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Reading in the translation of the meanings of the Holy Quran into the Amazigh

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Abstract

The Quran, the eternal Book of God, addresses all of humanity in eloquent classical Arabic, embodying guidance and illumination for all peoples. While this sacred language serves as the medium of divine revelation, it may pose challenges for those who have not mastered it or lacked the opportunity to learn it. This necessitates the exploration of effective means to convey its heavenly message. As such, translation becomes an indispensable tool for transmitting the meanings of the Quran to non-Arabic speakers while preserving the sanctity of its original text.

Given the Quran's revered status, it is not translated word-for-word; instead, its meanings are rendered with sincerity and precision to resonate with the hearts and minds of people. The Amazigh, despite their historical interaction with the Arabic language, face similar linguistic barriers as other non-Arabic-speaking communities. In response, reformist scholars from the Amazigh community have embraced the religious and cultural responsibility of translating the meanings of the Quran into the Amazigh language. This noble endeavor aims to communicate the message of Islam in their native tongue and deepen their understanding of the faith's authentic teachings.

Among the most distinguished and careful efforts in this field is the translation by Sheikh Si Hajj Mohand Tayeb—may God preserve him—which is recognized for its high credibility and profound ability to convey the spiritual essence of the Quran. Published by the Notable Press in Medina, this translation stands as a lasting testament to scholars' dedication to making the Book of God accessible to diverse peoples in their own languages. It underscores the universal and inclusive nature of Islam, affirming that it is a religion meant for all of humanity, without exception.

Through such committed efforts, the Quran continues to transcend linguistic and cultural boundaries, reinforcing its timeless message of guidance and enlightenment for all humankind.

Keywords: Quran translation, Amazigh language, Islamic communication, Linguistic diversity, Faithful translation



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Introduction

Language is one of the divine signs in the universe, shaping the identity and sense of belonging of individuals (karbiyeh, language and identity, 136ah). Most researchers have concluded that the name identity is not Arabic, but rather a word derived by ancient translators from the word “ho,” which, among Arabs, signifies the connection between the predicate and the subject in its essence. (karbiyeh, language and identity, 1436ah, p. 51)

It varies in expression among individuals and in dialects among communities. Each person takes pride in their language and strives to preserve it as a testament to their existence, identity, and affiliation. Languages and dialects are numerous, glorifying the One who made us nations and tribes so that we may come to know one another, as affirmed in His exalted words:

“O mankind, indeed We have created you from male and female and made you peoples and tribes that you may know one another. Indeed, the most noble of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous of you. Indeed, Allah is Knowing and Acquainted” (Surah Al-Hujurat .13).

Moreover, His statement:

“And of His signs is the creation of the heavens and the earth and the diversity of your tongues and your colors; indeed in that are signs for the learned” (Surah Ar-Rum, 22).

This provides clear evidence that the diversity of languages and tongues is one of the great signs of God and a miracle among His miracles, demonstrating His greatness and wisdom. Linguistic diversity is not merely a social or cultural phenomenon but a cosmic sign that reflects the Creator’s power in His creation. It confirms that this diversity is part of God’s divine order in the universe and serves as a means for mutual recognition and communication among humanity.

Ignorance of another’s language poses a significant barrier to communication and the ability to benefit from their experiences. It also hinders human interaction and engagement, necessitating proficiency in languages—or at least a basic understanding of them. In response to this need, humanity turned to translation, dedicating time and attention to it, encouraging its practice, studying it meticulously, and establishing specialized institutes and schools for this science and art. Translation has provided invaluable assistance, enabling exploration of previously hidden worlds, immersion in other cultures, and understanding the secrets of societies and their scientific advancements across various fields. Through translation, bridges of communication with others—regardless of their form, color, gender, or creed—are built.

The most widespread and effective type of translation for communication purposes is faithful translation, as its name suggests. Faithfulness in translation ensures that the intended meanings of the original text are conveyed, prioritizing meaning over structure (mounin, 2002, p. 45), thereby creating the same impression and ease in the mind of the recipient as the original text does in its native language. This task, however, is highly challenging, as Al-Jahidh noted:

“Whenever someone speaks two languages, it becomes evident that they impose injustice on both, since each language pulls the other, takes from it, and opposes it.” (AL-jahidh, 1965, p. 76)

Nevertheless, we assert that translation is impossible without mastery of both the source and target languages, and it is natural that one’s mother tongue will always be more secure in eloquence and expression than any second or third language.

Al-Jahidh further stated:

“One must be the most knowledgeable person in both the language being translated from and the language being translated into, achieving parity and perfection in both.” (AL-jahidh, 1965, p. 76).

However, no matter how profound this knowledge may be, it remains insufficient when dealing with certain texts, particularly the Quran. Its translation approximates the meaning but does not fully capture it, for its essence resides solely within its linguistic framework. Its vitality is bound to the language in which it was revealed. The Quran is not just any book, it is God's miracle for humanity, and its primary and fundamental miracle lies in its eloquence, which cannot be fully conveyed in any other language, no matter how sophisticated. Moreover, acts of worship can only be fulfilled through its exact wording, pronunciation, and phrasing as originally revealed.

Despite this, if there is an urgent and compelling need for translation, the Quran demands it most, for it is the book of humanity, the constitution of all worlds, the final divine scripture containing light and guidance, faith and law, argument and proof. Thus, conveying it to everyone is a great responsibility resting upon scholars and preachers, in accordance with the Prophet Muhammad's (peace be upon him) directive:

“Convey from me, even if it is only one verse.”

Among the notable efforts that inspire hope and optimism are the translations of the meanings of the Quran into the Amazigh language. This is no small endeavor. First, it aligns with the mission of calling people to God, a significant responsibility yet an obligatory duty. Second, it affirms the necessity of respecting the pillars of our identity: the historical, cultural, and civilizational dimensions of our homeland. It is well-known that the Amazigh language is one of the cornerstones of this nation, representing our collective identity and forming a beautiful and distinctive twin alongside the Arabic language.

Language, in all its diversity and variety, is a sign of God and a miracle among His miracles, pointing to His greatness and wisdom. It is a tool for communication and mutual recognition among peoples and a bridge for understanding and peaceful coexistence. Therefore, preserving this linguistic and cultural diversity is akin to safeguarding one of God's signs and enriching human civilization as a whole.

The Importance of Translating the Meanings of the Quran into the Amazigh Language

Translating the meanings of the Quran into the Amazigh language is not simple task, given the numerous considerations and challenges involved. However, it has been accomplished to a significant extent, and such an endeavor represents a monumental effort worthy of appreciation, reverence, and respect.

Translation into Amazigh is both a necessity of Da'wah and a response to practical realities. Many individuals do not have a strong command of the Arabic language, let alone the elevated and eloquent language of the Quran, which is imbued with unparalleled rhetorical and expressive power. Therefore, translating the meanings of the Quran into Amazigh is essential to bring these individuals closer to the Quran, enabling them to benefit from its spiritual, intellectual, and moral dimensions. Reading the Quran in Amazigh not only resonates with the audience but also sparks curiosity, motivating them to explore the original language in which it was revealed. We have observed examples of Western converts to Islam who have strived to learn Arabic, even at an advanced age. Their attachment to the Quran drives them to connect with its linguistic vessel, which carries its profound content and meanings. Moreover, this translation holds significant importance in countering certain misleading narratives and false claims propagated by those with ill intentions. Some argue that Islam eradicated the Amazigh language or that it “Arabized” the Amazigh people. This translation effort, supported and promoted by a religious and scholarly institution based in the Sacred Mosque, serves as a powerful rebuttal to such deceptive assertions. It unequivocally demonstrates that Islam does not oppose linguistic diversity; rather, all languages are divine signs in this universe. Islam emerged to guide humanity from darkness into light and to unite all people under the banner of worshipping God alone, the Almighty and Exalted.

The Difficulty of Translating the Qur'an into Amazigh

A group of researchers specializing in Amazigh culture, Quranic studies, and translation have attempted to translate the meanings of the Qur'an into Amazigh. Some have translated individual chapters, while others have translated specific portions, each striving to the best of their abilities to convey the message. However, the most comprehensive and accomplished translation to date is the complete translation of the Noble Quran by Sheikh Si Hajj Mohand Tayeb, may God preserve him. In a report published online, he noted that eighty percent of Amazigh vocabulary consists of Arabic words. Conversely, researcher Salem Shaker argues in his book *Texts in Berber Linguistics* that Arabic words make up thirty-eight percent of the Kabyle dialect (chaker, 1984, p. 9). Regardless of which perspective is more accurate, the proportion is undeniably significant. This leads us to pose the following question:

Is the Amazigh language, in its current state, capable of accommodating and conveying the translation of the Quran's meanings?

- ✓ **Loanwords and linguistic purity:** Amazigh contains a substantial number of loanwords, not only from Arabic but also from ancient languages such as Latin, Greek, Spanish, and French. This is a result of historical influences from colonizers over the centuries. Therefore, it is imperative to begin purifying the language by extracting its authentic core, a task that demands considerable effort and should be spearheaded by an academic institution.
- ✓ **Most Arabic words are Tamazighized,** meaning they are directly incorporated into Amazigh with little to no modification or only minor adjustments that make them immediately recognizable as Arabic. We have adopted the term "Tamazighized," analogous to the Arabic term "Arabized," to describe this phenomenon. The Amazigh language contains many such words, such as *Arhim*, *Abnin*, and *Aziz*. Would it not be more appropriate for a scholarly body to coin new terms or revive older ones for concepts that lack genuine Amazigh equivalents.
- ✓ **Amazigh requires development:** The Amazigh language has suffered from neglect for various reasons, which now necessitates a methodological approach. Translation is not a final product and will never be; as the language evolves academically, there will always be a need for revised translations that keep pace with this progress.
- ✓ **Amazigh encompasses a wide array of dialects that vary significantly from one region to another:** for instance, the translation by Sheikh Hajj Mohand Tayeb is based on the Kabyle dialect. However, even within Kabyle, there are numerous sub-dialects that differ across regions, tribes, and even within the same province. In Béjaïa's city, much like the rest of the Kabyle region, negation is expressed using *Ara*. In Kherrata and its surrounding areas, both *Oula* and *Ara* are used, depending on the locality. In Ouaqas and Souk El Tenine, a distinctive pattern emerges where *Ha* or *T'ha* is placed before the word, unlike other negation forms that typically appear at the end. Examples include *Azrigh Ara*, *Azrigh Oula*, *Azrighani*, *At'ha Zrigh*, and *Ha Zrigh*.
- ✓ **To translate the Quran into Amazigh effectively,** it is essential to form collaborative groups of cultural actors from all Amazigh-speaking regions: Kabylie, Shawiya, Tamazight (the Greater South), Chenoua (Tipaza), and Shilha (Southwest—Béchar, Adrar, Tamanrasset). Such efforts would enrich the translation by identifying and authenticating Amazigh terms through rigorous study and analysis.
- ✓ **There is a pressing need to establish a scientific body** tasked with unifying these dialects and developing a standardized lexicon and grammatical framework.
- ✓ **The Tifinagh script must be further developed and adopted as the sole writing system,** The oldest inscription we have found dates back to 3000 BC and was written in the Tifinagh script. Tifinagh is the plural of Tafingh, meaning "sign," or the alphabet. It is one of the greatest achievements of this language at a time when there was no written language. It is the original script of the Amazigh language moving beyond the ongoing debate between proponents of the Arabic and

Latin scripts. This would grant the language an independent identity, particularly since Amazigh includes unique phonetic elements not found in most languages, whether Arabic or Latin. For instance, it features sounds like “kh” (pronounced between the Arabic “khā” and “kāf”), as in akhel (meaning earth, dirt) and khemmi (meaning you). It encompasses all Arabic and Latin sounds while also introducing its distinct phonetics.

Oral Translations: The Roots of communication with the Quran

The Amazigh people have long been renowned for their deep passion for the Quran, dedicating themselves to both learning and teaching it. To facilitate this, they established Zawaya and Katatib (Quranic schools), and even utilized mosques for this purpose. Although French colonial authorities permitted the memorization of the Qur’an, they prohibited its interpretation. However, the scholars, particularly in the Kabyle region, defied this restriction by teaching children to memorize the Qur’an while simultaneously explaining the meanings of its chapters. According to accounts passed down from our ancestors, they would gather in groups at these katatib to memorize the Qur’an, accompanied by explanations provided in the Kabyle dialect. In practice, the interpretations they learned, though simple, were accurate. Traditionally, a teacher or sheikh would not proceed to the next chapter until the student had thoroughly memorized and understood the current one.

Among the oral traditions were also family gatherings during various evenings, where the extended family would come together to recount stories of the Prophet Muhammad’s (peace be upon him) struggles in spreading the message of Islam, as well as tales of the prophets. These gatherings, especially during winter nights, were a source of great joy for the family. Typically, the patriarch, often the grandfather, or sometimes the father or eldest uncle who had studied at the kotab, would narrate the lives of the prophets and messengers. These stories were often supplemented by recitations of relevant Quranic verses, followed by oral translations of their meanings into Kabyle. In the Kabyle region, not everyone had the opportunity to learn Arabic, particularly during the French colonial period, which restricted its teaching. Those who mastered Arabic were few, and even today, many elderly individuals still do not understand Arabic.

However, these oral translations were never recorded in writing or documented. They survived solely through the oral storytelling traditions, which are now preserved only rarely by grandparents.

Written Translation: Scholarly Efforts to Document Meanings

Among the notable efforts in Algeria to address this challenging and significant task is the translation by Sheikh Si Hajj Mohand Tayeb. Another significant contribution came from a group of professors at the University of Tizi Ouzou, who translated portions of Juz’ Tabaarak and Juz’ Am under the supervision of Sheikh Mohand Saïb Aouider¹. Despite these efforts, Sheikh Si Hajj Mohand Tayeb’s translation remains the most comprehensive, as he was divinely aided in translating the entire Quran, a remarkable achievement and an effort that deserves great appreciation.

Challenges of Written Translation: Weaknesses and Obstacles

The proposed translation is heavily populated with Arabic words, some of which have lost their original meanings—despite the existence of Kabyle equivalents. Ideally, such a monumental task should be undertaken by a specialized body with linguistic, cultural, and religious expertise, especially considering the challenges as mentioned earlier.

We suggest an approach that combines translation with commentary rather than a literal rendering. This is especially relevant since the Quran itself is not translated verbatim; instead, its meanings are conveyed. Translating meanings closely aligns with the concept of interpretation, with the ultimate

¹ Additionally, the Moroccan scholar Sheikh Al-Hussein Bouemarani produced a translation. It is important to note that the Algerian and Moroccan translations differ due to variations in Amazigh dialects between the two countries.

aim being to make the message understandable to the Amazigh audience—not merely to reproduce the words. This mirrors the method used in oral translations, which were primarily interpretative rather than literal.

Some Observations on the Amazigh Translation

The first observation pertains to the opening phrase:

“The Noble Quran and the Translation of Its Meanings into the Amazigh Language: Lqraan l’adheem Dthitharam Athmanin Gallega Tamazight”. (hadj, 1433 AH).

This sentence is entirely in Arabic. If Kabyle lacks a suitable equivalent, other Amazigh variants should be explored. For instance, “language” in Kabyle can be translated as *awal* or *amslay*.

Would a native Amazigh speaker unfamiliar with Arabic understand “al-‘Adheem” (the Great)? In Arabic, this term reflects grandeur, high status, and divinity—one of the names of Allah. While “amqran” (great) in Amazigh may not fully capture this divine nuance, it would be preferable to using a foreign term.

Examples from Some Short Surahs:

Surah Al-Fatiha: (hadj, 1433 AH, p. 01)

1. Anhamth Rab (Athnashkar) Athntsa Athbab Atkhalqeeth.
2. Thahneen Yatshoor Thalhana.
3. Yawm Al-haqq Natsa Athpapis.
4. Athkatsh Kana Arn’abth, Athkatsh Kana Atha Ma’awan.
5. Amlagh Abreeth Asawban.
6. Abreeth Abwayth Fathna’mat.
7. Mashi Athwathak Kasrafan, Nagh Wuth Ma’raqan Aprthan.

“In the name of Allah, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful”

Translation: *Asiṣm A rabi tha hnin ychur Dlḥnana*

- The word “name” should be translated. It’s unclear whether a suitable equivalent doesn’t exist in Kabyle across its various dialects (Tizi, Bejaia, Bouira, etc.).
- “tha hnin ychur Dlḥnana” lacks accuracy and coherence.

“Praise” (al-hamd):

Options like *Anḥamd* or *Aṭnaṣkur* are both Arabic-derived. A more native Kabyle term such as *thumirth* (thankfulness) might be more appropriate.

“Owner of the Day of Judgment”: “Yawm al-Haqq Danta Idpapis”

- “Yawm” (day): *As*
- “Al-Haqq” (truth): still Arabic; *Thidetts* could be a more suitable Amazigh equivalent.

“Guide us to the straight path”: *Amalagh Abrith Iṣoben*

- *Iṣoben* is derived from Arabic *al-sawaab*. A Kabyle alternative like *Iqesqmen* may be more appropriate.

Surah Al-Ikhlās:

Asiṣm A rabi tha hnin ychur Dlḥnana

1. Inasen (AMohameth): “Ithnatssa ithrabi wahthes
2. ithrabi ahwajn alkhlaqees

3. ardilool arees'ee ammees
4. had aryeli thalmathlees.
 - *ithrabi ahwajn alkhlalqees* (“the One whom all creation depends on”): The use of *ahwajn* is consistent with the meaning but alternatives like “Aliro Ulturo” might better convey divine uniqueness.

Surah Al-Falaq:

(1) Inasen (Amohameth), Obthagh Asrrabb Naspah

- *Inasen*: Translates as “say to them” rather than simply “say.” The better fit would be *Inith* (“I say”).
- *Thi Echar Al'abth Akahdhan*: The Arabic term *abd* (slave) is used, but Amazigh has *Amthan*.

Surah Al-Masad:

1. *Kworradh hfssan an «Abou lahab», ogwar (othizgwilwara).*
2. *orthnifi'a achis, wa la ayn yaksap*
3. *athi kinaf thithmas, (yarghan) athlahhap*
4. *ma tsamattothis, isgharan ifiris*
5. *amrar thazran yezzi athwa magurdhis*
 - *orthnifi'a achis*: “His wealth did not benefit him”—a fair rendering.
 - *isgharan ifiris*: Refers to his wife carrying firewood. Consider “Mtemtthies Iqerfden Isgharen” to convey more vivid imagery.

These observations are offered in a spirit of constructive critique—not to discredit the translation, but to encourage further refinement. Given the depth and complexity of this work, a specialized committee would be best equipped to produce a translation that maintains both meaning and clarity.

Once again, we commend this effort and extend our blessings to Sheikh Si Hajj Mohamed Tayeb for this noble initiative. Undertaking such a task is no small feat, and success in such endeavors

Conclusion

The Holy Quran continues to require further efforts in approaching its meanings through additional translations, which would serve as a complement to the esteemed work of Sheikh Si Hajj Mohamed Tayeb. Despite the commendable effort, the diversity of Amazigh dialects means that the current translations remain limited in scope.

It is therefore recommended to standardize the use of the Tifnagh script alongside Arabic for writing translations. This would help resolve discrepancies among translators who rely on Latin characters and ensure greater consistency and accessibility.

Ultimately, any translation is merely an approximation of the meaning and cannot fully encapsulate the essence of the original text. It serves as a bridge to understanding but remains distinct from the divine words themselves.

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