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The Living Text: The Many Lives of *Tuhfat al-Mujahidin,* a Sixteenth-Century Epic from Kerala

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Abstract:

This essay follows the surprising journey of a single text—*Tuhfat al-Mujahidin*, a fiery call to arms penned by Sheikh Zainuddin Makhdum II in sixteenth-century Malabar. Written to rally Muslim Mappilas against Portuguese invaders, its story didn't end in 1583. Instead, the book itself embarked on a voyage, translated into Italian, French, Malayalam, Urdu, and English, popping up again and again in different times and places. Each new translation was also a new interpretation, bending the text to serve different purposes: for colonial officers, it explained "fanatical" rebels; for modern nationalists, it proved patriotic loyalty; and in today's world, it's often read through the lens of global terrorism. This paper argues that by watching this text travel, we see more than a history of colonial conflict. We see a mirror reflecting the changing political dreams, fears, and identities of the people who have kept it alive for over 400 years.

Keywords: Tuhfat al-Mujahidin, translation studies, Malabar, Portuguese colonialism, jihad, Muslim Mappila Muslims,

Introduction

Imagine a book written not for a library, but for a battle. In the late 1500s, as Portuguese ships patrolled the Malabar coast, the scholar Sheikh Zainuddin Maqdoom II dipped his pen in Arabic ink to write *Tuhfat al-Mujahidin*—"A Gift to the Holy Warriors." His goal was urgent and clear: to stir the Muslim Mappila community to defend their faith and homes. Yet, the book's life was just beginning. Long after the cannons fell silent, the text began a remarkable second life, traveling far beyond its shores. The historian P. Govinda Pillai sees it as a landmark, calling it "the first history of Kerala written by a Keralite," and praising its eyewitness authenticity, much like the ancient Greek historian Thucydides (qtd. in Panikkassery 15).

But why would a local war cry find itself translated into Italian, French, Portuguese, and Czech? Why would it be rendered into Malayalam not once, but three different times,

each translator arguing with the last? From its first English translation in 1833 to a fresh version published in 2012, this text has been persistently, almost stubbornly, revisited.

This constant recycling forces us to ask new questions. We can't just ask what the text *says*; we must ask what it has *come to mean* for different readers across the centuries. How did a call for *jihad* become a certificate of patriotism for Indian Muslims after Partition? Why do some modern historians read it as an early example of communalism, while others use it to trace the roots of global Islamic militancy? This essay will follow the text on its journey, showing how its translation is never just about words—it's about power, memory, and the never-ending search for identity in a changing world.

What's Inside the Book?

To understand its journey, we first need to know what the book contains. *Tuhfat al-Mujahidin* is built in four parts, each with a distinct purpose.

Part One is pure inspiration. Drawing deeply from the Quran and the Prophet's sayings, it makes the theological case for *jihad,* promising heavenly rewards to those who fight. This section consciously continues the work of the author's own grandfather, who had written a similar tract urging resistance against "cross-worshippers."

Part Two shifts to history, recounting the coming of Islam to Kerala. The author tells the cherished story of Malik bin Dinar's mission, but then does something interesting: he pauses. He admits there is no clear historical date, and that many local Muslims believe a legendary Chera king met the Prophet himself. "They believe that the king… saw in person the splitting of the moon, following which he set out to meet the Prophet," he writes, acknowledging popular belief alongside historical uncertainty (Nainar 32). He then paints a picture of harmony, describing the peaceful coexistence of Muslims and Hindus under the local Zamorin rulers before the Portuguese arrived.

Part Three turns anthropologist, offering a snapshot of sixteenth-century Kerala society. The author describes the caste system, the matrilineal *Marumakkathayam* custom, and even polyandry among certain artisan castes. A telling translation choice occurs here: the original Arabic term *kuffar* (non-believers) is rendered as "Hindus" in later English and Malayalam versions, a subtle shift that can color the reader's perception (Nainar 45).

Part Four is the visceral heart of the book. Here, Zainuddin becomes a chronicler of horror. Across fourteen chapters, he details the Portuguese arrival in 1498 and the decades of violence that followed—mosques burned, pilgrim ships captured, Qurans desecrated, and people branded with hot irons. This is not dry history; it is a raw indictment, meant to fuel rage and justify resistance (Makhdum 78-95).

A Text From a Wider World

To grasp why this text was written in Arabic, we must step back and see a bigger picture. Zainuddin was part of a vast network known as the Hadrami diaspora—scholars,

traders, and saints from Hadramaut (in modern Yemen) who spread across the Indian Ocean. Engseng Ho, in his study of this diaspora, shows that these travelers were fundamentally different from the Europeans who followed them.

The Portuguese and Dutch sailed with cannons and flags, building "militarized trading-post empires." They did business, as Ho puts it, "at the point of a gun" (21). The Hadramis, however, traveled with a different kind of power: the authority of genealogy and religious knowledge. Ho contrasts the two worlds beautifully: while Renaissance Venice merged the church of San Marco with the Doge's palace, symbolizing the union of God, commerce, and state power, the Hadrami traveler carried his authority in his lineage and his books (20).

Tuhfat al-Mujahidin belongs to this cosmopolitan world of Islamic learning, not to the narrow box of a future nation-state. It was written in Arabic—the lingua franca of this scholarly network—so its message could resonate from Malabar to the Arabian Peninsula, connecting a local struggle to a universal Muslim community, the *ummah*.

Was He Telling the Truth? A Question of Brutality

Some might dismiss Zainuddin's gruesome accounts of Portuguese torture as propaganda, the exaggerated rage of a victim. But the text finds unlikely supporters: the Portuguese themselves. The English translator M.J. Rowlandson, in his 1833 preface, directly addresses this doubt. He argues that the "furious and persecuting spirit" of the Portuguese in India is well documented, and that Zainuddin's descriptions "fall far short of the atrocious acts which writers of their own country and religion have admitted" (xiv). He points to other European accounts, like that of Monsieur Dillon, who called the Portuguese Inquisition in Goa a "house of darkness and stench" (qtd. in Rowlandson xv). The text's value, Rowlandson suggests, lies in this very agreement—a victim's testimony corroborated by the perpetrator's own records.

The "Fanatic" Label and the Search for Political Space

So, what kind of political community was Zainuddin defending? Colonial British historians later called it a space of "fanaticism," a label that stuck for decades. As scholar M.T. Ansari explains, the "fanatic" is a powerful colonial stereotype—a figure seen as irrationally religious, a primitive throwback who prefigures the modern "terrorist," someone who can only be controlled or crushed (63). This label was even adopted by some Indian nationalist thinkers.

This forces a difficult question: if it wasn't a "fanatical" space, and it certainly wasn't a modern nation-state, what was it? It's anachronistic to call it "communalist," a term born from modern secular politics. Perhaps the safest answer is that it was its own thing: a layered, cosmopolitan society where faith, trade, and local kingship overlapped in complex ways, which the Portuguese invasion violently disrupted.

A Text Reborn as a Patriotic Symbol

The text's most poignant transformation came in the 20th century. After the trauma of Partition in 1947, Indian Muslims faced a relentless, suspicion-filled question: where do your loyalties lie? In this defensive climate, *Tuhfat al-Mujahidin* was rediscovered and recast. No longer just a chronicle of holy war, it became a *proof of patriotism*. Here was a text urging a fight against foreign invaders (the Portuguese)—could there be a better symbol of love for the motherland?

This reading seeped into popular culture and even academia. Historian Velayudhan Panikkassery, in his commentary, framed the struggle as a war for national freedom, declaring that the text promised "paradise for those who fight for the freedom of the motherland" (89). The book was mobilized in speeches and school events, its complex theology simplified into a nationalist soundbite. This was a survival strategy, but it also flattened the text, forcing its rich, cosmopolitan message into the narrower container of the modern nation-state.

The Heavy Weight of a Word: *Jihad* Then and Now

The core of the text is its call to *jihad*. But words, especially powerful ones, don't stand still. In Zainuddin's world, *jihad* was a clear, defensive concept: a religious duty to protect the local community from a specific, brutal colonizer, even in alliance with Hindu kings.

Today, that same word echoes in a global arena. After 9/11, reading a text that champions *jihad* against Western powers feels uncomfortably current. Scholar M.T. Ansari notes the irony: "His text exhorts natives of Malabar to target foreign invaders… while in the contemporary world it is the terrorist who travels to tread their ways among natives" ("Seminar Address"). The localized, community-bound *jihad* of the 1500s has morphed in our imagination into the borderless, ideological "global jihad" of groups like Al-Qaeda.
Thinkers like Faisal Devji argue that this modern *jihad* has become less about territory and more about a universal ethical stance, even adopting the language of human rights to critique Western power (45, 128). This dramatic shift shows how the same textual anchor—the call to *jihad*—can pull readers into utterly different historical waters.

Why Arabic? The Language of a Dreaming Community

Given its local purpose, why wasn't the book written in Malayalam? The choice of Arabic is the key to Zainuddin's deepest ambition. He wasn't just writing to the Mappilas of one coast; he was writing to the *ummah*, the global community of believers. By using Arabic, he was placing a local fight on a world stage, appealing to Muslim rulers everywhere for solidarity. He was documenting Portuguese crimes in the international language of Islamic law and diplomacy.

This vision of a connected Muslim world, the *ummah*, has itself evolved. Scholar John O. Voll traces its modern journey: from being sidelined by nationalist "God and Country" slogans in the early 1900s, to fueling revolutionary movements in the mid-century,

to re-emerging today as a potent form of global Muslim identity in the age of the internet and the Arab Spring (356-365). Zainuddin was speaking into the earliest version of this enduring ideal.

Conclusion

Tuhfat al-Mujahidin is a shapeshifter. In the 16th century, it was a weapon. In the 19th, it was colonial evidence. In the 20th, it became a badge of patriotism. In the 21st, it is a puzzle piece in debates about global conflict.Its four-century journey teaches us that a classic text is never truly finished. Its meaning is not locked in its original pages but is forged and reforged in the act of translation and interpretation. Each generation picks it up and sees its own face reflected—its own anxieties about identity, its own political battles, its own need for a usable past.

By tracing the life of this one resilient book, we learn that history is not just about what happened. It's about the stories we tell afterwards, and how those stories, in turn, shape who we are. *Tuhfat al-Mujahidin* endures not because it has a single, timeless message, but because it is always timely, always waiting for its next reader to give it new life and new purpose.

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