

Conscientious Bilingual Description: Treating problematic language in colonial records on the Qatar Digital Library

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Agenda

- Decolonising Archival Language Initiatives
- CBD
- Methodology & Approaches
- Q&A

Decolonising Archival Language

Why Decolonise?

- **Problematic Terminology:** Archival records and catalogue descriptions often contain terms now considered **offensive, derogatory, or outdated**, such as 'Bania', 'Blackamoor', 'Coolie', 'Moor', 'Native', 'Negro', 'Oriental', and 'Primitive'.
- **Perpetuating Colonial Perspectives:** Language used in colonial contexts often **reinforced hierarchies**, portraying non-Europeans as 'inferior' or 'uncivilised'. For example, the term 'primitive' serves to reinforce this colonial perspective.
- **Ignoring Diversity:** Broad and generalising terms like 'Arab', 'Indigenous', and 'Oriental' can **obscure**

the diversity of people, cultures, and languages.

The term 'Bania' became a broad category that disregarded specific communities.

- **Exclusionary Language:** Certain terms and phrasing can **create a sense of 'us' and 'them'**, reinforcing who is seen as belonging and who is not. The term 'native' was often used as a euphemism for 'non-British' or 'non-European' without distinction.

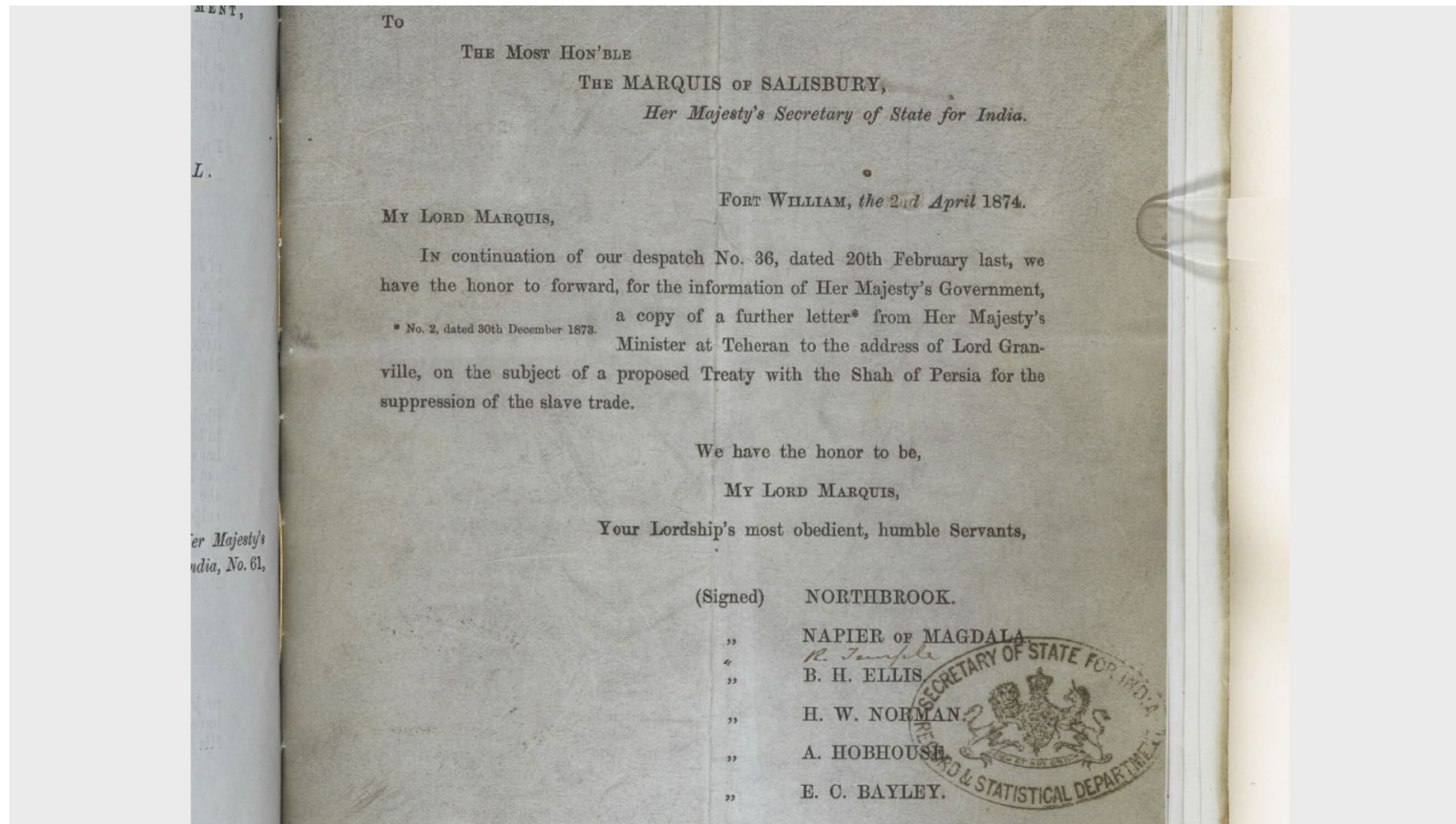
• **Historical Context vs. Contemporary Impact:**

While historical language reflects past norms, its continued uncritical use can **perpetuate harm and exclude contemporary audiences.**

Decolonising Archival Language - Initiatives

- The **DE-BIAS project** and tool aims to **detect and contextualise potentially harmful language** in cultural heritage collections. (Europeana Pro)
- the *[Words Matter](#)* glossary produced by the National Museum of World Cultures in the Netherlands.
- Archives for Black Lives in Philadelphia (A4BLiP) - Created "**Anti-Racist Description Resources**" to address racist and colonial language in archival finding aids
- Society of American Archivists (SAA) - Developed the "**Inclusive Description**" guidelines to promote culturally sensitive metadata creation
- **The Lothian Project** - Reparative descriptive work at the University of Edinburgh to address colonial language in academic archives
- "**Decolonial Archival Futures**" initiative - Collaborative project between multiple institutions to develop new archival language standards
- **The Archival Decolonist Manifesto** - Framework for decolonial archival practices developed by Nathan Sentence
- "The British Library's "**Challenging Histories**" project - Reviews and updates catalog descriptions to address colonial legacies
- The British Library/Qatar Foundation Partnership (BLQFP) project **Conscientious Bilingual Description CBD**

Conscientious Bilingual Description CBD



Conscientious Bilingual Description CBD

- The British Library/Qatar Foundation Partnership (BLQFP) project is digitising material from multiple collections related to the history of the Gulf. These digitised records are published in the Qatar Digital Library (QDL) with enhanced bilingual catalogue descriptions in English and Arabic.
- The vast majority of the material comes from the India Office Records (IOR), which incorporates the archival records of the English East India Company and the India Office. They span centuries of colonial activity across different continents, cultures and peoples.
- Cataloguers and translators on the BLQFP is building on emerging approaches and resources to develop a dedicated and evolving set of guidelines for conscientious bilingual description (CBD).

CBD Process

1- Researching the terms

- Drawing on our own knowledge of the records, as well as making use of existing resources, in particular the [Words Matter](#) glossary produced by the National Museum of World Cultures in the Netherlands to identify terms that were potentially problematic.
- Close collaboration between linguists and cataloguers to make sure that our understanding of these terms was rooted in how they were used in the records
- Research was aided by technology. A former member of our team, Sotirios Alpanis, produced a python script that could search for a term across all of the QDL's catalogue descriptions, and return results that allowed us to view how a term appeared in its context. In parallel, Translators relied on the Translation Memory within [the translation management software they use](#) (memoQ) to investigate previous translations. Thus, allowing us to gain a better understanding of the nuances of historical usage.

```
def search_term_builder(term_list):
    term_list = sorted(term_list)
    search_term_list = []
    flag = False
    while flag == False:
        for term in term_list:
            print(term_list.index(term)+1,term)
            if len(search_term_list) > 0:
                print('Already added to the list of terms to search:
{0}'.format(search_term_list))
                search_term_index = input("Input the number of the term
you'd like to search for, or enter 0 to add a search term not on the
list.\n(Leave blank to continue) ")
                if search_term_index == '':
                    flag = True
                elif int(search_term_index) == 0:
                    search_term = input("What term would you like to search
for? ")
                    search_term_list.append(search_term)
                elif int(search_term_index) <= len(term_list):
                    search_term = term_list[int(search_term_index) -1]
                    search_term_list.append(search_term)
                    term_list.remove(search_term)

            else:
                print("Sorry {0} is not in range, please try
again".format(search_term_index))
    return search_term_list
```

Caption: Screenshot from the python script created by Sotirios Alpanis, former Head of Digital Operations

CBD Process

2- Categorisation

- Context is crucial in determining whether a term could a term be easily deemed either problematic or not problematic.
- Few terms were clearly offensive
- Most were problematic in more complex and historically rooted ways.
- We needed different ways of dealing with these terms.
- Sometimes a small intervention was sufficient, but in other cases we needed to develop more extensive treatments.
- To this end, we sought to place the terms into one of four categories:

Category	Example	Recommendation
Not problematic	Tribe <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In a Middle East context, this is simply the English translation of the Arabic term <i>qabilah</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Avoid using in a generalised way • Name the specific tribe(s) where possible
Sometimes problematic	Native <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acceptable if describing the relationship between a person and the place they are from, e.g. a native of India • Not acceptable if used to group distinct identities together in an indiscriminate way, creating an unfavourable contrast between 'Europeans' and 'natives' 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In problematic instances, place in single quotation marks • Identify the names of individuals if known, or provide as precise as possible descriptions of the areas they ruled • Provide further information in square brackets, e.g. 'native rulers' [shaikhs of Bahrain and Sharjah]
Always problematic	Piracy <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The labelling of certain Arab tribes as pirates represents a British point of view, and was used as a justification for colonial intervention 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do not use unless quoting from the record, in which case place in single quotation marks • Provide further context in an article
Problematic and offensive	Mohammedan <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Offensive because it implies that Muslims worship the prophet Muhammad 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do not use unless quoting from the record, in which case place in single quotation marks • Always follow with [Muslim] or [Islamic] in square brackets • Add to the Glossary to provide further context

CBD Process

3- Treatment

- Quotation marks to be used within catalogue descriptions, and recognised alternative terms be employed.
- For terms requiring more detailed treatment than could be provided within a file or item-level description, the QDL's dedicated bilingual [Glossary](#), was developed which we plan to use to provide further contextual information for problematic and offensive terms, such as 'Mohammedan'.
- The QDL's Expert articles are also used to provide further information about terms whose historical importance and complexity merit a more detailed analysis. One such term is 'piracy', on which we wrote an [article](#) to highlight its problematic nature from the points of view of both cataloguers and translators.



Translation Recommendations

- Mirror the English treatment (quotes, explanations) in Arabic translations
- Maintain sensitivity to cultural contexts in both languages
- Be aware of terms that carry different connotations in Arabic vs. English
- Use appropriate Arabic equivalents that avoid introducing new problematic connotations

The screenshot shows a concordance tool interface with the following details:

- Search for:** slave
- Settings:**
 - Put selected text in quotes
 - Case sensitive
 - Add wildcards to selected text
 - Find different numbers, too
 - Auto-detect source/target
 - Guess translation
- Filter target:** (empty)
- Limit:** 128
- Total hits:** 1121
- View:** Source + target

Source	Target	Meta-information
Slave trade	تجارة الرقيق	BL Qatar TM 6.0 (master) Modified 02/01/2025 18:35 (malkhalifa) Doc Translation_English_IOR_L_PS_5_456_ff_363-517_20...
Slave Trade in the Persian Gulf (IOR/L/PS/5/488, ff 55-91)	(IOR/L/PS/5/488, ff 55-91) تجارة الرقيق في الخليج الفارسي	BL Qatar TM 5.2 (working) - copy Modified 30/10/2024 14:29 (hadam) Doc Translation_English_IOR_L_PS_5_488_20241017_124...
An engagement entered into by the British Government with the 'Chief' of Bahrein [Bahrain] for the more effectual suppression of the 'slave trade' [trade in enslaved people]	معاهدة مبرمة بين الحكومة البريطانية و"حاكم" البحرين، لزيادة فاعلية جهود كبح "تجارة العبيد" [الاتجار بالمُسْتَعْبِدِينَ]	BL Qatar TM 5.2 (working) - copy Modified 30/10/2024 14:29 (hadam) Doc Translation_English_IOR_L_PS_5_488_20241017_124...
Slave Trade in the Persian Gulf	تجارة الرقيق في الخليج الفارسي	BL Qatar TM 5.2 (working) - copy Modified 30/10/2024 14:29 (hadam) Doc Translation_English_IOR_L_PS_5_488_20241017_124...
An engagement entered into by the British Government with the 'Chief' of Bahrein [Bahrain] for the more effectual suppression of the 'slave trade' [trade in enslaved people]	معاهدة مبرمة بين الحكومة البريطانية و"حاكم" البحرين، لزيادة فاعلية جهود كبح "تجارة العبيد" [الاتجار بالمُسْتَعْبِدِينَ]	BL Qatar TM 6.0 (master) Modified 30/10/2024 13:28 (hadam) Doc Translation_English_IOR_L_PS_5_488_20241017_124...

At the bottom of the interface, there are buttons for "Insert selected", "Insert", "Close", and "Help". A status bar at the very bottom shows "Changed never" and "Update from active segment" / "Update from concordance".

Examples

Fallāḥ (pl. **fallāḥīn**) is originally an Arabic word فلاح،ين فلاحين equivalent to 'agricultural labourer' or 'farmer'. In Arabic, the word also has ethnic implications dating back to the Arab conquest of Egypt when it was used favourably to refer to indigenous Egyptians.

British colonial officials use *fallāḥ* in the IOR files, it is usually to refer the IOR files, British officials use the term to refer to Muslims or disparagingly to agricultural labourers or their political/social class (a anything related to Islam. The inaccuracy inherent in this usage usage closer in meaning to 'peasant').

The term was added to both the English and Arabic glossaries, thereby providing the necessary historical context on how it is specifically used in these records.

Mohammedan highly problematic and offensive. Appearing across colonial discourse on Muslims from the 15th century onwards, the word means 'followers of Muhammad'. Historically, it reflects an antiquated Christian view of Muslims as heretics and/or a conflation of Muhammad's place in Islam with that of Jesus in Christianity. In the IOR files, British officials use the term to refer to Muslims or anything related to Islam. The inaccuracy inherent in this usage warrants signalling in both English and Arabic.

The term is placed it within quotation marks, followed immediately by an in-line gloss in square brackets: '[Muslim]' or '[Islamic]'. In translation, we similarly use محمدية/ة within quotation marks, followed by [مسلم/ة] or [إسلامي/ة] in square brackets.

Glossary entries in both English and Arabic provide additional context on the term's problematic nature.

Challenges and Considerations

Decolonising archival language is not without challenges. Archivists must navigate:

- The tension between revising offensive language and maintaining historical accuracy
- Limited resources and institutional resistance to change
- The complexity of working across cultural and linguistic boundaries
- The risk of tokenistic approaches that fail to address deeper structural issues

These challenges should not deter efforts but rather inform thoughtful, nuanced approaches to decolonial practice.

Q&A

Thank you! 😊