

Early Arabic Printing at the Cape of Good Hope

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A THOROUGH and scientific treatment of the historiography of the African Muslim peoples and institutions south of the Zambesi is a long-felt and eminent want. As yet, this particular field of research has hardly been explored, and its results, if collected and evaluated, would add tangibly to our contemporary knowledge of Oriental penetration in lands where Europeans have founded new homes and fostered a vitalist conception of Occidental civilization.

Especially in South Africa, with its thousands of Muslim devotees adding weight to the daily and serious problems of the country, such a survey should be encouraged for, as the most erudite of South African historians—the late Dr. George McCall Theal—recalled in an interview before he left London (*vide Cape Times*, February, 1926), the more he had delved into the manuscripts at Lisbon and at the Vatican, the more convinced he had become that the Arabic historiographers and geographers were worth the study of the Cape historian. More fittingly has the late Sir Thomas Arnold expressed this conviction: “Very little notice has been taken of these Muslims by European travellers, or even by their co-religionists until recently.” (*The Preaching of Islam*, London, 1896, p. 284.)¹

Prompted by this motive, this small contribution to Islamica essays to reveal another facet of the growth of Muslim society in South Africa. I attempt to trace the one or two efforts made to introduce Arabic printing at the Cape of Good Hope as well as the

¹ The case is otherwise when one searches the range of Africana for references by European travellers (from the early days of the D.E.I.C. until our times) to local Muslims, who are more popularly called “Cape Malays”—a name which has been applied broadly to the co-religionists of various races who came from the Eastern seas, India, Ceylon, Eastern Africa, and whose oldest section came from the Malay Archipelago. Much material exists, but it has not yet received adequate attention. It is clear that Sir Thomas Arnold did not have the opportunity to conduct such a search. In his *Preaching of Islam* (second edition, London, 1913, pp. 350–2), he gives a short history of this people. Anent them the brilliant series of articles on “Vertolking aan die Kaap in Maleis en Portugees” and “Maleise en Portugeese Relikte aan die Kaap van Vandag”, which appeared in the Cape Town Afrikaans weekly, *Die Huisgenoot*, between May and November, 1930, and written by Professor Dr. J. L. M. Franken, repay scrutiny for linguistic purposes. Cf. “Two Cape Town Catechisms” in the *Moslem World* (New York, October, 1925), and S. M. Zwemer’s *Across the World of Islam* (New York, 1929, p. 252) for present day instances.

broader non-Islamic causes which necessitated this movement.¹ At the same time, it must be taken into consideration that typography was introduced only recently into the Arabic-thinking world,² and this aspect, too, cannot be left out of our picture.

Before proceeding with my main case, I desire to point out this fact (for it, too, has some bearing on our discussion), that Qur'ans were available for local religious purposes³ some time before 1806—the year which saw the final conquest of the Cape of Good Hope by the British—and so helped to spread the knowledge of matters

¹ No full-sized history of local printing has been compiled. Neither A. C. G. Lloyd in *The Printing Press: First Production in South Africa* (Cape Town, 1910), nor Sydney Mendelssohn in his authoritative *South African Bibliography* (London, 1910), throw any light on our subject. Dr. R. A. Nicholson's *A Literary History of the Arabs* (second edition, Cambridge, 1930) does not, of course, mention it at all.

² For example, in Persia, c. A.D. 1816–17 (*The Press and Poetry of Modern Persia: Partly Based on the Manuscript Work of Mirza Mūhammad 'Alī Khān "Tarbiyat" of Tabriz*, by E. G. Browne (Cambridge, 1914, p. 8)) and in Constantinople about 1727 (*Encyc. of Islam*, s.v. Turks, iv, 919a; cf. *A History of the War in Bosnia*, trans. from the Turkish by C. Fraser, London, Oriental Trans. Fund, 1830, p. 884).

³ It may be of interest to note that Old and New Testaments in Arabic lettering were sent to the Cape from Holland for transmission to the East. Cf. *Kaapse Archiefstukken Lopende over het Jaar 1778*, door K.M. Jeffreys, M.A. (Cape Town, 1926, pp. 497, 499); "Ontvangen met 'de Behemoth' den 27th Dec., 1778." J. S. Mayson in his *The Malays of Cape Town* (Manchester, 1855, p. 8) states that in "1820–1 a number of distinguished Arabs, from the Island of Johanna in the Mozambique Channel, visited the Colony. They were kindly received by the Government, and were hospitably entertained by the Malays, whom they further instructed in the faith and practice of Islam, and with whom they (the Malays) have since corresponded, sending them also supplies of the Koran and other books."

Also, I may refer to the presence of two Muslim authors at the Cape sometime during the eighteenth century, seeing, as far as I am aware, that as yet no presentable account of their careers have been published, and Mendelssohn does not index their volumes in his *South African Bibliography*. They, too, knew Arabic, and are, perhaps, the first of their co-religionists to have penned something regarding the Cape. (1) *Shigurf Namahi Velaët, or Excellent Intelligence Concerning Europe, being the Travels of Mirza Itesa Modeen*, translated from the Original Persian MS., etc., by J. E. Alexander (London, 1827). C. E. Buckland in his *Dictionary of Indian Biography* (London, 1906, pp. 217–18), writes thus, *inter alia*: "Itisam-ud-Din (?) . . . about 1765–6 accompanied Captain Swinton to Europe as *munshi*, on a mission to deliver Shah Alam's letter to George III: he was the first educated native of Bengal to visit England and describe his journey: returned after nearly three years' absence to India: wrote the *Shigurf-nama*, or 'Wonder Book'; a popular work in India: he was careful and painstaking in his observations." Cf. H. G. Keene's *An Oriental Biographical Dictionary* (London, 1894, p. 186). (2) *The Travels of Mirza Abu Taleb Khan in Asia, Africa, and Europe during the years 1799, 1800, 1801, 1802, and 1803*, written by himself in the Persian Language, and translated by Charles Stewart (London, 1810, 2 vols). According to the *British Museum General Catalogue*, vol. i, p. 246, Abu Taleb Khan edited the works of Hafiz (in Persian, 1791). The best biography of him (to my mind) is to be found in Michaud's *Biographie Universelle* (Paris, 1843, vol. i, pp. 85–7).

devotional among them. Zwemer writes thus: "Another name in the early history of Islam in South Africa is that of Abdullah Abdus-Salam, a later convict who, when he received his liberty, called the Moslems together, and instructed them in their faith. He knew the Arabic Koran by heart, and is said to have written out the whole of it from memory. This first copy of the Cape Koran is a treasured possession in the Moslem community. He died at the age of ninety-five, and many of the faithful visit his grave on Fridays, and his tombstone which, although well kept, bears no inscription. His descendants became prominent men in the Moslem community of South Africa. One of them is head of a dervish order." (*Across the World of Islam*, pp. 245-6). Alas, there is no definiteness about the local edition of the Qur'an, and no trustworthy written evidence exists regarding the scribe ever having performed such a labour.

The first notification of an attempted introduction of Arabic printing in this country appeared in this wise:—

"Among the publications recently received in the South African Public Library is a work entitled *Roostum Zaboolee and Soohrah*" and in the *Appendix* to this volume we observe an English version of the *Hidayut-ool-Islam, or a Guide to Faith and Practice, being the Book of Common Prayer of the Moohummudans*: Translated from the Arabic, Persian, and Hindoostanee Languages, by W. T. Robertson, Esq., of the Bengal Civil Establishment. We understand that this gentleman, who is at present in Cape Town, intends to get the original Text printed in the Arabic character, together with his translation into English, and a version into the Dutch tongue, for the benefit of the Malay Moslems throughout the Colony of the Cape of Good Hope. It was his intention, we believe, to have printed the work at this place—but, as none of the local presses can supply Oriental type, he proposes to superintend the printing of the Text, together with English and Dutch translations, on his approaching return to Calcutta. It is self-evident that a Book of Common Prayer, in a language understood by the community of Malays in this Colony, must prove valuable and acceptable as well as useful and instructive.

"Debased, depraved, ignorant, and self-willed as the Malays of Cape Town are, and as little inclined to encourage the sanguinary and sensual dogmas of the Arab imposter, we are nevertheless glad to discover any method by which the unexceptionable portions of his creed may be known to his followers in this quarter of the world." (*The Cape of Good Hope Literary Gazette*, Cape Town, 1830, vol. i, No. 2, p. 18.)

Thus, it can be easily evidenced that Christian missionary effort was responsible for the proposal to initiate the above venture. For the propagation of Muslim beliefs among the non-Christian blacks had excited attention, and the contemporary newspapers and official

documents give a clue to this tendency.¹ “The Malays, who are supposed to amount to nearly three thousand,” opines the anonymous author of the *State of the Cape of Good Hope in 1822* (London, 1823, p. 68), “carry on their devotion in rooms and halls fitted up for the purpose, and occasionally in the stone quarries near the town. One of their imans is said to be a learned man, well-learned in the Hebrew and Arabic tongues, and in Al Coran, which he chants with taste and devotion. It must be acknowledged with shame and sorrow that Mahometanism makes great progress amongst the lowest orders at the Cape. But where there is the greatest zeal, there will be the most effect.”

On the whole, the viewpoint of the European public respecting them seemed to be favourable, the proviso being that the Muslims should act in a law-abiding manner towards themselves and the state. Commenting on the effect upon non-whites of the publication of the famous 50th Ordinance, the most representative journal of the day—*The South African Commercial Advertiser*, 27th December, 1828—writes editorially:—

“As to the public worship of the Mahomedans, although it was tolerated, no Proclamation of Law, as far as we know, was ever issued in this Colony, by which it was sanctioned or recognized! Perfect toleration was however one of the few praiseworthy principles of the old system.

“Thus we have seen, that an industrious and peaceable class of inhabitants, whom an enlightened policy would have cherished and perfected, were, up to July 3, 1828, treated with the utmost harshness and ignominy. Their marriages were declared unlawful, and their issue degraded. They were refused admission to the rights of Burghership. They could not hold landed property nor remain in the Colony, though born there, without special permission and ample security. They were placed under the arbitrary control of the Burgher Senate and Landdrosts—compelled to perform public services gratuitously—punished at discretion with stripes and imprisonment—unable to leave their homes without a Pass—their houses entered and searched at pleasure by the police. They were liable to arrest without a warrant—and yet they were Taxed up to the lips, like the other Free inhabitants.

“Since their Emancipation, their conduct has been most exemplary, and on some occasions their promptitude in rendering assistance in case of Fire—no longer compulsory—has called forth the public approbation of the Head of the Police Department. Many of them are men of the most estimable character, inoffensive in their demeanour

¹ Consult G. McC. Theal's *Records of the Cape Colony*, vol. xxviii, pp. 36-8; vol. xxxv, pp. 138 ff.

and humane and generous in their dispositions. And the whole class may be considered as a most valuable addition—the fruit of the late Ordinance—to our effective and improving Population.”

But this orientation of feeling became intensified after 1838—the final year of the Abolition of Slavery at the Cape. Needless to declare, the Cape Malays rejoiced in their new status as citizens of the land. Under such auspices, they continued to thrive numerically and spiritually.

This was the spirit which prevailed when the second introduction of Arabic typography (this time a successful affair) was announced :—

“ Under the title of ‘ Cape Genius ’ the *Volksblad* contains the following account of a Mahomedan Catechism in Arabic, printed in Cape Town : ‘ We have received to-day the first number of a Malay Catechism, *Gablomalien*. The printer of the work is Mr. M. C. Schongewel (Greenmarket Square). It is entirely in the Arabic language, and in every way reflects great credit on the printer, its execution being very good. The work particularly deserves our attention and admiration, as the printer had to set the very difficult letters himself, which is not only a very troublesome task but a tedious one, too. It will consist of twenty numbers, and will be published from time to time. We have often had occasion to admire the beautiful specimens of Lithography executed by Mr. Schongewel, and we would wish that that gentleman present a copy to the South African Museum, in order that the public also may be enabled to put a proper estimate on his ability.’ ” (*South African Commercial Advertiser*, 26th July, 1856.)¹

Yet further concern in the matter did not wane. The nineteenth century witnessed another notable effort made in this direction. At Constantinople, in 1877, the Turkish Ministry of Education issued an Arabic-written publication in the Cape Malay dialect to serve as a handbook of the principles of the Islamic religion.² Since then several minor attempts have been made to organize Arabic

¹ No copy of this work appears to be extant. It is worth while, at this juncture, to mark this statement of Dr. T. H. Hahn in *An Index of the Grey Collection at the South African Public Library* (Cape Town, 1884, p. 362) : “ Arabic MSS. Lessons read from the pulpit before the prayers, Friday of Lobberang (Cape Malay name for *Eid-ul-Fitr. S.R.*). Probably written at the Cape. 8vo.” Owing to the great distance between Cape Town and Johannesburg, where the present study was written, I have not been able to examine these MSS.

² M. J. de Goeje, “ Mohammedanische Propaganda ” in *Nederlandsche Spectator*, No. 51, 1881. For further Turkish interests in the Cape Malays, *vide The Mussulman Population at the Cape of Good Hope*, by Maximilien Kollisch, Directeur du Journal International *Les Deux Mondes* (Constantinople, 1867).

typographical endeavours on a firmer basis, but this latter development is outside of the purview of this study.¹

¹ Apropos the above subject, on all accounts, the best Arabist who resided at the Cape during the nineteenth century, and who helped to awaken concern in the Cape Malays through the medium of his missionary endeavours, was Dr. John M. Arnold, a Church of England minister. His *Ishmael or a Natural History of Islamism, and its Relation to Christianity* (London, 1859), was well thought of. At any rate, Thomas P. Hughes in his *A Dictionary of Islam* (London, 1895, pp. 237, 242) considers Arnold's *Islam and Christianity* (London, 1874), a first-rate work. Locally, it is difficult to discover further biographical details respecting him. The *Dictionary of National Biography* contains no reference to his labours.
