



Cultural Think-Tank | Action Platform | Conservation Space

A DEMONSTRATION PROJECT

ON

ARABIMALAYALAM

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INTRODUCTION

This document is meant as a demonstration of how LĪLĀ works with a specific project towards effecting transformation. Every full-fledged project at LĪLĀ will go through three stages:

1. Ideation and research;
2. Translation of ideas and findings into public interface programmes and material production;
3. Conservation of knowledge towards re-ideation for further cycles of change.

We here showcase a specific project on Arabimalayalam. Arabimalayalam is the name of a script used primarily by the Mappila Muslim population of Malabar since the 16th century – as per the available records. It was specific to the language they spoke, which combined primarily Malayalam words, many Arabic borrowings and elements from five other languages. Technically, the Arabimalayalam script is made of Arabic characters, later modified by Urdu and Persian scriptal components. Arabimalayalam literature, including spiritual corpuses, had flourished till its slow weakening by the beginning of the 20th century. Today, Arabimalayalam is only extant as a script taught to children in Madrasas, the religious learning centres of the Muslims. Arabimalayalam is a unique linguistic and cultural construct, which invites the researcher to discover insightful facts in the fields of inter-linguistic and inter-cultural communications. It is also urgent to revive the study of Arabimalayalam and to reveal its insights today, since this language is only used in restricted spaces and slowly disappearing. It contains rare features that must be preserved as they may clarify a number of linguistic questions relevant to contemporary times.

The present research project was conceptualised and conducted by two research officers at LĪLĀ. This document follows the entirety of the process, from the initial general interest to the conservation of the findings for re-ideation. In the case of projects coming from outside LĪLĀ, the individual, institution or community may have already reached a specific level of advancement in this long process. LĪLĀ will first review the methodology used, before confirming the selection of the project to complete the remaining steps.

PART I. IDEATION AND RESEARCH

I.1. IDEATION

Through ideation, the Core Ideation Team (CIT) at LĪLĀ aims at identifying:

1. Seminal areas that need to be interlinked through research and practice;
2. Possible interface programmes and models for knowledge transmission;
3. The need to build particular institutions (educational, social, scientific, cultural...) in particular localities, to further develop the area under consideration;
4. Geographical regions with hidden resources that need to be recovered;
5. Methods of deriving new ideas from a research project.

Following is our process of ideation on the present project of Arabimalayalam.

I.1.a. IDEATION ON AREA SCOPE

The ideation process on the area scope involves:

- Rethinking the history of trade contact between Arabia and India from a socio-linguistic perspective;
- Exploring similar linguistic sites such as Arabipunjabi, Arabikannada, Arabitamil, Arabibengali, etc. from the western coast to the eastern coast of India;
- Identifying similar border regions, their mixed oral traditions and the possibilities of new scripts;
- Looking at the instances of mediator languages arising between two nationalities in past contexts of international contacts, such as trade or colonisation. Such encounters suddenly brought members of two linguistic traditions together, giving birth to the possibilities of new languages and scripts;
- Researching the conditions of marital relations between Kerala women and Arab traders, or with Portuguese, Dutch, French, and English invaders and colonisers. Which languages were used in such relations?

I.1.b. IDEATION ON SPECIFIC RESEARCH

The ideation process on the specific topic includes:

- Selection and validation of a specific area of research: Arabimalayalam;
- Choice of a topic and appropriate methodology: the comparative analysis of a century-old poem in Arabimalayalam.

I.1.c. IDEATION ON INSTITUTION BUILDING / CONSERVATION OF KNOWLEDGE

With specific research projects, LĪLĀ will facilitate the construction of institutional centres for the larger development of the area. In this case, we see the possibility to:

- Build a Centre for Linguistic Cultures (CLC) in the border district of Kasaragod. Located in the northern coast of Kerala, Kasaragod is the setting of seven language traditions, following the incessant interactions of Arab traders, European invaders and others.

I.2. RESEARCH

LĪLĀ's CIT plans and undertakes a research approach to:

1. Understand different epistemological fields and contribute to them with groundbreaking findings;
2. Organically link theory and praxis, knowledge and creative practices;
3. Open out the field of research and make it more democratic and accessible;
4. Create a horizontal continuum of knowledge through interdisciplinary research;
5. Resist isolating powers of vertical specialisations to make academics a more open ground;
6. Facilitate a new research culture that promotes consciousness of association;
7. Make research more life-oriented and transformative.

I.2.a. LARGER AREA-BASED OBJECTIVES

Beyond the immediate purpose of producing a translation and analysis of an Arabimalayalam text, this research attempts to understand, contribute to, and open out the potential research areas of

- Minority languages, literatures and cultures;
- Blend/border languages and cultures;
- Regional/marginal languages and cultures;
- Oral/folk linguistic traditions and cultures.

I.2.b. SUBJECT-BASED RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

- Exploration of the Arabimalayalam literary genres of poetry, essay, novels;
- Further exploration of poetry in Arabimalayalam: epics/narrative poetry, letter songs, Bhakti Kavya, romantic poetry.

I.2.c. TOPIC-SPECIFIC RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

- English Translation of Naduthoppil Abdulla's century-old Arabimalayalam poem, *Akbar Sadaqa Pakshippattu*;
- Socio-cultural, linguistic, political study of the text;
- Theoretical Analysis of the text to recover its contemporary relevance.

PART II. TRANSLATION OF IDEAS INTO CULTURAL PRACTICES

Through the step of translation of ideas into cultural practices, the Creative Operations Team (COT) of LĪLĀ transfers the theoretical insights into possible actions in society. The COT collaborates with individuals and institutions to:

1. Find ways to interlink research and practice;
2. Develop programmes and models for knowledge transmission;
3. Tie up with particular institutions (educational, social, scientific, cultural...) in particular localities to promote a certain area of knowledge;
4. Discover ways of linking dynamic cultural practice with archiving.

II.1. CULTURAL PRODUCTION AND TRANSMISSION OF KNOWLEDGE

The LĪLĀ COT attempts to translate the research ideas and consolidate them into as many instances of cultural production as possible:

- Books and other publications, directly or through collaborations with publishing houses and university presses. For instance, a publication from the project on Arabimalayalam has already been released by the Central University of Kerala, and another is proposed to Oxford University Press;
- Documentary and films, through collaborations with studios and directors;
- Digitisation of materials, through collaborations with technical specialists;
- Audio-video recordings of the poem, in collaborations with cultural practitioners.

II.2. PUBLIC INTERFACE AND SHARING KNOWLEDGE

LĪLĀ will organize programmes for specific institutions:

- Cultural exchange with other similar sites and formation of linkages;
- Academic conferences and seminars to exchange ideas, identify newer scopes of research in the area and establish their contemporary applicability;
- Workshops, debates, etc. to generate more ideas.

LĪLĀ will also organize programmes for the general public, in collaboration with public agencies:

- Arts festivals and cultural programmes to celebrate and revive the 'live' cultural aspects of the text;
- Socio-cultural and educational projects designed on the basis of the research findings;
- Documentary and film screenings.

PART III. CONSERVATION OF KNOWLEDGE

At LĪLĀ, the Conservation and Archive Team (CAT) is focused on the conservation of knowledge and findings towards new re-ideation. In collaboration with individuals and institutions, the CAT aims at:

1. Finding ways to make knowledge generation and transfer a sustainable and continuing enterprise;
2. Developing dynamic archives and new models for knowledge conservation;
3. Collaborating with particular institutions (educational, social, scientific, cultural...) to set up specific archives;
4. Implementing connections between the research and cultural practice on the one hand, and with archiving, on the other.

LĪLĀ is currently setting up a space for dynamic archiving on its website. Each project undertaken in collaboration with LĪLĀ will be accommodated and nurtured in this space.

III.1. CONSERVATION THROUGH ARCHIVING

LILA aims at the conservation of the Arabimalayalam project in the following manner:

- Collaborations with institutions to start specific physical archives;
- Online archiving in collaboration with institutions and individuals. Our *Mappila Archives* already contains the collected data on Arabimalayalam;
- Project planning for building institutions, such as an Institute for Minority Languages or a Centre for Trans-Cultural Art Forms. LĪLĀ may itself build the institution if we consider the need to be urgent.

III.2. REGENERATION OF IDEAS

This section describes the process of re-ideation, final to one cycle but initial to the next. It follows the same principles and methods of ideation, as seen in Part I.

Examples of re-ideation

The work undertaken by LĪLĀ has revealed potential areas of re-ideation, of regeneration for contemporary times and situations. We discuss here one instance of an idea of new research:

SCRIPT AS PARADIGM

- The Arabimalayalam script is ‘made’ by using various scriptal components from Arabic, Urdu and Persian. The findings revealed by our research could be applied in the interactive contexts of contemporary cultures, in order to facilitate the creation of new common scripts for inter-linguistic communication.

CASE STUDY LĪLĀ

- The Arabimalayalam script is the product of century-long dynamics between various spoken languages, linguistic communities and distinct scripts. Few scripts have undergone such intense interactions with other linguistic entities. It deserves to be considered as a privileged script for transliteration studies.
- Arabimalayalam can also be a *connecting-script* of preference to help populations of Arabian countries learn other languages, and vice versa.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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