

TRANSLATION AS AN INSTRUMENT OF CULTURAL DOCUMENTATION: THE CASE OF MAKYUNG

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Abstract. Translation is increasingly recognized as a vital instrument of cultural documentation, particularly for intangible heritage that risks being underdocumented or confined to local contexts. This study focuses on Makyung: The Mystical Heritage of Malaysia as a case study to explore how translation preserves and disseminates cultural knowledge. Three objectives guide the analysis: (i) to identify categories of cultural elements present in the source text, (ii) to examine the translation procedures employed in the target text, and (iii) to evaluate the broader role of translation in cultural preservation and documentation. Based on Newmark study on cultural categories, which are ecology, material culture, social culture, organisations and customs, and gestures and habits, the study adopts a qualitative descriptive approach. Findings reveal that cultural elements are retained through procedures such as transference, literal translation, and descriptive equivalence, supported by a strategic balance of domestication and foreignisation. These strategies ensure cultural authenticity while enhancing accessibility for international readers. Paratextual features, including illustrations, captions, and media excerpts, further enrich comprehension by situating the text within its cultural context. Overall, the study demonstrates that translation extends beyond linguistic substitution, functioning as a bridge for documenting intangible heritage and introducing Malay cultural traditions, such as Makyung, to global audiences.

Keywords: *cultural translation, heritage documentation, Makyung, cultural preservation, paratextual elements*

Introduction

Translation is closely connected to culture, as language reflects the practices, values, and lived experiences of a community. In the context of intangible cultural heritage, translation plays an important role not only in transferring meaning but also in documenting and preserving cultural knowledge for wider audiences. Makyung is a traditional Malay dance-drama that combines music, dance, song, humor, and ritual in its performance. It is believed to have originated from the Kelantan–Pattani kingdom and has existed for around 400 years within the Malay royal courts. Today, Makyung remains an important cultural heritage, recognised by UNESCO as a Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity in 2005 (Pati Khan et al., 2018). As a performative cultural tradition, Makyung embodies a rich combination of linguistic, visual, and embodied elements that are not easily conveyed through language alone. This presents a challenge for translation, particularly when attempting to represent culturally specific practices for an international audience. In this context, translation extends beyond linguistic transfer and functions as a means of cultural documentation.

Literature review

Categorisation of cultural elements

Translation is deeply intertwined with culture, as language reflects the way of life and distinctive manifestations of a society. Newmark (1988) defines culture as the

collective practices and values expressed through language, while Nida (1993) reminds us that translating cultural elements is complex because it involves transferring implicit meanings closely tied to identity and tradition. Newmark (1998) identifies five categories of cultural elements that are particularly relevant in translation: (1) Ecology: geographical features such as landforms, flora, fauna, climate, and weather. (2) Material culture: tangible artefacts including food, clothing, housing, and technology. (3) Social culture: customs, values, beliefs, and socially shared norms. (4) Organisations and customs: institutions, procedures, and concepts. (5) Gestures and habits: body language, facial expressions, and everyday behaviours. Recognising these categories is crucial, as it ensures that the cultural context of the source text is preserved while guiding translators in selecting strategies that balance fidelity and accessibility.

Foreignisation strategy

Accordingly, translation practice often involves two overarching strategies, which are domestication and foreignisation. Domestication refers to the adaptation of foreign elements into the target culture so that the translated text reads naturally and appears as if it were originally written in the target language. In other words, this strategy is targetoriented, aiming to produce a text that is accessible and familiar to the intended readership. Procedures commonly associated with domestication include cultural equivalence, adaptation, and omission. Foreignisation deliberately retains elements from the source text, even when these may be unfamiliar in the target language. The primary purpose of this strategy is to preserve the cultural identity and distinctiveness of the source text, ensuring that readers encounter its foreignness rather than having it assimilated into their own cultural framework. Procedures associated with foreignisation include: (1) Transference (loan words/borrowing): Directly importing lexical items from the source language into the target text, thereby retaining cultural specificity. (2) Literal translation: Rendering words or phrases on a wordforword basis, while ensuring the translation remains idiomatic and grammatically acceptable in the target language. (3) Calque (loan translation): Translating expressions literally, preserving the structural form of the source language. (4) Retention of proper names and titles: Keeping original names, honorifics, and culturally bound references intact. (5) Foreign syntactic structures: Occasionally preserving sourcelanguage syntax to signal difference and highlight cultural distinctiveness. (6) Minimal adaptation of idioms or metaphors: Allowing unfamiliar imagery to remain visible rather than replacing it with targetculture equivalents. (7) Use of footnotes, glosses, or explanatory notes: Supplementing the text with paratextual elements that clarify meaning without erasing foreignness.

Together, these procedures demonstrate how foreignisation safeguards cultural authenticity by ensuring that the translated text functions not merely as a linguistic product but also as a cultural document. By foregrounding the cultural identity of the source text, foreignisation resists the homogenising tendencies of domestication and compels readers to confront cultural difference rather than assimilate it. Thus, the strategy transforms translation into a mode of cultural documentation that preserves the integrity of the source tradition. At the same time, foreignisation carries an educational dimension: by exposing readers to unfamiliar concepts and practices, it broadens intercultural understanding and fosters appreciation of diversity.

Domestication strategy

Foreignisation with domestication, a strategy that adapts elements of the source text to the norms and expectations of the target culture. The aim is to produce a translation that reads fluently and naturally, allowing the target audience to engage with the text as if it were originally written in their own language. In this sense, domestication is targetoriented, prioritising accessibility and reader familiarity over the preservation of foreignness. Domestication is particularly effective when the translator seeks to bridge cultural gaps by reshaping unfamiliar concepts into forms that resonate with the target audience. This strategy ensures that the translated text is not only comprehensible but also culturally acceptable, thereby enhancing its communicative function. Within the domestication strategy, several translation procedures are commonly employed: (1) Cultural substitution (equivalence): Replacing a sourceculture item with a culturally similar concept in the target language. (2) Adaptation: Modifying cultural references so they align with the social norms, values, or practices of the target audience. (3) Naturalisation: Adjusting foreign terms to fit the phonological or morphological system of the target language. (4) Omission (deletion): Excluding elements that may be incomprehensible, irrelevant, or disruptive to the target readership. (5) Paraphrase or generalisation: Recasting culturally specific items into broader, more familiar terms for the target audience. (6) Idiomatic substitution: Replacing sourceculture idioms or metaphors with equivalent expressions in the target language. (7) Restructuring syntax: Reworking sentence structures to conform to targetlanguage norms of fluency and readability.

These procedures serve as analytical tools for identifying the strategies employed in translating cultural elements in the selected text. It is important to note that domestication and foreignisation are not mutually exclusive; rather, they often operate in combination, depending on the nature of the cultural element and the intended function of the translation. In the context of cultural texts, foreignisation is frequently associated with the preservation of cultural identity, while domestication enhances readability and comprehension. The interplay between these strategies is therefore central to understanding how cultural meaning is negotiated in translation.

Paratexts in the context of translation

While translation is often understood as a linguistic process, meaning is not constructed through language alone. Genette (1997) introduces the concept of paratexts as materials that accompany a text and shape how it is presented and interpreted by readers, often before the main content is engaged. Elements such as book covers, prefaces, footnotes, and illustrations provide initial cues about the text's theme, tone, and subject matter, influencing readers' expectations and comprehension. Paratexts are generally divided into two forms: peritexts and epitexts. Peritexts refer to materials within the text, such as book covers, footnotes, and translator's notes, while epitexts exist outside the text, including reviews and reports. This distinction highlights the multiple layers through which meaning is framed and accessed. From a cognitive perspective, paratexts prepare readers to engage with the main text by offering preliminary information that shapes interpretation and supports mental visualisation (Altmann et al., 2014). By signalling genre, context, or narrative cues, they enable readers to construct meaning more effectively and engage more deeply with the content.

From a social perspective, paratextual elements function as mediators between source and target cultures. They provide contextual framing that helps readers interpret culturally specific references and understand the broader social and ideological

dimensions embedded in the text (Aly et al., 2025). Thus, paratexts facilitate intercultural communication and contribute to the wider circulation of cultural knowledge. In the context of translation, this mediating role becomes particularly significant when linguistic translation alone is insufficient to convey meaning, especially in texts involving performative or visually rich cultural practices. Paratextual elements therefore extend the interpretive capacity of translation by providing visual and contextual support, reinforcing its function not only as a linguistic act but also as a mechanism for documenting and disseminating cultural heritage. These perspectives are not treated in isolation; rather, they are integrated to provide a comprehensive framework for analysing how cultural elements are categorised, translated through relevant strategies, and supported through paratextual features, particularly in documenting and preserving cultural knowledge.

Research objectives

This article seeks to achieve three main objectives: (1) To analyse the translation of cultural elements in Makyung. (2) To examine the role of paratextual features in the translated text. (3) To evaluate the implications of translation for the documentation and preservation of cultural heritage.

Materials and Methods

This study adopts a qualitative descriptive approach to examine the role of translation in documenting cultural elements in Makyung. The analysis is based on two primary texts: Makyung: Warisan Mistik Malaysia, compiled by Rahimidin Zahari and Sutung Umar, and its English translation, Makyung: The Mystical Heritage of Malaysia, translated by Cecilia Alphonsus. Both texts were published by Institut Terjemahan & Buku Malaysia (ITBM) in 2011. The data for this study consist of cultural elements identified throughout the source text and their corresponding renderings in the translated text. A total of 35 cultural items were identified and analysed. These items were selected as representative examples of culturally bound concepts related to Makyung as a traditional performance. They include references to ecology, material culture, social culture, social organisations and customs, as well as gestures and behaviours, following Newmark (1988) classification. The analysis was conducted in three stages. First, cultural elements were identified and categorised according to Newmark (1988) five cultural categories. Each item was examined within its textual and cultural context to ensure accurate classification. Second, the corresponding translations were analysed using domestication and foreignisation. Specific translation procedures such as transference, literal translation, descriptive equivalence, and adaptation were identified and classified accordingly. This step enabled the study to determine the dominant translation strategies used in rendering cultural elements.

Third, paratextual elements present in both the source and target texts were analysed to evaluate their role in supporting the translation and enhancing cultural understanding. These elements include the book cover, title, preface, footnotes, captions, index, and illustrations. The analysis considered how these features contribute to meaning-making and facilitate the accessibility of culturally specific content for target readers. All data were analysed using a consistent coding framework based on the integration of Newmark's cultural categories and Venuti's translation strategies. The findings are

presented descriptively, focusing on patterns of translation and their implications for cultural documentation, rather than on statistical generalisation.

Results and Discussion

To address the first research question, the data were categorised into five cultural elements as outlined by Newmark (1988): (i) ecology, (ii) material culture, (iii) social culture, (iv) social organisations and customs, and (v) gestures and behaviours. *Table 1* and *Table 2* present the findings from two of these categories, namely material culture and social culture. The ecological elements identified in *Table 1* include references to flora and fauna that frame Makyung's cultural setting. These items are classified under ecology in Newmark (1988) taxonomy, as they represent the interaction between cultural practices and the natural world. In translation, ecological terms were often rendered through literal translation or transference, particularly when the items were unique to the Malay context. For instance, local species such as kelulut were translated using their scientific designation (*Trigona*), while other ecological references such as janewokem, a local term referring to colophony (rosin) were similarly clarified through scientific nomenclature. This strategy preserves cultural authenticity while simultaneously providing precision and universality, since scientific names are internationally recognised. The use of scientific terminology reflects a foreignising approach that foregrounds the distinct ecological identity of the source culture. At the same time, explanatory glosses or descriptive notes were occasionally added to ensure comprehension among readers unfamiliar with Malay ecological references. This demonstrates a careful negotiation between authenticity and accessibility, ecological elements are documented as cultural markers while being made intelligible to global audiences. *Table 2* further highlights the central role of musical instruments in Makyung performances.

Table 1. Translation procedures for ecological elements.

Source language	Translation	Translation procedure
kelulut	kelulut (<i>trigona</i>)	transference and descriptive equivalence
merbau	merbau (malaysian hardwoods)	transference and descriptive equivalence
kayu nangka	kayu nangka or jackfruit tree	transference and descriptive equivalence
pokok lantar	pokok lantar (dried palmyra palm)	transference and descriptive equivalence
kemenyan	kemenyan (benzoin)	transference and descriptive equivalence
janewokem	janewokem (colophony)	transference and descriptive equivalence

Table 2. Translation procedures for material items.

Source language	Translation	Translation procedure
rebab	rebab	transference
serunai	serunai	transference
geduk	geduk	transference
gendang	gendang	transference
mahula	mahula	transference
pacat	pacat	transference
kayu hantu duri	kayu hantu duri	transference
kayu betah	kayu betah	transference
pemulas	pemulas	transference
batang suna	batang suna	transference
gedombak	gedombak	transference
hadrah	hadrah	transference
susu rebab	susu rebab	transference

These artefacts, such as rebab and gendang, are tangible cultural items and thus fall under material culture. Furthermore, specific components such as susu rebab, a part of

the rebab traditionally made from materials derived from kelulut bee nests and used to support the strings and influence sound production, highlight the presence of specialised, culturally embedded musical terminology. In translation, procedures such as transference and descriptive equivalence were employed. Retaining the original terms preserves cultural specificity, while explanatory notes ensure comprehension for international readers. This reflects a foreignisation approach that prioritises authenticity, particularly in the treatment of specialised musical instruments. In addition to such specialised artefacts, the data also include more general material culture items, such as clothing and dwellings. *Table 3* presents the translation procedures applied to these everyday cultural references. As shown in *Table 3*, costumes and dwellings are tangible elements of Makyung's material culture. Costumes reflect traditional aesthetics and social identity, serving both functional and symbolic roles in performance, while housing references place the art form within its cultural environment, reflecting the spatial and domestic contexts in which Makyung exists. In translation, literal translation and adaptation were the dominant procedures. Costume terms were often retained through transference, preserving cultural specificity, while descriptive glosses clarified their meaning for target readers. Housing references, meanwhile, were adapted to ensure readability, with occasional explanatory notes to contextualise architectural or spatial features unfamiliar to nonMalay audiences. This combination of strategies demonstrates how translators negotiate between foreignisation (to safeguard cultural authenticity) and domestication (to ensure accessibility). By retaining original terms and supplementing them with explanations, the translation preserves the distinctiveness of Malay heritage while making it intelligible to global readers. *Table 4* further presents the translation procedures applied to social culture items.

Table 3. *Translation procedures for material culture items.*

Source language	Translation	Translation procedure
baju kurung	baju kurung (a traditional Malay daily attire)	transference and descriptive equivalence
samping	samping (a knee-length sarong worn over the pants)	transference and descriptive equivalence
setanjak	setanjak or a headgear	transference and descriptive equivalence
semutar	semutar or a piece of multi-purpose cloth	transference and descriptive equivalence
songkok	songkok (a scull-cap to protect from the sun)h	transference and descriptive equivalence
pondok	pondok (traditional Islamic schools)	transference and descriptive equivalence

Table 4. *Translation procedures for social culture items.*

Source language	Translation	Translation procedure
Peran Tua	Peran Tua	transference
Peran Muda	Peran Muda	transference
Tok Wak	Tok Wak	transference
Orang Darat	Orang Darat	transference

Social culture refers to the institutions, customs, occupations, and everyday practices that shape communal life and identity (Newmark, 1988). In Makyung, this category is reflected in social roles and character types that embody traditional values and functions within the performance. The translation of social culture elements in *Table 4* primarily employed transference, a procedure that preserves the original terms. Character names such as Peran Tua and Peran Muda were deliberately retained in the English translation rather than replaced with approximate equivalents. This choice is crucial because these names are not merely labels but carry cultural connotations of age, wisdom, humour, and social hierarchy within the performance. More importantly, these characters are central to Makyung, forming the core of its narrative and performance structure. As noted in previous research, attempts to equate the Peran with figures such as the

Shakespearean “wise fool” or the “vidushaka” in Sanskrit drama have been criticised as simplistic and clichéd, as they fail to recognise the unique cultural significance of the Peran (Zahari and Umar, 2011). Their preservation ensures cultural authenticity, maintains the performative function of these archetypal roles, and invites readers to engage directly with the cultural specificity of Makyung. Supported by paratextual elements such as illustrations and captions, this strategy enables readers to visualise these roles and understand their functions, thereby documenting Makyung’s social culture as a living heritage while balancing fidelity to the source text with accessibility for global audiences. Beyond these character-based representations, the data also include other dimensions of social organisation and customs. *Table 5* presents the translation procedures applied to this category, further illustrating how culturally embedded elements are rendered in translation.

Table 5. *Translation procedures for social organisation and customs.*

Source language	Translation	Translation procedure
Sultan Ahmad ibn Sultan Muhammad II	Sultan Ahmad ibn Sultan Muhammad II	transference
Temenggung	Temenggung	transference
Penghulu atau Penggawa	Penghulu or Penggawa	transference
moyang dan poyang	moyang and poyang	transference

Based on the examples in *Table 5*, social structures marked by proper nouns or titles were retained in the translation through transference. Theoretically, proper nouns must be translated with precision, while also considering the cultural connotations embedded in such terms (Nyangeri and Wangari, 2019). For instance, the preservation of titles such as sultan, temenggung, penghulu, and penggawa implicitly conveys the traditional social hierarchy of the Malay world. Their retention reflects the historical roots and cultural traditions of Makyung, situating the performance within the broader socio-political structures of the Nusantara region. This strategy highlights how translation functions not only as a linguistic act but also as a means of documenting intangible heritage and social organisation. *Table 6* presents the cultural elements of gestures and behaviours that shape the embodied dimension of Makyung performance. Meanwhile, the examples in *Table 6* show that items in this category are translated through a combination of transference and descriptive equivalence. This approach allows the translator to retain cultural specificity while still making the meaning accessible to target readers. As suggested by Baker (2011), such strategies are effective in preserving cultural references, ensuring that the practices embedded in Makyung remain visible rather than being simplified or replaced.

Table 6. *Translation procedures for gestures and behaviours.*

Source language	Translation	Translation procedure
Bersila Lendik: Kaki kanan dibengkokkan dan diletakkan di bawah paha kiri atau kaki kanan dibengkokkan dan diletakkan di bawah paha kanan.	Bersila Lendik: The right leg is bent and placed under the left thigh or the left leg is bent and placed on top of the right thigh.	transference and descriptive equivalence
Bersila Panggung: Kaki kanan dibengkokkan dan diletakkan di atas paha kiri atau kaki kiri dibengkokkan dan diletakkan di atas paha kanan.	Bersila Panggung: The right leg is bent and placed on top of the left thigh or the left leg is bent and placed on top of the right thigh.	transference and descriptive equivalence

From the researcher’s perspective, this becomes particularly important when dealing with gestures as embodied cultural expressions. Unlike other cultural elements, gestures such as Bersila Lendik and Bersila Panggung involve physical movements that are difficult to convey fully through words alone. Even with descriptive explanations,

certain aspects of posture and movement remain unclear or abstract. In this context, the presence of illustrations on the same page plays a crucial role. Rather than functioning merely as supporting material, these visual elements help readers make sense of the translated descriptions by showing how the movements are actually performed. *Figure 1*, therefore, work together with the text to clarify meaning and reduce ambiguity. More importantly, this suggests that translation in this context goes beyond language alone. Meaning is constructed through both verbal and visual elements, indicating that translation operates as a multimodal process. The use of paratextual features thus strengthens the role of translation as a means of documenting intangible cultural heritage, particularly in preserving embodied practices central to Makyung performance.

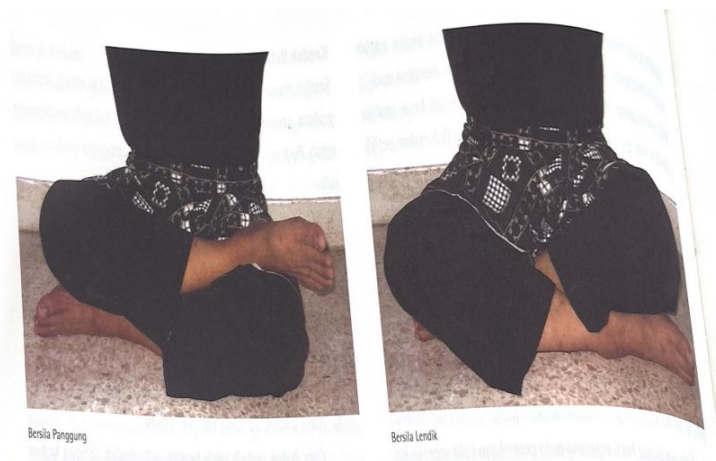


Figure 1. The sitting position of *Bersila Lendik* and *Bersila Panggung* of a rebab player in Makyung.

Paratextual elements in Makyung

In documenting Makyung, language alone is insufficient to capture the full scenography of the performance. As Shaari and Yunos (2023) explain, Makyung is a dance-drama form that integrates acting, music, dance, and comedy into a single staging. Consequently, the presence of paratextual elements, such as illustrations, book covers, and footnotes, in the original text serves as crucial support for enhancing reader comprehension. Within the context of translation, paratexts require the translator to make complex decisions, whether to retain, adapt, or omit these elements in the translated version. Each choice carries significant implications, as it not only shapes the target audience's understanding but also determines the extent to which cultural heritage can be preserved and disseminated through translation. By embedding illustrations and other paratextual features, the translation provides readers with visual and contextual cues that strengthen cultural appreciation and ensure that Makyung's uniqueness as a dance-drama tradition is effectively conveyed. *Figures 2* illustrate the paratextual elements in both the original text and its English translation, highlighting how visual and textual supports function as mediators between source and target cultures. Based on *Figure 2*, it is evident that the illustrations in the translated text were retained exactly as in the source text, while the captions were rendered into English. This practice substantiates Watts' (2007) assertion that paratextual elements are closely tied to cultural context and readership, thereby shaping the reception of the text. The retention of illustrations provides a universal visual reference, while captions and footnotes are

translated according to the needs of the target audience. In this way, the translation negotiates between preserving cultural authenticity and ensuring accessibility, reinforcing the role of paratexts as mediators of meaning across cultures.

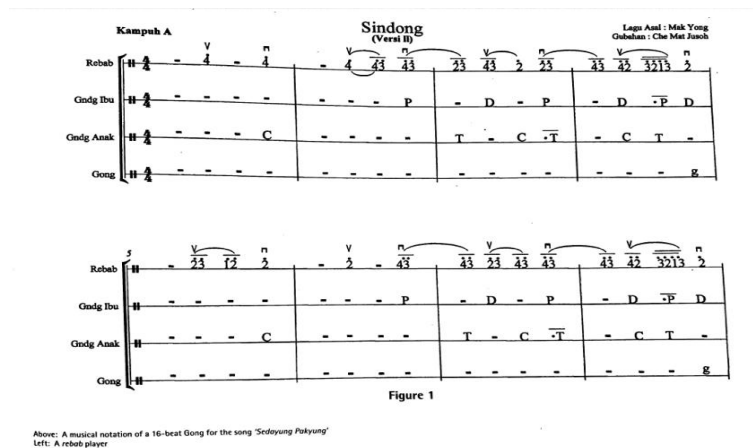


Figure 2. Musical notation in Makyung's song.

Implications of translation for documenting Makyung

The analysis of epitexts in *Makyung: The Mystical Heritage of Malaysia* including newspaper coverage, media reviews, and scholarly writings enables a critical observation of audience reception and demonstrates the role of translation as a systematic instrument in the preservation and documentation of Malay cultural heritage. The publication and translation of this book are regarded as the first comprehensive documentation of the performance tradition, recording nearly all elements of dance, music, songs, costumes, makeup, props, and performance structure (Ariffin, 2015), following UNESCO's recognition of *Makyung* in 2005. Importantly, the study reveals that the procedure of omission was deliberately avoided. This decision reflects the translators' commitment to cultural preservation, as omission would risk erasing significant cultural meaning and undermining the function of translation as documentation. By rejecting omission, the translation ensures that the richness of *Makyung's* cultural elements is fully conveyed, safeguarding authenticity while enhancing accessibility. Thus, the implications of translation for documenting *Makyung* are twofold: first, it consolidates translation as a mechanism of cultural preservation by retaining and clarifying cultural elements; second, it elevates translation into a platform for revitalisation, as evidenced by the acknowledgment from the Department of National Culture and Arts (JKN), which affirmed that the book serves to re-energise *Makyung* at both national and international levels (Ariffin, 2015).

Conclusion

This study finds that the cultural elements of Makyung, including material culture, social structures, and performative gestures were successfully translated using appropriate strategies, enabling readers to grasp the cultural context and origins of the performance. Paratextual features such as illustrations and captions further clarified cultural meaning, providing visual and contextual support that enhanced comprehension. Overall, translation not only preserved the original meaning but also

fostered cultural appreciation, supported the documentation and safeguarding of local heritage, and functioned as a linguistic bridge for future generations and cross-cultural audiences. In this way, translation emerges as both a scholarly endeavor and a cultural act, ensuring that Makyung continues to resonate as a living tradition within global discourse.

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Conflict of interest

The authors confirm that there is no conflict of interest involve with any parties in this research study.

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