

"TRANSLATION CHALLENGES OF ISLAMIC CULTURE-SPECIFIC UNITS INTO ENGLISH: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS"

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Abstract. This paper investigates the multifaceted linguistic, semantic, and jurisprudential challenges associated with the cross-cultural translation of Islamic Culture-Specific Items (CSIs) into English. Operating at the intersection of religious discourse and translation studies, the research systematically examines fifteen pivotal Islamic concepts categorized into theological, ritualistic, and socio-legal domains. Methodologically grounded in Mona Baker's taxonomy of non-equivalence at the word level and Lawrence Venuti's dual macro-strategies of domestication and foreignization, this study utilizes a qualitative, descriptive-comparative research design. The corpus under analysis is extracted from classical Islamic texts and authoritative English translations of the Qur'an and Hadith literature. The empirical findings indicate that an over-reliance on domestication via Eurocentric or secular Western lexical equivalents (e.g., rendering Zakat as "charity" or Mahram as "chaperone") triggers severe semantic reduction and legal de-regulation. Such strategies strip the source text of its precise legal binding and spiritual parameters, superimposing alien religious frameworks onto Islamic discourse. Conversely, extreme foreignization through pure transliteration risks cognitive alienation and reduces accessibility for non-Muslim target readers. To mitigate these translational gaps, this paper proposes a structured Hybrid Strategic Framework that pairs linguistic borrowing (transliteration) with immediate inline descriptive glosses or explicit footnotes. Ultimately, this study demonstrates that preserving the socio-legal and conceptual boundaries of Islamic culturemes is essential for maintaining textual fidelity and achieving objective intercultural mediation in global academic contexts.

Keywords: Culture-Specific Items, Domestication, Foreignization, Islamic Discourse, Non-Equivalence, Translation Studies, Lexical Gaps.

INTRODUCTION

Translation is no longer viewed merely as a mechanical process of linguistic substitution, but rather as an act of complex cross-cultural mediation (Baker, 2018). When navigating texts embedded with religious and theological components, this process faces heightened complexity due to the absolute lack of direct semantic equivalents in the target language. In the realm of translation studies, these specific cultural manifestations are conceptually identified as Culture-Specific Items (CSIs) or "culturemes" (Newmark, 1988). The translation of Islamic CSIs into English represents one of the most prominent lexical and conceptual gaps in modern linguistics, primarily because Arabic (the foundational language of Islamic discourse) and English stem from fundamentally divergent historical, religious, and socio-philosophical systems. According to Venuti (2008), translators dealing with culturally dense texts generally adopt one of two macro-strategies: **domestication**, which assimilates the source text into the cultural norms of the target reader, or **foreignization**, which deliberately preserves the linguistic and cultural strangeness of the source text. When applied to Islamic terminology, an over-reliance on domestication frequently leads to semantic reduction or distortion. For instance, translating the Arabic term *Zakat* into the English *charity* strips the lexical unit of its obligatory, systemic, and mathematically defined jurisprudential weight within Islamic law, reducing an absolute religious

duty to a voluntary act of goodwill. Conversely, extreme foreignization via pure transliteration without contextual glosses risks making the target text opaque and inaccessible to a non-Muslim English-speaking audience.

This paper aims to provide a comprehensive comparative analysis of how fifteen critical Islamic culture-specific units are rendered into English. By utilizing the theoretical frameworks established by Mona Baker (2018) regarding non-equivalence at the word level and Peter Newmark's (1988) taxonomy of cultural words, this study examines the linguistic and semantic implications of various micro-strategies (such as cultural equivalent, descriptive paraphrase, and borrowing). Ultimately, the research seeks to identify a balanced pedagogical and practical model that minimizes conceptual loss while ensuring structural readability in English translations of Islamic discourse.

METHODS

This study employs a qualitative, descriptive-comparative research design anchored within the theoretical frameworks of contemporary translation studies. The primary objective is to investigate the linguistic mechanisms, semantic shifts, and conceptual losses that occur when Islamic Culture-Specific Items (CSIs) are translated into English.

Data Collection and Corpus Selection: The research material (corpus) for this study consists of fifteen purposefully selected Islamic cultural terms (culturemes) that frequently appear in theological, ritualistic, and socio-legal Islamic discourses. To ensure a systematic analysis, the corpus was categorized into three distinct domains based on Peter Newmark's (1988) classification of cultural words:

1. **Theological and Abstract Concepts** (e.g., *Taqwa*, *Jihad*, *Barakah*)
2. **Ritualistic and Practical Units** (e.g., *Wudu*, *Tayammum*, *Iftar*)
3. **Socio-Legal and Jurisprudential Terms** (e.g., *Zakat*, *Iddah*, *Mahram*)

The data samples and their corresponding English translations were extracted from widely recognized, authoritative English renderings of Islamic texts, including standard translations of the Qur'an (such as those by Abdullah Yusuf Ali and Marmaduke Pickthall) and classical jurisprudential commentaries. This selection ensures that the analyzed units represent authentic translation practices rather than isolated or hypothetical examples.

[Mona Baker's Model] → Analyzes Non-Equivalence & Micro-strategies (Paraphrase, Loan Word, Omission)

[Lawrence Venuti's Model] → Evaluates Macro-strategies (Domestication vs. Foreignization)

First, each Arabic CSI was evaluated using Mona Baker's (2018) taxonomy of non-equivalence at the word level to determine why the concept lacks a direct lexical match in the English language. Second, the English renditions were examined through Lawrence Venuti's (2008) ideological framework of **domestication** (target-culture oriented) and **foreignization** (source-culture oriented).

The semantic implications of specific micro-strategies—such as using a cultural equivalent, translation by a more general word, descriptive paraphrase, or borrowing with an inline gloss—were critically assessed. The qualitative evaluation focused on identifying instances of "semantic reduction," "legal de-regulation," or "cultural mismatch" to measure the degree of conceptual fidelity maintained in the final English text.

RESULTS and DISCUSSIONS THEOLOGICAL AND ABSTRACT CONCEPTS

Theological culture-specific items (CSIs) in Islamic discourse represent highly abstract, multi-layered concepts that resist direct lexical mapping in English. When translating these terms, translators often default to domestication by adopting Christian or secular Eurocentric terms, which ultimately alters the semantic core of the source text.

1. The Concept of *Taqwa* (تقوى)

The lexical unit *Taqwa* is frequently rendered in Western translations as "piety," "godliness," or "the fear of God." While these renditions carry positive spiritual connotations in English, they fail to capture the etymological and theological depth of the Arabic root *w-q-y* (meaning "to protect" or "to shield"). According to Islamic theology, *Taqwa* is not a passive emotion like fear, but an active psychological and spiritual state of remaining hyper-vigilant against violating divine boundaries. By utilizing a simplified cultural equivalent like "piety," the translation undergoes a process of semantic reduction, transforming a comprehensive lifestyle of spiritual awareness into a narrow concept of religious devotion. To minimize this loss, a descriptive paraphrase such as **"God-consciousness joined with spiritual vigilance"** or foreignization with an explicit gloss is highly recommended.

2. The Concept of *Jihad* (جهاد)

Perhaps no term has suffered more from ideological and Eurocentric domestication than *Jihad*. In mainstream English media and historical translations, it is almost universally mapped onto the phrase "Holy War." From a translation studies perspective, this is a severe cultural mismatch. The concept of "Holy War" is an imported historical framework originating from the Christian Crusades (*Bellum Sacrum*), which has no direct conceptual equivalent in classical Islamic jurisprudence. The Arabic root *j-h-d* denotes "striving," "exerting effort," or "struggling."

Islam divides this concept into the "Greater Jihad" (*Jihad al-Nafs* — the internal struggle against one's base desires) and the "Lesser Jihad" (physical defense of the community).

Translating *Jihad* as "Holy War" not only misinforms the target reader but also strips the term of its primary spiritual and ethical dimensions. This represents a critical failure of domestication where the target culture's socio-political biases override textual fidelity.

3. The Concept of *Barakah* (بركة)

When translating *Barakah*, translators typically rely on the English word "blessing."

However, a comparative analysis reveals a distinct semantic gap. In English, "blessing" is often understood as a static gift or approval from the divine. In contrast, *Barakah* is a dynamic and cumulative concept denoting the presence of divine grace in a thing, which causes it to increase exponentially in utility, value, and spiritual benefit, regardless of its physical size. For example, a small amount of food possessing *Barakah* can satisfy a large number of people.

Translating it merely as "blessing" neutralizes this inherent element of divine increase and spiritual multiplication.

"Ritualistic and Practical Concepts"

Source CSI (Arabic)	Common English Renditions	Applied Strategy (Baker/Newmark)	Cultural & Semantic Implication
Wudu (وضوء)	<i>Ablution, Washing</i>	Domestication / Cultural Equivalent	Semantic Deviation: "Ablution" historically refers to a ceremonial washing of hands or vessels (e.g.,

Source CSI (Arabic)	Common English Renditions	Applied Strategy (Baker/Newmark)	Cultural & Semantic Implication
			in Christian liturgy). It obscures the fact that <i>Wudu</i> is a strict, structured legal prerequisite for Islamic prayer, not a casual wash (Almahasees, n.d.).
Tayammum (تَيَمَّمَ)	<i>Dry ablution</i>	Descriptive Paraphrase / Explication	Functional Clarity: Since no English word exists for wiping the face and hands with pure earth, this paraphrase successfully explains the mechanics, though it lacks the concise spiritual weight of the original.
Raka'ah (رَكْعَة)	<i>Unit of prayer, Prostration</i>	Structural Shift / Borrowing	Reductionism: "Prostration" only covers one movement (<i>Sujud</i>). Translating it as "unit of prayer" is mathematically accurate but requires an inline gloss to explain the sequence of standing, bowing, and prostrating.
Suhur / Iftar (سُحُور / إِفْطَار)	<i>Pre-dawn meal / Breakfast (or dinner)</i>	Domestication via functional terms	Loss of Sacred Context: Translating <i>Iftar</i> as "breakfast" or "dinner" completely secularizes the action. It completely strips away the spiritual reward of breaking a fast at a legally prescribed moment.

Ritualistic and Practical Concepts

Unlike abstract theological items, ritualistic CSIs describe concrete physical procedures. However, their translation into English introduces unique challenges because these physical actions are legally bound to specific spiritual outcomes in Islamic jurisprudence (*Fiqh*).

The Case of *Wudu* (وُضُوء) and *Tayammum* (تَيَمَّمَ)

The cross-cultural transmission of terms related to ritual purification consistently exposes the limitations of domestication. In the majority of mainstream English translations, *Wudu* is replaced by the Christian or secular term "ablution." From a translational perspective, this substitution results in what dynamic equivalence theories call semantic deviation. In Eurocentric contexts, "ablution" carries a liturgical connotation associated with the washing of a priest's hands or sacred vessels.

In contrast, *Wudu* is a universal, highly ritualized daily practice compulsory for every practicing Muslim before executing formal prayers (*Salah*). When water is unavailable, the Islamic legal system introduces the alternative concept of *Tayammum*.

Translators have no choice but to deploy a descriptive paraphrase, typically rendering it as "dry ablution using clean sand or earth." While this micro-strategy achieves functional clarity, it expands a concise, single-word Arabic concept into a lengthy phrase, reducing the structural tightness of the text. This demonstrates Mona Baker's (2018) assertion that when a target language lacks a specific concept, translation by paraphrase is the most accessible but structurally heavy solution.

The Case of *Suhur* (سحور) and *Iftar* (إفطار)

Temporal ritualistic units such as *Suhur* and *Iftar* present another socio-linguistic barrier.

Translators targeting high readability often domesticate these terms into "pre-dawn meal" and "breakfast" or "dinner." However, translating *Iftar* as "breakfast" causes an immediate cultural mismatch for an English reader, who primarily associates breakfast with morning routines. Even though *Iftar* literally means "breaking the fast," its semantic field is deeply rooted in the sacred atmosphere of the holy month of Ramadan, specific communal gatherings, and exact astronomical timing (sunset). Relying solely on secular English terms like "dinner" strips the source text of its religious atmosphere, transforming a sacred ritual into a mundane biological activity. Thus, retaining the source terms via **borrowing (transliteration) accompanied by a brief contextual footnote** is far more effective for high-impact academic discourse.

"Socio-Legal Terms"

Source CSI (Arabic)	Common English Renditions	Applied Strategy (Baker/Newmark)	Legal & Semantic Implication
Zakat (زكاة)	<i>Alms, Charity, Poor-due</i>	Domestication / Cultural Equivalent	Legal De-regulation: "Charity" implies a voluntary act. <i>Zakat</i> is a mandatory spiritual and financial tax with specific legal thresholds (<i>Nisab</i>) (Bahumaid, 2010).
Iddah (عدة)	<i>Waiting period</i>	Functional Equivalent / Descriptive	Semantic Dilution: "Waiting period" is overly vague. It fails to convey the strict legal and biological purpose of the period (verifying pregnancy and protecting lineage) in Islamic family law.
Mahram (محرم)	<i>Unmarriageable kin, Chaperone</i>	Paraphrase / Cultural Approximation	Functional Mismatch: "Chaperone" is a social escort. A <i>Mahram</i> is a permanent legal status based on blood relation or

Source CSI (Arabic)	Common English Renditions	Applied Strategy (Baker/Newmark)	Legal & Semantic Implication
			marriage that grants explicit legal rights regarding travel and interaction.
Waqf (وقف)	<i>Endowment, Trust, Foundation</i>	Domestication via legal analogy	Partial Equivalence: While "trust" or "endowment" captures the financial mechanism, it lacks the sacred, irreversible dimension of dedicating property eternally to God.

and reinforcing ideological and diplomatic priorities.

Socio-Legal and Jurisprudential Units

Socio-legal CSIs within Islamic discourse present a significant challenge for intercultural mediation because they carry absolute legal weight within Islamic jurisprudence (*Fiqh*).

Translating these units using Western legal or sociological analogies often results in a profound misrepresentation of the governance systems inherent in Islamic societies.

The Case of *Zakat* (زكاة) and *Waqf* (وقف)

The systematic distortion caused by domesticating economic and financial religious concepts is most evident in the translation of *Zakat*. Frequently replaced by the English terms "charity" or "almsgiving," the term undergoes what translational frameworks categorize as legal de-regulation. In Western secular or Judeo-Christian frameworks, "charity" is conceptualized as an act of personal benevolence, completely optional and unregulated by law. Conversely, *Zakat* is one of the Five Pillars of Islam, functioning as a mandatory, institutionalized financial obligation levied annually on specific assets that exceed a precise legal threshold (*Nisab*). Translating it as "charity" neutralizes its compulsory, state-level economic functionality. Similarly, *Waqf* is often domesticated as an "endowment" or "charitable trust." While this functional analogy is structurally helpful, it fails to encompass the spiritual and metaphysical dimension of *Waqf*, which dictates that the ownership of the property is permanently transferred away from human hands to God, rendering it unalienable and legally irreversible under sharia law.

The Case of *Iddah* (عدة) and *Mahram* (محرم)

In Islamic family law, terms like *Iddah* and *Mahram* govern specific social interactions and structural boundaries, possessing no institutional equivalents in Western societies. When *Iddah* is translated simply as a "waiting period," the linguistic rendition becomes overly broad and legally hollow. The term specifically denotes the mandatory timeframe an Islamic woman must observe after divorce or the death of her spouse before she can legally remarry. Its primary legal functions are both biological (ascertaining the absence of pregnancy to prevent the confusion of paternity) and psychological (providing a period for mourning or marital reconciliation). Furthermore, the term *Mahram* is routinely mistranslated as a "chaperone" or "male escort." In sociological terms, a chaperone is a temporary, socially appointed supervisor.

In contrast, a *Mahram* is a permanent legal status defined by strict genealogical, marital, or foster relations with whom marriage is fundamentally prohibited. This status carries severe legal implications regarding privacy (*Hijab*), travel, and inheritance. Relying on superficial Western cultural approximations like "chaperone" strip the source text of its precise legal framework, replacing a strict jurisprudential structure with a casual social custom. Therefore, as proposed by Mona Baker (2018), the most effective methodology for preserving the integrity of such socio-legal units is **borrowing the original Arabic term (transliteration) combined with an explicit, inline descriptive gloss or a comprehensive footnote.**

CONCLUSION

The translation of Islamic culture-specific items (CSIs) into English extends far beyond mere lexical substitution; it is an intricate exercise in ideological, legal, and theological negotiation. This comparative analysis of fifteen pivotal Islamic concepts across theological, ritualistic, and socio-legal domains demonstrates that a standardized, one-size-fits-all translation strategy invariably results in severe conceptual distortion or semantic loss. The empirical findings of this study reveal that an over-reliance on **domestication** — while successfully optimizing target-text readability and linguistic accessibility for a Western audience — consistently strips Islamic terms of their institutional and spiritual gravity. Replacing precise jurisprudential and spiritual concepts like *Zakat*, *Taqwa*, and *Mahram* with Western or Eurocentric secular equivalents like "charity," "piety," and "chaperone" triggers a process of legal de-regulation and de-spiritualization. Such approximations superimpose foreign historical and religious frameworks onto the source text, misinforming the target reader and erasing the unique systemic context of Islamic discourse. Conversely, while **foreignization** through pure transliteration acts as a linguistic shield that preserves the semantic boundaries of the source text, it risks rendering the English text opaque, alienating non-Muslim readers who lack the necessary cultural presuppositions. Consequently, this paper proposes a **Hybrid Strategic Framework** as the most viable pedagogical and practical solution for high-impact academic and literary translations: [Arabic Source CSI] → [Transliteration / Borrowing] + [Inline Descriptive Gloss / Footnote]. By retaining the original Arabic lexical unit (e.g., *Iddah* or *Barakah*) and immediately pairing it with a functional, descriptive explanation, translators can achieve a dual objective: preserving the precise semantic and legal boundaries of the source culture while maintaining structural clarity and accessibility for the target reader. Ultimately, maintaining this delicate balance is essential for fostering accurate, textually faithful, and respectful cross-cultural and inter-religious communication in the modern globalized world.

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