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Adivasi Literature
in the Age of AI

**Human-Centred AI
in the Translation Industry.
Questions on Ethics,
Creativity and Sustainability**

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Translating Indigeneity: Adivasi Literature in the Age of AI

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Abstract: This article explores the ethical imperatives involved in translating indigenous epistemologies in the era of artificial intelligence (AI). Regardless of the other challenges that AI purportedly presents to a human-centric world order, its inadequacy to mitigate the crisis posed by social inequality cannot be overlooked. The abundant nature of indigenous intelligence coupled with social exclusion and segregation significantly interferes with effective translation of indigeneity with AI-based tools. This article analyzes how enforced peripherality of the Adivasis in Kerala amplifies the risk of misrepresentation and erasure of indigenous knowledges in AI. The first part elaborates on the multiple facets of abundant indigenous knowledge based on select Adivasi texts. The complexities involved in the translation of this abundance by humans are juxtaposed against its homogenized rendering by AI-based tools to describe the ethical problems AI-enhanced translation entails. The banality of stereotyping, which subsumes Adivasi communitarian identity into a monolithic, timeless entity, is analyzed in the second part of this article.

Keywords: Indigeneity, Adivasi literature, Abundance, Translation, AI.

1 Introduction

The use of technology in translation ranges from full machine translation to machine-aided translation. Artificial intelligence (AI) has been used in translation since the second half of the 1960s (cf. Hutchins 2015: 133). The reliability of AI in translation has been a matter of contention ever since, with the majority agreeing on its ineptitude in comparison with human intelligence.

To produce high-quality translation without human intervention, which is the original and ambitious goal of MT research, was soon found to be unrealistic. The goals thus have to be toned down, such as aiming only at rough translation to be post-edited by humans and limiting the content to small sublanguage domains. (Oi Yee 2015: 571)

Even though AI-based translation has come a long way, results are still far from perfect. One of the prime issues associated with the use of AI in this regard concerns the limits of ethical practice. Translation is an artistic endeavour that extends beyond the terrain of the linguistic. It demands a creative and ethical understanding of the emotion and tune of the source and target language and culture. These nuances are often lost to AI, which works strictly on the basis of an already available database. When it comes to the translation of inadequately archived indigenous knowledge systems, programmed intelligence is susceptible to misappropriating them. Such appropriations take the form of refusing authorship to the owner of the knowledge, misquoting or inadequately quoting the interlocutors, providing literal translations of culture-specific words, transliterating words transmitted orally because of insufficient data for them, etc. The obliteration of specificities in translation imprisons the source text within the domain of a timeless past and compounds the issue of marginalization. The source text continues to remain endangered on account of its inap-

propriate translation. The knowledge owners are unacknowledged and rendered invisible.

Ethical practice, usually identified as a major component of translation, takes a back seat in AI-based translation. This article intends to study the complexities involved in the translation of indigenous epistemology with AI in Kerala. The second section of this article elaborates on the abundant Adivasi knowledge as depicted in selected texts published in Kerala over the years. The third section analyzes the biased nature of the AI database which eventuates from an enforced peripherality. The fourth section describes how the AI platform of coded intelligence jeopardizes the translation of indigenous literatures of abundance.

2 Adivasi Epistemologies and Cultures of Abundance

Adivasi literature embodies tribal life in its plurality. It is published both in Malayalam, the official language of the state, and other tribal languages. Some of these writings have also been translated into English. Narayan, credited to be the first Adivasi author to have published a novel in Malayalam, had to battle with feelings of self-doubt as an author and the relevance of what he had written before deciding to give it out for publication. By the time the novel was finally published in 1998 it had been almost a decade since the first submission of the manuscript. Bigotry disguised as neglect and oblivion delayed its publication by several years. A novel written by a tribal (from the Mala Araya community) contradicted the image of a tribal woven by accomplished authors as a primitive being bereft of

any aspirations. Amidst the *savarna*¹ world and its predicaments, which predominated mainstream literature in Kerala, a novel about tribal life presented itself as an anomaly. This racist apathy towards the myriad expressions of life has however undergone a remarkable transformation from the 2000s onwards, at least in the domain of literature. The burgeoning field of Adivasi literature has compelled the readers habituated to reading the aesthetics of privilege to navigate into broader realms of experience.

Adivasi literature has certainly broadened the literary terrain of Malayalam through its diction, style, and mode of narration in disparate ways. Yet, the implications of these publications to the social mobility of Adivasi communities are debatable. The publishing industry's intrigue for the memories, nostalgias, and desires of the *savarna* world, the midland-dwelling middle class in Kerala, has witnessed a shift towards memories and experiences of displacement and aspirations of the coastal and forest eco-systems. While mainstream literature romanticized the primitive life of the Adivasi in the forest, writers from these communities reverse the gaze by projecting the repository nature of their habitat. The evolving nature of this space is central to Adivasi writings. The resonances of this unfolding landscape of abundance will be discussed in the context of the publication of a collection of ten poetry books written in Adivasi languages titled *Kaviyapothakanira* [*Collection of Poetry Books*] in October 2023.

Kaviyapothakanira was published as part of a research project under the Kairali Research Awards, funded by the Kerala

1 The term refers to the privileged minority who are entrusted with the power of subjugation and domination by the Brahminical caste system in India.

Higher Education Council.² This collection of ten poetry books is the latest addition to a tradition of poetry writing by Adivasi writers. This compilation of poems reflect contemporary concerns of dignity, land ownership, belonging, and self-assertion among the Adivasi communities, because of which I have quoted extensively from them. These ten anthologies featured ten poets from different Adivasi communities in Kerala. Many of the poems in these collections are translated from rent Adivasi languages to Malayalam by the respective authors. Some other poems are transliterated in the Malayalam language with a glossary to aid comprehension. These writings reverse the logic of the midland writers of Malayalam who perceive the Adivasis as a primitive community, living at the mercy of the forest, its rage and its wilderness. Lijina Kadumeni, in her poem “Kaadiranghiyon Kaadu Thedi” (“The One who Left the Forest, Seeks it”) translated from her mother tongue into Malayalam by the author herself, describes how, for instance, the forest never abandoned the tribals even as they were refused jobs and food during the Covid lockdown.

The forest received her son heartily
The one who left home, shifted home
and then returned
The outbursts and rage at home subsided
The wife and kids became merry
They looked at the forest thankfully. (Kadumeni 2023: 23)³

Greeshma Kannothe likewise writes about the forest lore in the poem “Prakasham” (“Light”):

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- 2 The fellowship was instituted by the Kerala State government for outstanding research contributions in various disciplines. The fellowship was awarded to Dr. Santhosh Manicheri in 2020, who was the general editor of the poetry collection.
 - 3 All translations, if not otherwise stated, are mine.

Once hometown stories were over
Grandma told us stories of the forest
Stories as gutsy as the forest
To the heart of Kudagu mountains looking for choral
Of ancestors who migrated to the forest
where elephants grazed
even during monsoon downpours
Journeys not to loot the forest
but to save their lives. (Kannothe 2023: 36)

Siju C. Meena is emphatic about the midlander's endless hatred and prejudice towards the Adivasis. In his Malayalam translation of his own poem "Ningalude Pusthakam" ("Your Book"), he writes:

Won't go away even after scraping
Won't go away even after sweeping it up
Like dog shit
This contempt that you have for us. (Meena 2023: 24)

There are poems which contest normative gender stereotypes. In his poem "The Girl who doesn't Menstruate," Prakash Chenthalam writes:

It was a she
In the me born as a man
She, all over my body. I am the girl
who will not menstruate
even when I am old enough to
I am tired of living in this male body
I want to die
as the she in me. (Chenthalam 2023: 103)

The writers featured here embody a keen sense of politicized consciousness that resonates in their aesthetic, though unromanticized use of language. Prakash Chenthalam says in his poem "You Know Me" (2023: 59) that Adivasis will be recognized only through their language. These writings display a liberated awareness of language, identity, nature, and modernity. They articulate the modernity implicit in their living and the

habitat that makes them so. As these writings suggest, the primitiveness of Adivasis is a societal attribute, rather than a personal or communitarian debilitation. Their narratives resonate the dynamicity of Adivasi consciousness, the translation of which poses challenges at the realm of language and vocabulary.

The dilemmas, negotiations and decisions involved in the translation of one of the earliest autobiographical writings into English provide an instance in this regard. Highlighting the importance of ethical translation, C. K. Janu, social activist and leader of Adivasi Gothra Maha Sabha,⁴ published her autobiography *Janu: C.K. Januvinde Jeevithakatha (Janu: The Life Story of C.K. Janu)* in Malayalam in 2003. The autobiography was transcribed and written by Bhaskaran based on conversations with Janu because of her lack of proficiency in using the Malayalam language. In the 2nd edition of the book, which came out within three months of its first edition, Bhaskaran tells the readers that “the language here is built up with very few words [...] dispersed and alienated on account of the intrusions of the dominant public into the life of the Adivasis” (Janu 2003: 7). The Malayalam version of C. K. Janu’s autobiography was later translated into English by Ravi Shanker and published in 2004 as *Mother Forest: The Unfinished Story of C. K. Janu*. Certain concerns raised in the translator’s note are of importance with regard to the problem of authenticity and ethicality discussed here.

In the Translator’s note to C. K. Janu’s *Mother Forest*, the translator dwells on the concerns he had to encounter while translating a tribal language, which had few precedents in the Malayalam literature published at the time. The text he was

4 This was a social organization that had been in agitation since 2001 for the redistribution of land to the landless tribal people in Kerala.

meant to translate was a transcription of Janu's interview written in her own language. The pertinence of this strategy, which the interviewer, Bhaskaran, insisted on, eventuated from the ethical need for an uncompromising insistence for authenticity while translating an indigenous language. The effort taken on the part of the human translator to prevent misrepresentation of indigenous articulation is of particular significance here. To quote from the translator

Bhaskaran had insisted that the entire interview be recorded on tape and not just jotted down. It was only when the first Malayalam article came out in *Bhashaposhini* (the book itself came out only a year later) that I understood his method. He had written the piece in her language, as if she were speaking it. As a translator, this was a challenge for me. (N. Ravi Shanker 2004: 4)

Another problem the translator mentions concerns the difference in the meaning of certain words in Malayalam and the Adiya language that Janu spoke. Janu describes herself or her society in the first person as *nammal* ("we"). The translator had to settle for using either "I" or "we," as the context demanded.

This is the one compromise I had to make with great reluctance, perhaps sacrificing accuracy for clarity. I wanted to retain the flavor of Janu's intonation and the sing-song nature of her speech in the translation. Verbs are pronounced with greater emphasis than nouns in Janu's language. I reworked the draft and used the simplest language possible, keeping the flow of the language close to the Malayalam that rolled off Janu's tongue. The upper cases in the first chapter, in a sea of lower cases, are used to indicate the stresses in Janu's spoken language. The first chapter was treated differently from the second, because I felt that it was closer to Janu's inner world, while the second was more polemical and belonged to the outer world. (N. Ravi Shanker 2004: 6)

After giving a detailed exposition of the difficulties of translating the Adiya language via Malayalam into English, Ravi Shanker adds that the completion of the final draft of the translation took fifteen drafts in total.

These passages from the translator's note are cited in elaboration to stress the particularity of a tribal language as well as the laborious editing work that needed to be undertaken to retain the nuances of the spoken words. The translator's insistence on clarity over accuracy when he translates into English points to the inadequately circulated and represented Adiya language that persuades the translator to understate accuracy. The emphasis given to capturing "the flavor" (N. Ravi Shanker 2004: 6) of intonation used, "the sing-song nature" (ibid.) of speech, the stress used on various occasions, etc., while translating reflects the subtle differences and particularities that mark the distinctiveness of the language used in the autobiography in Malayalam. The innumerable drafts required for grasping these nuances of language allude to the ethical responsibility exhibited by the translator in translating a text written in a language different from the mainstream language of Kerala. This refusal to compromise on the tune and abundance of language through the adoption of word-by-word, literal translation and experimenting with unconventional usages of language and linguistic structures in an attempt to document the particularity is key to the English rendering of the autobiography. The lines

when young all of us children would go the ridges of the fields to pick chappa. or to the little stream to catch fish. or else to lure out the crabs hiding in the slush of the fields. or to graze the jenmi's cattle. or to roam aimlessly in the woods. or to pluck wild fruits like karappayam mothangappayam or kanjippayam (N. Ravi Shanker 2004: 2)

exemplify how rules of grammar and sentence structure are flouted. The prioritization of indigenous abundance and the ethical interventions to convey it in translation distinguish human intelligence from translations that could be generated with AI-based tools. An AI search for "karappayam," "mothangappayam," or "kanjippayam," for instance provides misleading

information of these fruits.⁵ The inadequate AI databases for Adivasi epistemologies compromise their translations with AI-based tools significantly. The tonal significances of indigenous forms of resilience and indigenous outlooks towards life elude programmed verbal databases underlying AI models.

3 Racist Ethnography and the Biased Database

According to Pasquinelli (2023: 2), AI is constituted by “the intelligence of labor and social relations.” He defines AI as an endeavor

to capture the knowledge expressed through individual and collective behaviours and encode it into algorithmic models to automate the most diverse tasks: from image recognition and object manipulation to language translation and decision-making. (Pasquinelli 2023: 2)

The process between the capturing and encoding of knowledge is, however, crucial to a marginalized community. Societal bias is passed over to the domain of AI during this juncture. Even as their programming enables AI-based tools to make choices through evaluative processes that could be non-discriminatory, the databases which determine their choices may not be necessarily encompassing. Even as the concept of AI challenges the position of humans as the most intelligent of living species and questions human-centric epistemologies, social inequalities increase the risk that AI poses to the knowledge systems produced by segregated and ostracized communities. Jason E. Lewis reflects on how AI has to resonate the indigenous perception of the world which diverges from dominant ways of comprehension.

5 *Karappayam*, for instance, is described as a South Indian dish. Made with lamb or goat intestines.

If we are to keep AI from becoming yet another tool for imposing an impoverished understanding of the good life upon us all, we must look to ontologies and epistemologies that grow from different roots than those concepts of being and knowledge frameworks out of which the current mainstream vision of AI develops. (Lewis 2023: 210).

Lewis describes such a technology as one that would enable abundance. The production of such ontologies is however, overridden by racist biases and stigmas.

Towards the end of 2023, the South Indian state of Kerala organized a one-week cultural festival in the capital city of Thiruvananthapuram. The fest titled “Keraleeyam” was meant to showcase the cultural and industrial strongholds of the state while also seeking to envision a new Kerala that would embody the aspirations of the new world. Films were screened, literature was discussed, debates were held, and exhibition stalls were set up as part of the fest. One of these pavilions was named “Adiman Living Museum,” with an objective of portraying authentic Adivasi life in Kerala. The specific platform displayed representatives of five communities, in particular Kaani, Mannan, Paliyar, Mavilar, and Uralis, in traditional attires standing in front of an artificially assembled habitat consisting of huts and worship sites. The participants of the installation were transported from tribal communities all over Kerala and hired for daily wages to perform authentic Adivasi⁶ identity. The pay would also cover the on-demand performances of specific art forms by the dressed up Adivasis.

6 Adivasis are the composite indigenous population in the Indian sub-continent, who are constitutionally classified and protected as the Scheduled Tribes on account of their ethnic specificities and social backwardness. Many of the languages spoken by Adivasi communities do not have a script, are transmitted orally, and are hence only just percolating into the mainstream or print literary culture.

The stall intended “to express the unique life of tribal people” (cf. John 2023: n.p.)⁷ drew wide-spread criticism for its racist undertones and inhumane degradation of indigenous communities as primitive and timeless. The Adiman Living Museum was equated with the concept of a ‘human zoo,’ a colonial-era practice of displaying indigenous people (cf. John 2023: n.p.). Indigeneity is stripped off its present and converted into a museum piece. The enforced nature of peripherality is obscured by projecting it as an essential and timeless attribute of the Adivasis. The ensuing monolithic image of the regressive, forest-dwelling Adivasi assumes an authenticity which takes over and subsumes the communitarian Adivasi being. This stalled Adivasi becomes the embodiment of authentic indigeneity in Kerala and prevails over the Adivasi everyday and their communitarian identity. The representation of Adivasis draws on a database that can be described as exceedingly racist. The museumized Adivasi is drawn from their stereotypes disseminated through mainstream literature from as early as the 1960s:

Then, unexpectedly, a primitively clad man appears before you from another part of the forest. A soiled mundu, that reaches only up to his knees, is draped around the waist. A bow and arrow in his hand. On the right shoulder there is a bound cloth bundle. A tuft of hair on the head. We might feel relieved that we could spot a human being. But, he is frightened at seeing someone coming from the countryside. Are our spotless white mundu and other outfits frightening him! He will try to move away. Otherwise he'll turn around and walk away. Who is this person, who lives with wild animals and fears humans? He is one of the sons of this forest. He is a Kurichyan. (Panoor 1963/1980: 47)

This account of an encounter with a Kurichyan appears in a book titled *The Africa of Kerala*, written by a tribal welfare officer

7 It was also said that the tribespeople were forced to stay in the huts for seven days but were paid only Rs 1000 per day, which is nothing but social exploitation (cf. John 2023: n.p.).

named K. Panoor, and first published in 1963. It is one of the earliest books in Kerala profiling the various Adivasi communities living in the state. Clearly, the ethnographic enumeration of the Adivasi male body here is colored by a racist gaze that marks him as the other⁸ of the progressive and developed male city dweller. He is described as primitive and comfortable in the company of wild animals. Humans frighten him. The “spotless white mundu” or “other outfits” (Panoor 1963/1980: 47) that are significantly different from his own soiled mundu that reaches only up to his knees, are threatening to him. This male who displays fear at the sight of humans and the human-made and runs towards the forest is epitomized as the authentic Adivasi in Kerala.

In the preface to the book, K. Panoor proudly declares how his efforts in the forest had paid off and how his book had served as a database for the writers of future generations to write on Adivasis. He says:

Before this was published in book form, several parts of it were serialized in *Mathrubhumi* weekly. I received a lot of letters from different parts of Kerala and outside [...] there were college students determined to carry out research. There were people who found an easy way to get their PhD degree [...]. Meanwhile, a famous novelist from Tamil Nadu, Srimati Rajam Krishnan, translated these articles and started publishing them in the Tamil Digest Monthly. Our S.K. Pottekkad and M.T. Vasudevan Nair expressed their desire to write novels on Adivasis. (Panoor 1963/1980: 6)

The book goes beyond the conceits of an author to record the unrecorded and qualifies as a database with far-fetching consequences to the tribes profiled in it. It served as a primary source for research and literature, as the author himself testifies. The image of the Adivasi conceptualized by Panoor assumes an au-

8 For further details on the idea of the ‘other,’ see Spivak’s *In Other Worlds* (2006).

thenticity that surpasses the Adivasis of everyday life and replaces the latter on occasions. The banality of enforced peripherality interferes with the ways in which indigenous epistemologies are archived and translated. What is significant here is that regardless of the burgeoning field of Adivasi literature authored by writers from the communities in Kerala, it is the stereotypical image of the primitive and timeless Adivasi that gets reproduced even in a state-sponsored cultural fest. The choice of racist information over decolonial history is reflective of the deeply entrenched inequality in society that forbids acknowledging the equality of races. The unequal distribution of power in the society in turn also jeopardizes ethical practice in AI and reinstates an archive that is inclined towards xenophobic perception.

4 When Cultural Abundance Meets Coded Intelligence

Considering that AI works through information that is processed through algorithms, data that is available in a digitized form is fundamental to its output. Furthermore, the information has to be accurate and historically correct for it to be used ethically. This presupposes an egalitarian society where capital is equally distributed among the various communities. Alternatively, the prevalence of an unequal society posits multiple hurdles for the ethical representation of underprivileged communities through AI. The inadequate and misconstrued repositories of data pertaining to the history, culture, and literature of peripheral lives run the risk of further appropriation and erasure. The inclusion of parameters that enforce an ethical dissemination of knowledge systems assumes prime significance. The chasm between the two worlds as embodied by the Adivasi writers and the state machineries manifests the complexi-

ties pertaining to misrepresentation of Adivasi life by AI and flags up how the absence of sufficient laws regarding the same would lead to further alienation and displacement of Adivasi communities. The possible concerns of copyright infringement, stereotyping, and flagrant bulldozing of indigeneity in the AI-based translation of Adivasi literature would eventuate a reinforcement of stigma and racist alienation of the tribal everyday.

The divergent conceptualization of signification that is rooted in communitarian identity and specific understanding of temporality embodies the multi-layered experience of presence in indigenous communities. This is at variance with a perspective tinted by a culture of knowledge grounded in “Cartesian duality, monotheistic eschatology, and computational reductionism” (Lewis 2023: 216). Noelani Arista (2023: 218) describes how the indigenous concept of future relies on a great extent to the past. This implies a making of meaning that is contextually produced through interactions with inter- and intra-generational societies (ibid.: 222), as well as with contemporary manifestations of knowledge. The extent to which AI, which is “trained to code but not to know” (ibid.: 224), can appropriately decipher the abundance of this signification would be crucial in determining its potential for emancipation. The cultural abundance accumulated through a perception of the universe that traverses beyond established notions of knowledge production and which manifests in the rich particularity of indigenous cultures is compromised by artificially construed intelligence in most cases. For example, if you use ChatGPT to write about Wiradjuri culture, it could source documents that contain false, offensive, and/or secret/sacred cultural knowledge. Fitch et al. (2024) describe how, on two different occasions, ChatGPT provided two conflicting descriptions of the language word for “Moieties” when asked to

explain Wiradjuri Kinship structures. The AI model delivered the information in an authoritative way without being able to verify its sourced material.

The regional disparities that shape the cultural practices of Adivasi communities embody the complexities involved in enumerating the societies exclusively on the basis of their names. “Mavila,” for instance, is a tribal community in the Northern district of the South Indian state of Kerala. The community was enlisted as “Scheduled Tribe”⁹ only in 2003, before which they were classified as a ‘Scheduled Caste’ community. There are multiple etymological definitions attributed to the name “Mavila.” They are described as people who live on the *mala* (“mountain”). According to H. A. Stuart, the name refers to a community that collects and sells the medicinal plant called *Maavilan* (as quoted in Karipath 2005: 15). M. Venkitesh describes them in connection with the practice of taming elephants. Herman Gundert maintains that the original term was Malavelan, which later on became Mavilan (cf. *ibid.*: 13–28). The Mavila community is predominantly domiciled in the two neighboring districts in the northernmost part of Kerala: Kannur and Kasaragod. However, the community is constituted differently in each of these districts with respect to rituals and other practices.

The differently fashioned communities in the two districts of north Malanar have their own forms of ritualistic practices, which are further premised on the cultural formations of these

9 Communities in India which suffer from extreme social, educational, and economic backwardness are notified as Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in the Constitution of India.

regions. The *Theyyam*¹⁰ festival in Deviyottu kavu¹¹ (or Theeyottu kavu) in Aalapadambu panchayat in Kannur district¹² is particularly significant in this regard. All the Theyyam kolams ritualistically worshipped in this kavu are not accessible to people from other communities on specific days. This is quite unlike the Theyyam ritual, which is usually renowned for its inclusivity and allows devotees to pray to the human-turned-deity irrespective of their caste, gender and religious identity. The kavu does not have a sanctum sanctorum or idols which may be worshipped. On the contrary, the rituals are organized around a stub of teak wood decorated with brass bells. The reserved nature of this ritualistic practice of the Mavilars in Kannur district is quite different from the public performative aspect of another ritualistic practice of the same community in Kasaragod, which is called *Mangalamkali*.¹³ A Meta AI search for Mavilar community gives information about the two ritu-

10 *Theyyam* is a ritualistic practice of worship based in north Malabar where persons from certain lower caste and tribal communities are temporarily transformed into oracles. Elements of art and performance impart the trans-real ambiance of devotion with dramatic impact that becomes pivotal to the *Theyyam*'s actualization. In these moments of being god, the performer turned deity is venerated and worshipped by devotees irrespective of their caste, gender, and religion. *Theyyam* however, does not free the *kolakaran* (or the one who transforms into the oracle) from caste discrimination once s/he is out of her *kolam* (the transformed body).

11 Kavu refers to a grove that is considered sacred.

12 Panchayats are local government bodies responsible for managing the affairs of a region within a state.

13 *Mangalamkali* is a folk art form prevailing in north Kerala districts of Kannur and Kasaragod. The dance is staged around a post erected under a marquee. The performers, about thirty of them, would include men and women. Rhythmic songs and steps make it attractive. The lyrics are a mix of Tulu and Malayalam (cf. Natyasutra n.d.).

alistic practices of the Mavila community, Theyyam and *Mangalamkali*, but at the same time does not provide the particularities of these performances in the two districts. The regional variations that occur in these practices are lost to AI.

My interlocutor from the Kasaragod district in north Malabar, who is a veteran singer of Mangalamkali songs, shared his concerns regarding the preservation of these songs on account of the language used. The lines are composed in Tulu, a Dravidian language which has a non-standardized script. The assistance of traditional scholars who know the inflections and the meaning of the vocabulary used in these lines is imperative when translating these songs into Malayalam. However, the skepticism regarding the acknowledgement of the interpreters poses a major hindrance to the collation and publication of these songs. The reluctance to attribute authorship to the traditional authors of an indigenous community who are the custodians and practitioners of a minority language is rampant in print culture. Books like *Folklore Nigandu* [*Folklore Dictionary*] (cf. Namboothiri 1989), which enlisted words from different languages, did not do justice to the Mavila language, according to the interlocutor.¹⁴ He talked about how he had collected Mangalamkali songs with difficulty from various performers and yet was not confident enough to publish them in Malayalam because of the laborious task it involved of typing the dialectical variations of the script-less Tulu and rendering them into Malayalam. Also, he was anxious about not being acknowledged as the author of the work once the book would be completed.

The possible negation of traditional authorship is a concern that prevails in print culture and aggravates with the prominence of AI. Even with the distant possibility of an eth-

14 Interview with Mr Kannan, held on 12.06.2022.

ically constituted database on Adivasi literatures and knowledges, the absence of legal parameters to check plagiarism or copyright infringement would lead to a negation of authorship to the rightful owners, further exacerbating neo-colonial forms of appropriating knowledges. The blatant disregard of particularities would eventuate half-truths and misleading information that would impede the production and circulation of decolonial knowledge.

5 Conclusions

The experimental use of AI for the development of indigenous languages is not an isolated practice. Neither is its relevance for the propagation and contemporizing of peripheral languages irrelevant. For instance, Fitch et al. (2024) explain how traditional owners in the Kakadu National Park use AI to manage the habitat in a way that makes it friendly to the magpie geese populations spread across a large area: “Traditional owners work with rangers and researchers in conservation management and assist in programming AI with ICIP that is specific to geographic knowledge of Country that helps manage para grass” (Fitch et al. 2024: n.p.). The appropriate integration and acknowledgement of the indigenous knowledge-owners cannot be overlooked when prompting an ethical use of AI. Countries like New Zealand have used AI to revitalize Te Reo Maori, the language of the Maori indigenous community (cf. ITU News 2022). However, it was preceded by years of deliberations with the stakeholders as part of ensuring ethicality. “We spent many years interviewing our elderly about every river, plant, beach. Anything they would want to talk about” (ibid.: n.p.). The shift to AI was preceded by the building of an extensive audio-visual archive of Maori words, phrases, and idioms. However, the absence of such deliberations in the case

of the Adivasi indigenous knowledge systems in Kerala is a considerable challenge that stands in the way of creating an authentic database as well as its further use. The skepticism expressed by my interlocutor to share his knowledge regarding *Mangalamkali* is reflexive of the apathy prevalent in the making of such a database.

Social inclusion and participation of indigenous communities in creating AI databases qualify as pre-conditions to ensure autonomy and prevent copyright infringement in a machine-driven creative industry. As far as the production of a decolonial archive of Adivasis is concerned, digitization for databases will have to take into consideration the heterogeneity of Adivasi languages and the regional disparity of cultural practices added to a deeply segregated social structure that encourages bulldozing of diversities than its flourishing. Such an authentic digitization is central to ethical translation of Adivasi indigenous knowledge systems using AI tools.

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