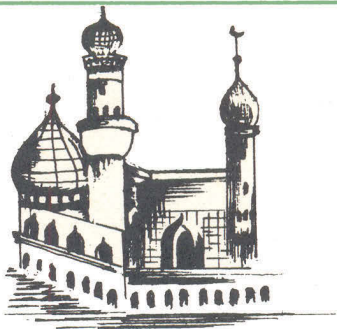


WHY PRAY IN ARABIC?



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FOREWORD

The Arabic language - in term of the number of speakers and extent of its influenceis - is by far the most important language today.

It is spoken today by over 110 million people in a number of the countries. In particular its significance lies in the fact that it is the language of the Qur'an, the holy book of God, read and revered by Muslims all over the world.

Arabic is a language of vigour, conciseness and precision: Arabic is fond of brevity, which is regarded by Arab rhetoricians as the real criterion of eloquence. Thanks to its inherent virtues as well as the fact that it is the language of Islam, Arabic has not only survived the vicissitudes of 14 centuries. but has progressed and developed to the highest possible degree.

In the few pages of this booklet, I have tried to

explain the significance of Arabic language being used in the daily Muslim prayers.

Some observations and points have been quoted from Persian translation of an article of Professor Hamidullah Khan.

I am grateful to Sayyid Saeed Akhtar Rizvi, Chief Missionary of Bilal Muslim Mission of Tanzania, for scrutinizing this little work of mine.

I hope this booklet will serve the purpose for which it is published.

A. H. Sheriff

WHY SHOULD WE PRAY IN ARABIC

The question some times is asked as to why should a Muslim pray only in Arabic language and not his mother tongue.

It may first seem logical that every Muslim should pray through his own mother language, so that he may understand what he says; but a little more thinking and study, we shall find that there are strong arguments in favour of only one common language and that also Arabic.

ARABIC: A DEEP AND VAST LANGUAGE

It is a fact recognized by the linguists that the Arabic language has the best ability to express wide and deep thoughts and to explain important subjects in short and precise words. Moreover, it has been proved that no language, except Arabic, is capable of presenting such deep spiritual, moral and ethical expressions in such an eloquent manner. Therefore the choice of Arabic for Islamic prayers is not to be wondered upon.

Wakche Aglari, an Italian orientalist in the University of Naples, writes in her book on Advancement of Islam, that in no literary work of the world can there be found such deep-meaning sentences with such beautiful words except in the Qur'an; and that depth of meaning is crowned with such eloquent language.

The late George Bernard Shaw, in the course of his discussion on Islam at Mombasa during 1943 said: "I also very much admire the forcible and striking diction of the Qur'an. What grace and beauty characterizes that passage which depicts the dreadful scene of the dooms-day field, and dealing with infanticide, dramatically leaves off at the question, 'For what crime wert thou slain?' to the innocent child that was buried alive or put to death. In my opinion it is the most effective way of creating an abiding impression on the minds of people." (He was referring to the opening ayats of the Sura 81)

Professor Arbury, the well known orientalist scholar (University of Cambridge), says that no

language has and shall have the ability to put in a short sentence, the word **مِنْ** (Min) (which is repeated five times in an ayat of the Qur'an) without disturbing the eloquence and conveyance of its meaning, except the language (Arabic) which is chosen for the Qur'an to convey the message of Islam.

A COMMON LANGUAGE FOR THE ISLAMIC PRAYER

All Muslims perform their religious rites and worship of God, including the daily five time prayers, in Arabic. In the course of these prayers, some verses of the Qur'an and other sentences, are uttered so as to express the Greatness and Glory of Allah, the Creator, and the humbleness and insignificance of the human beings, the creatures.

This is done in the same wordings by all Muslims, Arabs and non-Arabs alike, even by those who do not understand Arabic. This system of prayers in one common language was

in practise during the life time of the Prophet of Islam and has continued after him for more than 1400 years. In every country, Muslims have been praying in Arabic language.

CEMENTING THE ISLAMIC BROTHERHOOD

Prayer in Arabic cements the Islamic brotherhood and emphasizes the universal character of Islam. Islam has come for the entire Human race. It is a fact that the Muslim Communities of the world, like all other communities, speak numerous languages and dialects. At the same time it should be appreciated that our life today is rapidly assuming international character. Distance between any two points of the world has shrunk fantastically. In every place you will find Muslims speaking different languages. Imagine a Muslim who is an Englishman going to China and passing through a street. Suddenly he hears the voice of, say 'CHING-CHANG-CHUNG' which, let us suppose mean 'Allaho Akbar' – God is Great.

No doubt the stranger would not understand that it is a call for Muslim prayer and would miss the opportunity of praying in congregation with the people of that locality. Incidentally, the mosques in China do not resemble in appearance to those in Europe or other Eastern countries and are without minarets. Conversely, if a Chinese travels abroad where people pray in their local language, he would not be able to understand it and participate in it.

Sayyid Saeed Akhtar Rizvi, Chief Missionary of Bilal Muslim Mission, writes:-

“Prayers in Arabic are an important factor cementing the solidity and unity of Muslims all over the world. Nowadays if a Muslim from Czechoslovakia enters a mosque in the interior of Congo, he finds himself at home and participates in the prayer without any hint of bewilderment. What will happen if every man is told to pray in his own language? Can this feeling of Unity and Oneness survive?”

Thus, Islam, the universal religion, has paved the

way of common approach to God, has united its followers and instilled in them a feeling of everlasting Brotherhood.

One cannot ignore the racial, colour, or national prejudices which are rife these days almost in every country, Islam has not only condemned all sorts of discrimination but has shown the practical way of fostering fraternity and brotherhood. A common language for religious services plays a great part in bringing people close to one another and create a feeling of equality in the eyes of God.

QUR'AN: WORK OF ALLAH

Arabic in which the holy Qur'an and traditions of the Prophet have been revealed has a special status and honour. This high status of Arabic is not due to its being the language of the Arabs; rather it is because of its being language of Qur'an chosen by Almighty Allah for conveying His last message and revelation.

Muslims believe that the holy Qur'an is the Word of God. As such, it is only befitting that the recitation of the word of God is done in the same form and language in which it was originally pronounced. Spiritually, a faithful Muslim finds himself ascending higher and higher with the support of the words of God as expressed in the original language which is Arabic.

TRANSLATION ALMOST IMPOSSIBLE

Any translation of the original will not be the word of God but the work of human beings. Keep in view the imperfect human knowledge, and remember that Arabic is the widest and richest of all languages. Then you will have to admit that no translation of the Qur'an would be perfect enough to carry the true meanings and to fulfil the spiritual purposes.

Sayyid Saeed Akhtar Rizvi writes on this subject:-
“Praying in English: First of all, translation of any work of literature from any language into

another is considered by all men of literature as almost impossible. Of course, you will find thousands of translations of literary works, but they represent only the body of the original; the spirit is always lost.

Secondly, Arabic language, in particular, is so comprehensive that, for example, it is just impossible to convey the complete idea of a word (let alone a 'sentence') into English. Take for example, the most common phrase **الْحَمْدُ لِلَّهِ** which is generally translated as "All praise be to God." Now 'Al' **الْ** conveys in Arabic the following shades of meaning:

- (1) Each and every individual of the thing mentioned, taken separately;
- (2) All the individuals of the thing mentioned taken jointly;
- (3) The species of the thing mentioned taken as an abstract idea etc.

Now if you want to translate **الْ** in such a way as to convey all the meanings mentioned above you will have to say 'Each and every, all and the.'

Then comes حمد .There is not a single word in English to convey its idea. ‘Praise’ is translation of حمد not مدح ; Thanks’ is translation of شكر not حمد. “Hamd” means “to praise and thank someone because he deserves to be praised whether he has done you any favour or not provided that his qualities are not given to him by someone else.”

How can anybody convey this idea in translations?

Now comes (L) of الله . It conveys the idea of ‘For’, ‘Of, ‘Belonging to’ etc. No single English preposition can cover the whole range of its meanings. الله is generally rendered as ‘God’. But, first of all ‘god” is not translation of الله because الله means ‘One who deserves to be loved’ and ‘Into whom every one seeks refuge.’

Secondly الله has no plural and no feminine. So this name itself reflects light upon the fact that He is one and only “one and that He has no partner nor any equal. But god’ has plural (gods) and feminine (goddess).

This short explanation should be sufficient to show that it is impossible to translate the Qur'an in such a way that the translation conveys all the shades of meanings of the original,"

In the words of A. J. Arbury, the Qur'an is "a foreign idiom, for the Qur'an is God's revelation in Arabic, and the emotive and evocative qualities of the original disappear almost totally in the skilfullest translation." (The holy Qur'an, an introduction; London,1953).

It is clear, therefore, that no translation can replace this, divine literary work at all. Of course, a number of English translations of the Qur'an have been published; but it has always been felt that yet another effort for better translation is necessary, because all existing translations appear inadequate or carrying misleading meanings of certain verses. This feeling is not restricted to English translations; but it affects also those in other languages. Under the circumstances, should one make use of the defective translation and leave aside the perfect

original, particularly when he is addressing the Almighty Allah?

QUR'AN: THE ONLY PRESERVED REVELATION

Let us remember that no revealed religion has succeeded to preserve the original revelations sent from God, except Islam. What is today available in the hands of the Jews, Christians, Zorastarians and others is only a part of their original scriptures, and that also mostly in translation, not in the original form. It is a matter of pride for Muslims to have today their Divine book in the same words in which it was originally revealed from God, and that is the holy Ouran in Arabic. This preservation of original words is due, in part at least, to the rule that prayers MUST be in original Arabic.

QUR'ANIC MELODY

The Qur'an, emphatically, is not poetry. Still its prose embodies all the beauties of a poetry.

Add or remove one word here or there and the Qur'anic beauty is marred. Thus the Qur'anic sweet melodious sound at the time of recitation has its own beauty and perfection which cannot be found in any translation.

DIFFERENCE BETWEEN 'DUA' AND 'SALAT'

There is a difference between 'Dua' which means Invocation or supplication to God, and 'Salat' which means prayers to God: So far as Dua is concerned a Muslim is completely free to supplicate and ask from God what he wants in whatever language he chooses in whatever state he is and whenever he wishes. This Dua has an individual aspect and is a personal communion between the created and his Creator. After giving this freedom in Dua, Islam has imposed the strict discipline in Salat.

In contrast to 'Dua' the Salat (prayer) is to be performed strictly in the same wording which have been prescribed in the Sheriat, and is in

Arabic and a major part of which consists of the portions of the Qur'an. Also, it has a social aspect. In it one is expected to ask God for requirements and needs of all Muslims, and particularly of those who are with him in the congregational prayers (Salatul Jamaat).

UNDERSTANDING ARABIC PRAYER NOT DIFFICULT:

In the beginning I mentioned the argument of some people that if a man prays in his mother tongue he will understand what he is saying. But this argument is superfluous. It should be appreciated that the whole Islamic prayer consists of but a few sentences. The first being Azan & Ikamah; thereafter Allaho Akbar; the sura of Alhamd and a small sura; then Subhana Rabbiyal Azeeme wa behamdihi; and Subhana Rabbiyal Aaala wa bihamdihi; then Tashahhud and Salaam. All these would hardly occupy one page if noted down. Any Muslim after studying the meanings once or twice would be able to understand what he is saying in his prayers. Thus

the necessity of saying translated prayers does not arise at all.

It is obvious that the respect and reverence a Muslim holds for the holy Qur'an (knowing that these very words were revealed by Almighty God to His Apostle and Prophet Muhammad s.a.w.) would not be the same for any of its translations in any language. Because the translation is after all the work of a human being.

CONCLUSION:

Thus we find that the Grace, Dignity, Beauty and Spirituality of prayers depend on praying in original Arabic; and the literary and artistic values of the Qur'an are bound to be lost if prayer is performed in translation; and the Islamic Brotherhood will be the first victim of such translated prayer.



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