairs and the Hereafter.