

Artificial Intelligence and the Translation of Cultural Heritage: Preserving Memory in a Digital World

الذكاء الاصطناعي وترجمة التراث الثقافي: الحفاظ على الذاكرة في عصر الرقمنة

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Abstract

This paper examines translation as a mechanism for preserving and transmitting cultural memory, focusing specifically on the Arab world and the increasingly prominent role of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in heritage translation. In a globalized and accelerated digital communication, translation has become indispensable to the survival of cultural heritage. It traces how translation enables the transmission of collective memory, safeguards endangered traditions, and brings marginalized cultures into global visibility. The article investigates how digital archives, machine translation, automated transcription, and multilingual accessibility tools are reshaping the circulation of Arabic manuscripts, oral traditions, and literary works. It argues that while AI substantially accelerates these processes, it also introduces significant linguistic, ethical, and cultural risks. Automated systems regularly struggle with symbolic language, religious terminology, poetic form, and culturally inherent meaning specific to Arabic heritage. The study therefore demonstrates that AI is best understood as a complementary instrument rather than a substitute for human translators, whose interpretative and ethical capacities remain irreplaceable.

Keywords: Translation; Cultural Heritage; Artificial Intelligence; Digital Memory Preservation; Arab World.

Résumé

Le présent article met l'accent sur la traduction en tant que mécanisme fondamental de préservation et de transmission de la mémoire culturelle, en portant une attention particulière au monde arabe et à l'intégration croissante de l'intelligence artificielle dans le domaine de la traduction patrimoniale. Dans un contexte de mondialisation et d'accélération des échanges numériques, la traduction s'impose comme une condition sine qua non à la survie du patrimoine culturel. L'étude se focalise sur manière les archives numériques, la traduction automatique et les outils d'accessibilité multilingue reconfigurent la circulation des manuscrits arabes, des traditions orales et des productions littéraires. Si l'intelligence artificielle optimise sensiblement ces processus, elle génère parallèlement des risques d'ordre linguistique, éthique et culturel. Les systèmes automatisés se révèlent insuffisants face au langage symbolique,

à la terminologie religieuse et aux structures poétiques constituant le patrimoine arabe. L'article soutient en définitive que l'IA doit être envisagée comme un instrument complémentaire, et non substitutif, du traducteur humain, dont les compétences interprétatives et le discernement éthique demeurent irremplaçables.

Mots-clés : Traduction ; Patrimoine culturel ; Intelligence artificielle ; Préservation de la mémoire numérique ; Monde Arabe.

1. Introduction

In today's world of globalization, digital communication, and growing intercultural interaction, translation has become one of the main ways through which cultures connect and reach international audiences. Cultural traditions and artistic productions are no longer limited by geographical boundaries; they now circulate through literature, cinema, tourism, museums, digital platforms, and academic scholarship. In this environment, cultural heritage holds a particularly important place because it represents the collective memory, identity, and historical continuity of societies. It is not only a reminder of the past, but also a means through which communities, understand them in the present and shape their future.

The Arab world possesses one of the richest and most diverse cultural heritages in human civilization. From pre-Islamic poetry and Abbasid intellectual achievements to Andalusian music, oral traditions, and the art of calligraphy, Arab heritage reflects centuries of religious, artistic, and intellectual creativity. This heritage includes both tangible elements — such as manuscripts, mosques, archaeological sites, and historic cities — and intangible forms like storytelling, music, rituals, proverbs, and traditional knowledge passed down through generations. UNESCO considers intangible cultural heritage an essential part of human diversity because it safeguards the living memory of communities and protects traditions that are increasingly threatened by globalization and cultural homogenization.

The preservation and global transmission of Arab cultural heritage rely greatly on translation. Without it, many Arab literary, intellectual, and artistic contributions would remain inaccessible to non-Arabic-speaking audiences. Translation therefore goes beyond the simple transfer of words from one language to another; it acts as a process of interpretation and cultural mediation that enables civilizations to communicate across time and space.

In recent years, Artificial Intelligence and machine translation technologies have significantly changed this field. Digital archives, automated subtitling, and neural machine translation tools now play an increasing role in preserving and spreading Arabic cultural heritage. These new technologies improve accessibility and allow cultural materials to circulate more rapidly and on a larger scale. However, they also raise important ethical, linguistic, and cultural issues. Although AI can support manuscript preservation and speed up translation processes, it often struggles to convey symbolism, religious sensitivity, and deeply rooted cultural meanings.

This paper examines translation as a bridge between cultural memory and universality. It explores the historical role of translation in Arab civilization, the contribution of AI technologies to heritage preservation, and the ethical and linguistic challenges involved in translating Arab cultural heritage in the digital era. Moving from historical foundations to contemporary technological practices, the study ultimately highlights the irreplaceable role of the human translator.

2. Translation in Arab-Islamic Civilization

Throughout history, translation has played a crucial role in the transmission of civilizations and the preservation of knowledge. Philosophical, scientific, and literary traditions have survived because they were translated and reinterpreted across different linguistic and cultural contexts. Within the Arab-Islamic world, this process reached one of its most influential peaks, particularly during the Abbasid period, when translation became a cornerstone of intellectual life.

In the ninth century, Baghdad emerged as a major intellectual center of the medieval world, largely thanks to the establishment of Bayt al-Hikma (the House of Wisdom). There, scholars translated key works of Greek philosophy, medicine, mathematics, and science into Arabic. This translation movement was not only a mechanical transfer of knowledge but was an act of intellectual production that reshaped and enriched the original ideas.

The influence of this tradition can also be noticeable through an Algerian historical perspective. In medieval North Africa—particularly in cities such as **Tlemcen**, **Bejaïa** and **Constantine**, which later became important centers of learning, scholars inherited and continued transmitting this intellectual tradition. Bejaïa, for example, became a major scholarly port where mathematical and astronomical knowledge circulated between Andalusia, the Maghreb, and the wider Mediterranean world. Figures such as **Ibn Khaldoun**, who lived and wrote in regions that include present-day Algeria, reflect this broader Maghrebi engagement with knowledge production, interpretation, and transmission shaped by multilingual intellectual environments. (Gutas, 1998, pp. 27–30).

This historical experience shows how translation allowed cultural heritage to survive and evolve across centuries. Without the Arabic translation movement, many classical Greek texts might have been lost. Likewise, without the scholarly networks of North Africa and the Maghreb—including Algerian intellectual centers—much of this knowledge circulation would have been geographically and culturally incomplete. Translation thus functioned as a mechanism of continuity, connecting ancient civilizations to later societies and making the Arab-Islamic world as a bridge between antiquity and modern intellectual history.

2.1 The Andalusian and Maghrebi Dimension

The same phenomenon can be observed in the transmission of Andalusian heritage, which spread profoundly across North Africa, particularly in Algeria. Al-Andalus represented a unique space of intercultural interaction where Muslim, Christian, and Jewish communities coexisted and contributed to a flourishing intellectual and artistic civilization (Menocal, 2002, pp. 33–41). This rich heritage crossed the Mediterranean and became deeply rooted in Maghrebi cities such as Tlemcen, often regarded as a "daughter of Andalusian culture" (Seghier, 2025, p. 4). In these cities, Andalusian

music, poetry, and architectural traditions were preserved and integrated into local cultural life.

The influence of this heritage extended beyond the Islamic world. The philosophical writings of Ibn Rochd, translated into Latin and Hebrew, played a major role in shaping European scholasticism in medieval Europe (Leaman, 1998, pp. 12–19). Likewise, Andalusian poetic forms such as the *muwashahat* left a lasting imprint on North African literary and musical traditions (Touma, 1996, pp. 63–67). Their legacy remains especially visible in Algerian classical Andalusian music, which continues to be performed and celebrated in cities such as Algiers, Constantine, and Tlemcen.

Nowadays, manuscripts and musical heritage related to these traditions, preserved in Algerian archives, libraries, and cultural institutions, continue to be studied, digitized, and translated through international cooperation (UNESCO, 2012; Bessouh & Belarbi, 2021, pp. 7–9). These efforts highlight that translation — whether textual, cultural, or digital — remains essential for preserving and transmitting cultural heritage across time, geography, and generations.

3. Translation, Memory, and Cultural Mediation

Theoretical reflections on translation shed light on its importance in preserving heritage and transmitting collective memory. George Steiner argues in *After Babel* that translation is fundamentally an act of interpretation rather than merely a linguistic substitution: translators reconstruct meaning within another linguistic and cultural system (Steiner, 1975, pp. 28–30). This perspective is especially relevant in heritage translation, where cultural texts contain symbols, beliefs, and historical references deeply integrated in the source culture.

Walter Benjamin, in *The Task of the Translator*, describes translation as a means through which texts achieve an “afterlife” — a renewal of existence within another cultural context rather than a simple reproduction of the original (Benjamin, 1968, pp. 71–72). This framework is particularly pertinent to Arab cultural heritage, since many Arab literary and religious texts continue to circulate worldwide through translation long time after their initial composition.

Arab cultural expressions frequently possess spiritual, poetic, and historical dimensions that exceed literal meaning. Classical Arabic poetry relies heavily on metaphor, rhythm, symbolism, and intertextuality (Versteegh, 2014, pp. 120–123). The pre-Islamic *Mu'allaqat* poems contain references to tribal identity, desert life, and collective memory that require cultural interpretation alongside linguistic translation. Paul Ricœur’s concept of “linguistic hospitality” — the translator’s openness to cultural difference while acknowledging the impossibility of perfect equivalence — is similarly instructive (Ricœur, 2006, pp. 23–26). For Ricœur, the translator occupies an ethical as well as a linguistic position, serving as a mediator who must balance fidelity

to the source culture against accessibility for the target reader. This is precisely the tension that defines heritage translation across cultural boundaries.

Translation therefore serves as a bridge between cultural specificity and universality. Through translation, local experiences enter global cultural dialogue: Arab literature translated into English, French, Spanish, and other languages invites international readers into Arab history, identity, and artistic expression, transforming cultural memory into a shared human inheritance (Hatim & Mason, 1997, pp. 1–5).

4. Artificial Intelligence and the Preservation of Arab Cultural Heritage

AI and machine translation technologies have transformed the way translation works around the world. Programs like Google Translate and DeepL can now translate text almost instantly, something that was hard to imagine twenty years ago. These systems have improved a great deal and can produce fairly natural-sounding translations. However, they still have trouble with cultural references, expressions, and language that depends heavily on context.

In the Arab world, this issue is especially important. Arabic is a linguistically diverse language, with many regional dialects spoken alongside a formal written standard. AI tools are now being used to preserve and share Arab cultural heritage, scanning old manuscripts, adding subtitles to videos, and making Arabic content more accessible to people around the world. This brings real benefits, including better access to knowledge and stronger cultural exchange. But it also comes with serious concerns. Machine translation tends to smooth over dialectal differences, can misrepresent ideas that are deeply rooted in local culture, and creates a reliance on systems that are not always well understood by those who use them (Cronin, 2013, pp. 37–42). Balancing these opportunities and risks is one of the central challenges of using AI for translation in the Arab world.

4.1 Manuscript Preservation and Digital Archives

One of AI's most significant contributions concerns the preservation of Arabic manuscripts. The Arab world holds millions of historical manuscripts covering theology, medicine, astronomy, mathematics, literature, philosophy, and history. Many remain inaccessible to people because of linguistic complexity, physical deterioration, or limited translation capacity. AI-assisted technologies now contribute to preserving these archives through optical character recognition (OCR), automated transcription, digital restoration, and machine-assisted translation.

Institutions, such as the Bibliotheca Alexandrina in Egypt and the Qatar National Library, have launched digital heritage projects aimed at preserving and translating Arabic manuscripts for international audiences. AI systems can identify damaged text, restore faded documents, and convert handwritten Arabic into searchable digital archives facilitating access to Arab intellectual heritage.

Arabic, nevertheless, presents impressive challenges for AI systems. The language is characterized by morphological complexity, rich derivational structures, and considerable dialectal variation (Versteegh, 2014, pp. 94–97). Historical manuscripts frequently contain classical vocabulary, calligraphic conventions, and grammatical forms that differ significantly from contemporary usage. Machine translation therefore requires human revision to ensure linguistic and cultural accuracy (Wright, 1896, pp. 55–60).

4.2 Large Language Models and the New Generation of AI Translation

Recent developments in Generative AI, especially Large Language Models (LLMs) like GPT-4, GPT-4o, Gemini, Claude have changed machine translation in major ways. Older Neural Machine Translation (NMT) systems worked mainly at the sentence level, using statistical and neural alignment. LLMs go further: they can process longer stretches of text, understand how sentences relate to each other, and produce translations that can be read more naturally. Because they can interpret context, rephrase ideas, and keep a consistent style, they show real promise for literary and culturally sensitive translation (OpenAI, 2025; Hassan et al., 2024). Still, LLMs have clear limits when it comes to cultural heritage texts. They generate translations based on patterns learned from data, not from real cultural understanding. This means a translation can sound fluent while still missing historical references, symbolic meaning, religious nuance, or culture-specific expressions.

Research also shows that LLMs can produce cultural bias or oversimplified interpretations when translating historical or literary material. Even though these systems demonstrate strong linguistic, they cannot replace what human translators bring: cultural knowledge, historical awareness, and ethical judgment (Ji et al., 2023; Guerreiro et al., 2024). For this reason, most current research supports a human-in-the-loop model, where AI acts as a helpful assistant rather than an independent translator. For Arab cultural heritage specifically, this means combining AI's speed and scale with the cultural insight and judgment that only human translators can provide.

5. Arabic Literature in Global Circulation

Translation has been essential to the international recognition of Arabic literature. The global success of Egyptian novelist Nadjib Mahfoud was made possible through translations of his novels into English, French, and other major languages (Allen, 2000, pp. 1–5). His works introduced global audiences to representations of Egyptian society, urban transformation, and cultural identity. Similarly, the poetry of Mahmoud Darwish reached worldwide audiences through translation, communicating Palestinian historical experience to readers with no direct knowledge of the context.

Yet, literary translation remains particularly demanding for AI systems, because Arabic literary language relies on ambiguity, symbolism, irony, and rhetorical density that machine translation often fails to capture (Bassnett, 2014, pp. 85–90). Poetry

presents even greater difficulty, since rhythm, sound, and emotional resonance are integral to the source language and cannot be separated from it without significant loss.

The history of translating *One Thousand and One Nights* further illustrates the ideological dimensions of the problem. European translations produced during the colonial period frequently emphasized exoticism and fantasy while neglecting the philosophical, social, and historical dimensions of the text. These translations contributed to stereotypical representations of Arab societies within Western imagination (Said, 1978, pp. 67–73)

To further illustrate the challenges discussed above, the following examples compare a human literary translation with a typical machine-generated translation of expressions taken from *One Thousand and One Nights*. These examples are intended as illustrative rather than empirical evidence, demonstrating how stylistic and cultural nuances may be preserved or lost in translation.

Arabic Source Language	Human Translation	AI Translation	Commentary
كان يا ما كان في قديم الزمان	<i>In days of yore, in ages long gone by...</i> (Lane, 1839)	<i>There was, there was, in ancient times... ..</i> (ChatGpt)	Human translation employs an idiomatic English storytelling formula, while machine translation closely follows Arabic syntax, producing a grammatically correct but stylistically awkward sentence.
بلغني أيها الملك السعيد، ذو الرأي الرشيد	<i>It hath reached me, O auspicious King, of wise judgment...</i> (Burton, 1885)	<i>It has reached me, O happy king, of sound opinion...</i> (ChatGpt)	The human translator recreates the high narrative style of classical Arabic storytelling, whereas AI renders the expression literally, losing its rhetorical elegance and ceremonial tone.

It can be observed that contemporary AI systems are capable of producing fluent and semantically accurate translations. Nevertheless, they generally privilege lexical equivalence over literary adaptation. Human translators, by contrast, reconstruct the stylistic register, narrative rhythm, and cultural atmosphere of the source text through interpretative choices informed by literary convention and

intercultural competence. This comparison demonstrates that, although generative AI and Large Language Models have considerably improved translation quality, they still encounter difficulties in conveying the aesthetic, historical, and symbolic dimensions that characterize Arab literary heritage.

6. Sacred Texts and Religious Heritage

The translation of religious heritage raises even more acute challenges than those encountered in secular cultural contexts. In Islamic tradition, the Qur'an is considered linguistically miraculous in Arabic, a concept known as *i'jaz al-Qur'an* and translations are therefore generally understood as interpretations or approximations rather than exact equivalents. Qur'anic language possesses rhetorical, spiritual, and theological dimensions that resist reproduction in any other language.

Nowadays, AI technologies provide instant translations of Qur'anic verses through digital applications and online platforms, considerably facilitating access for non-Arabic speakers worldwide. However, these tools raise serious concerns regarding theological accuracy and contextual interpretation. Key Arabic concepts like *rahma*, *baraka*, and *sabr* carry complex spiritual and emotional meanings that cannot be adequately rendered by automated translation systems operating on statistical pattern recognition alone (Bermann & Wood, 2005, pp. 12–15). As Venuti (1995, p. 20) has argued, translation is never a neutral act; it always involves interpretative choices shaped by cultural, ideological, and historical forces. AI translation tools may produce linguistically coherent words but miss the deeper religious meanings that Muslim scholars have carefully developed over centuries.

Source text /Concept	Machine Translation	Human Translation	Main Issue
رحمة (rahma)	Mercy	Divine mercy, compassion (depending on context)	AI tends to choose a direct lexical equivalent, whereas a human translator adapts the meaning according to the religious and cultural context.
بركة (baraka)	Blessing	Divine blessing, spiritual grace, or baraka (with explanatory note)	The spiritual and cultural connotations are often reduced in machine translation.
صبر (sabr)	Patience	Steadfast perseverance, faithful endurance, forbearance.	Human translators preserve the ethical and religious dimensions of the concept

These examples further illustrate that lexical equivalence alone is insufficient for heritage translation, where cultural, historical, and theological meanings frequently require interpretative intervention by human translators.

The same difficulties emerge when dealing with Sufi poetry and Islamic texts that belong to Algerian religious heritage. Algeria has produced influential religious scholars and thinkers whose works represent significant translation difficulties, most notably Sheikh Abdelhamid Ben Badis, whose Arabic writings were central to the Islamic reform movement of the twentieth century. The poetry of Mohamed Laïd Al-Khalifa, one of Algeria's most celebrated classical Arabic poets, similarly combines religious devotion with deep cultural references that are difficult to render in another language without significant loss of meaning. The philosophical and spiritual writings of Emir Abdelkader al-Jazairi, rooted in the mystical tradition of Ibn Arabi, present a further example of texts that resist accurate automated translation (Bouyerdene, 2012, pp. 78–83). Such texts carry spiritual and cultural layers that AI tools are not yet equipped to handle. Translating Algeria's religious heritage therefore remains dependent on human translators with the theological knowledge and cultural sensitivity that no machine can currently replace.

7. The Essential Role of the Human Translator

Despite significant technological progress, the human translator remains essential in heritage translation. Human translators bring cultural awareness, ethical judgment, and interpretative sensitivity that AI systems cannot replicate — capacities that are rooted not in data processing but in lived cultural experience and disciplinary formation (Baker, 2011, pp. 23–27). Translators do not simply transfer words between languages: they mediate between cultures, negotiate meaning within historical and social contexts, and accept responsibility for the representations they produce (Bassnett, 2002, pp. 11–14). This understanding of translation as cultural mediation rather than mere linguistic substitution has been central to translation studies since at least the cultural turn of the 1990s (Lefevere, 1992, pp. 6–9).

In the Arab context, translators function not only as linguistic specialists but as ethical mediators charged with preserving cultural authenticity while simultaneously facilitating intercultural understanding. They must constantly negotiate between fidelity to the source culture and accessibility for international readerships — a negotiation that involves aesthetic, political, and moral dimensions that no algorithm can fully assume. This tension is particularly acute when translating heritage material whose social and symbolic value is inseparable from its original linguistic form.

AI technologies may usefully assist translators by accelerating technical processes, organizing digital archives, and improving multilingual accessibility at scale. But cultural interpretation ultimately requires human understanding and human responsibility. Heritage translation involves ethical decisions concerning representation, adaptation, and cultural sensitivity that cannot be reduced to

algorithmic processes without significant impoverishment of the result (Pym, 2010, pp. 72–75). The appropriate model is therefore not replacement but collaboration: AI as a tool that extends and supports human capacity rather than replace it.

8. Conclusion

Translation has always been essential to preserving cultural memory and connecting civilizations across time. From the great translation movement of the Abbasid era, when scholars worked to transmit the knowledge of ancient Greece, Persia, and India into Arabic, to the digital archives of the present day, translation has allowed Arab heritage to reach audiences across languages, borders, and centuries. It is not merely a technical process but an act of cultural continuity.

Artificial Intelligence brings new and significant possibilities to this work. It makes rare manuscripts more accessible, speeds up the process of digitization and preservation, and broadens the global reach of Arab cultural production in ways that were difficult to imagine just a decade ago. For a heritage as rich, diverse, and historically layered as that of the Arab world, these capabilities matter enormously. But AI has real and important limits. It struggles with cultural nuance, religious language, historical context, and the structural biases that are quietly encoded in its training data. It can process words, but it does not always grasp what those words carry, the weight of tradition, the sensitivity of sacred text, the complexity of meaning that has accumulated over centuries. These are not minor technical gaps. They go to the heart of what heritage translation really requires.

This is why technology and human expertise should not be seen as competing forces. AI works best as a tool that supports, extends, and accelerates the work of human translators, one that handles scale and speed while human judgment handles meaning and responsibility. The two are most powerful when they work together, each compensating for the other's weaknesses.

Finally, the preservation and transmission of Arab cultural memory depends on more than efficient tools. It depends on deep knowledge, ethical responsibility and intercultural sensitivity. It requires people who understand not only the language, but the civilization behind it, its history, its values, and ways of making meaning. With the right balance between human and technological effort, Arab cultural heritage can continue to speak across languages, cultures, and generations. Not something preserved and set aside, but a living tradition that remains relevant and meaningful to people around the world.

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