

**TRANSLATION AS A VERITBLE TOOL FOR SOCIETAL AND NATIONAL  
DEVELOPMENT:  
REFLECTIONS AND LESSONS FROM THE Umayyad and Abbasid Eras**

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## **Abstract:**

*Translation has indeed been an effective vehicle and veritable tool in the development of societies, nations and even the rise of civilisations across the history of the human race, in this paper, the researcher tries to reflect upon the development and role played by translation in transforming the Arabs and Muslims, more especially during the days of Umayyad and Abbasid dynasties' rules, from mere backwarders and unnoticed societies, to the position of the torch bearers and face-setters in many fields of the scientific investigation, paving the way for the European Renaissance and laying solid foundation for the modern human civilization, the paper concludes with lessons for contemporary developing societies and nations.*

## **A-Definitional Frame Work:**

**A-Umayyad Period or Dynasty:**Refers to the dynasty that ruled the Islamic Caliphate for about 89 years (41-132 A.H./661-750 C.E.),they established a monarchical system of government for the first time in Islam after the lapse of the rule of the four rightly guided caliphs, they descended from a renown Qurashite nobility Umayyah bin Abdi Shams bin Abdil Manaf,the first caliph in the dynasty was Muawiyah bin Abi Sufyan,and the last one was Marwan (the second) bin Muhammad.

**B-Abbasid Period or Dynasty:**Refers to the dynasty that ruled Islamic Caliphate for about 524 years(132-656 A.H./750-1258 C.E.), they came into power after toppling the Umayyad dynasty, their progenitor was Abbas bin Abdul Muttalib the paternal uncle of Prophet Muhammad (P.B.U.H.), the first caliph in the dynast was Abul Abbas As-Saffah, and the last was Abu Ahmad Abdullah Al-Musta'sim.

## **2-Introduction:**

Despite the anarchy, disintegration and ignorance that characterized Arabia in the pre-Islamic era in all facets of human life, Arabs were not devoid of a form of knowledge and skills acquired instinctively through their mingling with natural and human environment around them. Arabs were famous for their poetic and oratorical skills to the extent of having an annual literary exhibition at Ukkaz near the city of Mecca(Rahim.A,2001:5), Arabs also knew a form of primitive medication mixed with divination and superstition, alongside traditional medication by bloodletting, ironing, drugs, and herbs found in their environment or fetched from India and China(.Aqqad.M,1989:22).

Islam came and wipe out all forms of divination, medication by sorcery and magic, and open the door for natural medication, and the Holy Prophet allowed for using prayers,

herbs, and consulting medical practitioners who based their knowledge on experiment and experience regardless of their religion and creed(Ibid).

Besides, Islam as a religion of knowledge and thought, has severally exhorted its followers toward reasoning, reflecting upon the creation and the world around them in order to know the majesty of their creator, it exhorted them to cultivate knowledge and science, and ponder over animal, plant and solid bodies, and as is evidenced in the first portion of verses revealed to the Holy Prophet (P.B.U.H) where the Al-Mighty Allah says: “Read in the name of your Lord and Cherisher Who created. Created man out of a (mere) clot of a congealed blood. Proclaim(read) and your Lord is Most Bountiful.He who taught (the use of)Pen. Taught man that which he knew no.” (Q:96:1-5).

In fulfillment of this religious obligation, which was further emphasized by several traditions of the Prophet, Muslims were prompted to cultivate all forms of knowledge, be it religious which guides their creed, worship and transactions, or natural which help them understand and harness the nature around them, and serve as a book of creation that will further consolidate their belief in Al-Mighty, as for the former it is well explained and articulated in the Book of Allah and the traditions of the Holy Prophet (P.B.U.H),but for the latter only basic references were made as admonition and mind evoking, thus the need for Muslim to turn to other nations and empires that had already advanced in terms of scientific investigation and technological applications, such as India, China, Persia and Greek, and this could only be achieved through the medium of translation, which is a herculean task for a society that was lagging behind in terms of science, technology and linguistic exploits, but the miracle was done, with a rare and unparalleled zeal and devotion.

During the the Jahiliyya (Pre-Islamic Period) few Arabs had the knowledge of reading and writing, talkless of translation from one language to another, the Holy Prophet himself encouraged and promoted literacy, as is evidenced in his treatment of the captives of the Battle of Badr, where he ordered that, a penniless captive might ransom himself by teaching ten Muslims how to read and write, as for translation, the Propeht orederd his companion Zaid bin Thabit to learn the script and language of the Jews (Hebrew), so that he could read, write and translate it for him, for he is apprehensive of their betrayal, Zaid, for his utmost devotion and brilliance mastered the language in half a month(S.H,2016),the Prophet had also translators in Persian, Coptic and Ethiopian Languages(Miftah,M,2013).

Translation had also played a vital role in development and spread of the Islamic Da’awah (Call), as it was used by the Holy Prophet on administrative and diplomatic level, when in his final days sent letters to all then great kings, emperors, emirs and political rulers such as Kosros of the Sasanid Persian Empire, Heraclius of Bynzantine Empire, calling them to the message of The Al-mighty Allah, the letters sent by the Prophet were in Arabic and were translated to those monarchs in their native languages and vice-versa(Ibid).

Imam Ali bin Abi Talib, (the fourth among the Rightly Guided Caliphs) was said to have translated Quran from Arabic Language to several other languages to ease the understanding of the non-Arabic Muslims on the Quran(Abdullah,M.2017).

This is how these two copious tributaries, and powerful factors, the quest for knowledge, and the vehicle of translation went in parallel, and converged to set forth the Muslim society into the realm of scientific investigation in the intervening centuries.

### **3-Translation during the Umayyad Era:**

The rule of the Umayyad Dynasty began in 41 A.H./661 C.E with the death of Al-Hasan bin Ali, and the unification of the Islamic State under one rulership of Muawiyah bin Abi Sufyan, the first among the Umayyad caliphs, Umayyad Caliphate was typically Arabic in all its affairs, higher positions were only held by Arabs, or those who have attained proficiency in the language, and soon the caliphs embarked upon the task of arabisation of all government records and documents which were formerly in Persian and Greek into Arabic, as some key administrative and clerical positions were held by the skilled and educated non-Muslim Greek civil servants(Bassiouni,M.2012).

Arabs and Muslims began to show their interest in sciences by this time, Harith who studied in Persia was said to be the first scientifically trained doctor of Arabia, and Khalid bin Yazid bin Mu'awiyah, who was the son of Yazid bin Muawiyah, the second caliph in the Umayyad dynasty, who happened to be a philosopher and promoter of knowledge himself was the first to ordered for translation of scientific books in alchemy (Chemistry), medicine and astrology from Coptic and Greek to Arabic(obviously for his personal usage) (Rahim, A.op cit), and that was when he turned his attention completely to the cultivation of knowledge, sciences and philosophy, having failed in politics, and lost the throne of caliphate to the rivalling house of Marwan bin al-Hakam(Al-Zayyat,A.1993:149). Omar II (popularly known as Umar bin Abdil Azeez) was said to have transferred the school of medicine from Alexandria to Antioch, (which was then closer to the Umayyad Capital of Damascus).(Rahim,A.Ibid,p169),as he also ordered the Basrah based jewish doctor Masirjawaih to translate a compendium of medicine by "Bishop Ahran" from Syriac to Arabic(Miftah,M.ibid) Translational activities continued to be carried-out on administrative and individual level, without any tangible intervention from the authorities towards large scale translation of scientific materials for public consumption throughout the Umayyad Era; which was aptly described as the period of incubation(Rahim,A,Ibid).

The process and policy of Arabisation adopted by the Umayyad authority, though motivated by Arabic nationalist zealotry, and seemingly restricted to political and administrative spheres, was indeed the motive behind the great works of Arabisation of sciences that followed during the Abbasid Era, for the state's adoption of Arabic as the state language had eventually paved the way for the Arabisation of other spheres of life.

#### **4-Translation during the Abbasid Era:**

The Abbasid Era was indeed the golden age of the Muslim civilization and development, and more especially the first phase of it, during the days of great caliphs: Abu Ja'afar Al-Mansur, Harun Al-Rashid, Al-Ma'amun and Al-Mu'atasim, whose foresight was instrumental to the evolution and monumental development of the empire in all facets of human endeavour. During the days of these great caliphs most of the great scientific works of the then known civilized world were translated into Arabic Language (Rahim.A, op cit, p.200), the works were carried-out by people from different races and nationalities that constitute the fibre of the Muslim empire, the Arabs, the Persians, and even the Syriac Christians, who were the backbone of the work at its beginning; owing to their vast experience in sciences, and the knowledge of the Greek Language, and whose Syriac Language served as an intermediary between the Greek and Arabic due to the complexity of the process; as they were also entrusted to run the medical schools established by the caliphs across the empire (Bassiouni, M. op. cit).

When Al-Mansur ascended to the throne, he invited the greatest of the "Jundshapur" doctors Jirjis bin Bakhtaishu, and asked him to translate medical books for him, and asked others to translate books on the Persian Literature, and later on sought for the translation of other books from Greek (historiafactory, 2017), Baghdad, which was built by Al-Mansur as the new capital of the empire was the first notable for being the first center for translation activities in Islamic history, as the Abbasid elites, including the caliphs and princes, civil servants and military leaders, merchants and bankers, scholars and scientists had all supported and contributed immensely in the flourish of the translation activities, for it was not the pet project of any particular group in the furtherance of their restricted agenda (S.H, 2016), but a collective consciousness of the incumbent responsibility of building the nation, and which for sure elevated the translation activities under the Muslim patronage (Ibid).

This trend was further boosted by the fifth and one of most famous caliphs and kings in the history of the world Harun Al-Rashid (764-809) who instructed for a large library to be built in the city of peace Baghdad, and be named "Khazanah al-Hikmah" or the treasure of wisdom (Abdullah, M.), this library was said to be the largest library outside China at that time (Burnett, C. 2004), the library served as a center for research and translation where great scholars and philosophers were invited to work and were paid generously from the government treasure.

Another booster to translational activities during the reign of Al-Rashid was availability of paper and learning to use it in writing and documentation, Arabs and Muslims were used to write on any writable and portable surface such as stones, leather sheets, bones, date palm leaves .etc, until when Al-Rashid invites some Chinese and asked them to establish a paper milling factory in Baghdad, which facilitated the spread of knowledge greatly by the

multiplication of manuscripts(S.H,ibid),which could be worked upon by scholars and translators.

Translational and scientific activities had reached its pinnacle during the reign of Caliph Al-Ma'amun the son of Harun Al-Rashid who in Arab is likened to Kiricles among the Greeks and Augustus among the Romans,for his rare and unparalleled zeal and quest for knowledge wisdom and philosophy, he carried on the works begun by his predecessors, and brought close to him Greek, Syriac and other non Arab scholars,and was regularly frequented by wise men and litearti(Al-Zayyat, A. op cit,p:263),his court was turned into academic debates arena where renowned scholars and philosophers used to gather and discuss complicated religious scientific and philosophical issues, the caliph himself being one of them, during his time translation advanced remarkably, books were translated from different languages and on diverse subject matters,others were re-translated(historiafactory,2017).

Khazanah Al-Hikmah which was established by his father was consolidated, enlarged and renamed Bait Al-Hikmah (The House of Wisdom), and capable and qualified translators and scholars were assigned to manage it from different races and religions to engage in translating of valuable works of ancient scholars in to Arabic and spent on them generously(Rahim,A,ibid,pp,2,3,).

The Al-Ma'amun's love and passion for sciences and translation had guided him to adopt several policies which yielded positively in promoting and sustaining the two, he first ordered all his governors in provinces like Egypt, Armenia and Syria to send him valuable books in their domain with a view of translating them in to Arabic Language, thus it was not unusual scene to see herds of camels entering Baghdad with loads of books in Hebrew, Greek and Persian Languages, he also befriended Byzantine emperors, and sought them to send him the philosophical books at their disposal, he even made it one of the conditions for truce between him and Michael the third the emperor of Constantinople that he should send him rare books in his domain, and having accumulated this vast inventory of book, he chose the most experienced translators at his disposal, who translated them, and pave the way for the caliphs and the scholars to study, grasp, assimilate, decipher, explicate, complete and improve upon them.

As a result of this encouragement and concern for translation, the number of translators got increased, and most of them became independent scholars and started working far maecenates (like freelance translators nowadays), then regular schools of translators came in to being gradually, where the position of translators were transferred from father to son(S.H,ibid).

As for the method and types of translation in those days. Safa Al-Khalusi has pointed out to two forms or types of translation being in practice;The method of Yohanna bin Bitriq

and ibn An-Na'imah al-Homsy and their like, who adopted word to word translation, which is an unhealthy and ineffective method for two reasons:

1-That it is not possible to have Arabic equivalent equivalents to all the Greek words being translated.

2-That this method undermines the structural characteristics of both the source and target languages.

The second method was that of Hunain bin Ishaq, Al-Jauhari and others, which was the free translation, where by a sentence in the source language is digested as a whole before an equivalent is assigned to it, and this is the most effective method, and that is why most of the books translated by Hunain were not re-translated, except for his translations in natural and theological logic, whereby his knowledge is minimal(Al-Husaini,M.2005,pp,33,34).

It was during the Abbasid Era that the most significant works of the ancient civilizations were translated in to Arabic by great scholars and philosophers, in Persian Literature, the famous book of “Kalilah wa dimnah”, originally translated from Sanskrit into Persian and a valuable work on polity was done into Arabic by Ibn Al-Muqaffa (757 A.D.), Euclid’s “Elements” and “Sidhanta”, a valuable astronomical treatise in Sanskrit were translated into Arabic on the order of Al-Mansur(Miftah,M.ibid). Hellenism was the most vital foreign influence in Arabs life, in the transmission of Hellenic ideas to Arab world the Syriac Nestorians had played an important part, they translated the Greek works into Syrian then into Arabic(Rahim,A.ibid,p,249), the great Muslim scholars and philosophers like Ibn Khaldun (1406 A.D.) Ibn Sina (Avecinne) (1198), al-Farabi and al-Gazali translated the works of earlier Greek philosophers and added their significant contributions(Bassiouni,M.ibid), early translators like Ishaq bin Hunain and his disciple Isa bin Yahya had translated a number of philosophical books such as the “Book of Ethics”, “Categories” (Al-Maqlat),both by Galen, and a book on plants by Aristotle, Hunain was also concerned with translation of books on medicine into Arabic, and he was able to translate almost all the books of Galen and Hippocrate’s book on it.

Costa ben Luqa who was a Christian philosopher and mathematician of Byzantine origin was the most famous of all the translators of the time,he was credited with the translation of the first four books of the Aristotle’s Treatise in “Nature” and “The Opinions of Natural Philosophers”.

Ibn Al-Muqaffah had also translated some of the books by Aristotle, including “The Categories” and “On Interpretation”(Al-Hakawati,2017).

## **6-The Impact of Translation in the Development of Arabo-Islamic Society,Empire and Civilisation:**

Having translated the works of ancient civilisations, Arabs and Muslims were then preoccupied with the work of studying, grasping, assimilating, and harmonizing these works with the spirit and tenets of Islam, they even modified, criticized, codified and made great original contributions that were instrumental in the development of modern sciences, philosophy and civilization, greatest names in Islamic Civilisation such as Al-Kindi, Al-Farabi, Ibn Sina (Avicenne) and Ibn Rushd (Averros) were familiar to the Western World, the harmonizing of Greek philosophy with Islam was started by Al-Kindi, an Arab philosopher and was continued by al-Farabi, a Turk, and completed by Ibn Sina, a Persian, Al-Farabi, inspired by Plato's "Republic" and Aristotle's "Politics" presented his concept of a modern city, a physician, a mathematician and a philosopher, Farabi is also considered of all Arabic music theorists, the Arabs invented the mariners' compass and voyaged to all parts of the world in quest of knowledge or in pursuit of commerce, they established colonies in Africa and other seas, "The Arabs discovered" says Ameer Ali "The Azores and it is surmised that they even penetrated as far as America"(Rahim, A. ibid, p, 252).

In Mathematics the Algebra branch is named in all the European languages by the derivative of Arabic root of (Aljabr) which was founded by the Persian mathematician Muhammad bin Musa Al-Khwarizmi, Arabs innovations in this field were famous, they, for they solved the cubic equations, expanded researches on cones and established basic theories for solving triangles (Aqqad, M. ibid, p, 26).

Besides, Arabs and Muslims developed and expanded the theory of numbers from the original Indian contribution, which resulted in The "Arabic Numbers" 1 through 9. Islamic scholars also used the concept of zero, which was also a Hindu concept. Without zero, neither Mathematics, algebra, nor cybernetics would have developed (Bassiouni, M. ibid).

In Chemistry all the Alkaloids are known in modern terminology with their Arabic names, aquafortis (nitric acid) which is one of the most important acids used in chemical experiments was never described before Jabir ibn Hayyan in his book, who is also credited with the Europeans; knowledge on ammonia salt, potassium, vitrol and some toxics, some of his books were translated into Latin at the beginning of the twelfth century A.D., and was considered the reference in this field in Europe up to the end of seventeenth century (Aqqad, M. ibid, p, 23).

In Physics Arabs and Muslims has discovered and sorted out the specific gravity of many elements and gems, conveyed the Greek concept of gravity, explanation of weigh, which denotes that weighty bodies are always attracted to the crust of the earth, while spiritual bodies are always attracted to their origin in the heaven, but Al-Biruni was skeptical about this, and posed his question to his teacher Ibn Sina, which implied that all bodies are attracted to the crust of the earth, and that paved the way for the Newton's discovery of the Law of Gravity on the basis of modern science (Aqqad, M. ibid, p, 24).

In medicine, there were tremendous contribution by scholars such as Ibn Sina (Avecinne), Al-Razi (Razes), and Husayn Ibn Ishaq al-Ibadi, who translated Hippocrates and other Greeks. Razi (860-940) is reported to have written 200 books on medicine, one of them on medical ethics, and Hawi, 1 25 volume practical encyclopedia, Ibn Sina (980-1037) became a famed physician at 18, he wrote 16 books and the Canon, an encyclopedia on all known diseases in the world, and which was translated into many languages (Bassiouni, M. *ibid*).

In Astronomy, the Copernicus's heliocentric system which placed the Sun and not the earth at the center of our universe was undoubtedly inspired by an Arabic text brought to Italy by Greek scholars who fled Constantinople when it fell to the Turks in 1453 (Burnett, C. *ibid*).

In Geography, Arabs and Muslims measured the perimeter of the earth during the days of Al-Ma'amun, and then measured it again base on Al-Biruni's method by measuring the altitude of by minutes and degrees, they corrected mistakes about Longitude and Latitude, their voyages and pilgrimage gave impetus to the study of geography, Ptolemy's geography was translated by Ya'aqub (840 A.D.), and Khuwarizmi's was the first geography that was accompanied with a map (Rahim, A. *ibid*, p.252).

The impact of these efforts and contribution made by Arabs and Muslim to the European Renaissance, and modern day world in general is a fact attested to by many scholars and researchers, Charles Burnett, a world expert on history of Islamic influences in Europe at the Warburg Institute (University of London) testifies to this, saying: "Imagine a period in history, a time when Arab and Islamic cultures were at their zenith, renowned for their learning, and scholarship. Aspiring scholars from world over, flocked to these centres to get the best education money can buy" (Burnett, C. *ibid*), Burnett also suggested that it was through this close interaction that Europe had with the Ara and Islamic cultures that they came into direct communication with other great civilizations such as Indian and the Chinese, to him Arabic and Islamic cultures are a kind of conduit between the civilization of these two parts of the world, and this further emphasizes the role translation plays in the evolution and rise of human civilization in the course of history.

It was asserted that the Arabo-Islamic culture, knowledge scholarship and sciences had fed the western world's development for about five centuries, and from the second half of the 8<sup>th</sup> century to the end of the 11<sup>th</sup> century Islamic scientific development were the basis of knowledge to the world (Burnett, *ibid*).

The translation and transmission of Muslim sciences and knowledge to Europe was chiefly through Toledo in Spain, Sicily in southern Italy and Middle East, Toledo was the most flourishing center of learning and translation in Europe in the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries, where Jewish and Christian scholars met with Arabs in a purely academic environment free

from any discrimination or religious bigotry, and in the words of Burnett “a commonwealth of scholars for whom political and religious barriers evaporated”(Burnett,C,ibid).

This is indeed a two way round affair,for Arabs and Muslims did translated works from ancient Greek, Persian and Indian Languages, preserved and built upon the heritage of these nations, and became the scholars and torch bearers, from whom Europe learnt, later on there was a change of role, were the Europeans came, learnt from the Arabs and Mulims,translated their heritage, studied, preserved, and improved upon it, and they are today the torch bearers,and in the hands of whom the custody of some of the valuable heritage of Muslims lays today.

7-Lessons from the Arabo-Islamic experience in translation activities to modern developing societies:

\*No civilization can evolve and flourish from zero point, as we have seen in the case of Arabs and Muslims who benefitted tremendously from the achievements of the ancient civilizations of India, China, Persia and Greek, and the modern Europe which depended to the large extent on the works and achievements of Muslims in their heydays in building it modern civilization.

\*Rising the status of our native languages to the status of official languages will help a great deal in the translation and domestication of sciences and technology, as was exemplified by the policy adopted by the Umayyad caliphs.

Translation as a vehicle through which sciences, cultures and civilization are transferred across various nations should be encouraged and supported by all, especially people at the helm of the affairs in our societies, as we have seen its results in the case of Abbasid elites.

\*Government should make education and translation of scientific and technological works into indigenous languages a topmost priority, they should pursue this policy relentlessly and spent on it generously.

\*We should not stop at translation of works from other languages,besides, we should further study them well, grasp, assimilate, and innovate so as to make them our own and forge ahead.

\*Translation Plays a great role in the evolution and rise of human civilization.

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