Arabic-Afrikaans Literature at the Cape

Tuan Guru – the first official imam at the Cape – used Malayu as the medium of instruction in the Dorp Street madrasah (Muslim religious school) which he established at the end of the 18th century. This changed in the middle of the 19th century when Cape Dutch was adopted as the language of instruction. While the children were familiar with this language they could not read the Latin script since they were barred from attending the public schools. Cape Muslims could, however, read the Arabic script which they had to learn for liturgical purposes - though they could not speak Arabic. To overcome this conundrum, numerous scholars and teachers began to translate Arabic texts into Cape Dutch and then transcribing these in the Latin script. These “readers” came to serve as official textbooks in the madrasahs at the Cape. This article traces the development of this genre of literature which came to be known as Arabic-Afrikaans, comments on manuscripts that were identified by Adrianus van Selms, Achmat Davids and Hans Kähler and highlights the daunting challenge of transcribing Afrikaans phonetically in the Arabic script. Key words: Arabic, Arabic-Afrikaans, Afrikaans Literature, Cape-Dutch, Cape Muslim history.

Introduction

This article provides an overview of the emergence of a genre of literature which has come to be popularly known as “Arabic-Afrikaans” Literature at the Cape, lists the manuscripts that have been discovered and/or identified by researchers of Cape Muslim history, and highlights the challenges of transcribing Afrikaans phonetically into the Arabic script. We know from historical records that Muslims were brought to the Cape mainly from the East Indies and the coastal regions of India which were under Dutch occupation, soon after the Dutch East India Company had established itself there in the mid-17th century. Slaves and lawbreakers (bandiete) were to provide labour for the newly founded colony, while political exiles were isolated either on Robben Island or on farms to ensure that they did not influence their people to rebel against the Dutch (Davids 1980: 37).

Apart from being victims of Dutch economic exploitation, Muslims at the Cape were deprived of fundamental human rights, including the right to worship freely and openly. The first mosque, the Awwal Masjid (also known as the Dorp Street Masjid), was established only in 1798 (Davids 1980: 47). During the first century and a half Islam was sustained essentially through the tariqah (sufi order) (Da Costa 1994:
We have clear evidence of sufī (mystic) practices at the end of the 17th century in the form of the dhikr (chanting) sessions that Shaykh Yusuf of Macassar, a sufī master of the Khalwatiyyah Order, conducted in secret with the slaves (see Dangor 1994).

Despite the hardships and deprivations that Muslims suffered under the Dutch, a sense of community began to develop among the disparate groups. The genius of this nascent community manifested itself in various ways, including the generation of literature which came to be called “Arabic-Afrikaans” (see Ebrahim 2004). This literature flourished briefly when it first emerged in 1868–1869 and later from 1906 to 1929. However, since it was written in the Arabic script, it was naturally assumed to be in the Arabic language.

Afrikaner academics only became alerted to the true nature of this literature in the mid 20th century, thanks mainly to Adrianus van Selms who used the designation “Arabic-Afrikaans” literature for the first time in his book Arabies-Afrikaansche Studies –‘n tweetalige (Arabies en Afrikaans) kategismus (“Arabic-Afrikaans Studies – a bilingual catechism”) in which it was defined as “literary work which is written in Afrikaans with Arabic letters”. In his Übersicht über die Arabisch-Afrikaansche Literatur (“Survey of Arabic-Afrikaans Literature”) van Selms cited ten such works. However, only two of these titles are known, Risalat fi Aqidat al-Tawhid (“Treatise on the Doctrine of Tawhid”) and Risalat Mushtamil ’ala Ziyarat al-Qubur (“Treatise on visiting graves”) (Davids 1991c: 90). According to Piet Muller (1960: 38) at least 21 manuscripts had been discovered by 1960. He has not provided any details though. Hans Kähler (1971) listed 51 titles in his Studien über die Kultur, die Sprache und die Arabisch-Afrikaansche Literatur der Kap-Malaien, in the chapter “Die Arabisch-Afrikaanse Literatur”, stating that the titles of the remaining 13 had still to be investigated. This list is reproduced below.

Achmat Davids located an additional 14 manuscripts to Hans Kähler’s 64. (Davids 1991a: 1). They include the following:

- Three student notebooks (koplesboeke)
- a manuscript by Ghatieb Magmoed
- Die Boek van Tougied by Imam ‘Abd Allah ibn ‘Abduranaf
- a letter by Achmat Effendi
- Tuhfat al-Attal (“Gift for children”) by ‘Abduralim ibn Muhammad al-Iraki
- Tartib al-Salah (“The system of prayer”) by Imam ‘Abdurahman Cassiem (Qasim) Gamieldien
- a letter by Awaldien, the fezmaker
In his biography of Shaykh Isma’il Hanif Edwards, Mogamat Hoosain Ebrahim includes the following titles which have been not identified by the earlier researchers:


Besides these texts which we will discuss in more detail below, Arabic-Afrikaans manuscripts dealing with amulets and black magic were in circulation among the learned class of the Cape Malays (Kähler 1971: 70).

**Reasons for emergence of this genre of literature**

When Tuan Guru, the first *imam* or Muslim cleric, opened the Dorp Street *madrasah* (religious school), the first *madrasah* in South Africa in 1793 he used Malayu as the medium of instruction since it had become the dominant language of Cape Muslims by the end of the 18th century (Davids 1989: 16, 18, 24). Later, when Afrikaans came to be the preferred language of communication among Muslims in the mid-19th century, it was adopted as the medium of instruction in the *madrasah* (Davids 1989: 38). Davids (1989: 3) claims that Cape Muslims were among the first to speak the new language which was actually a creolized form of the Dutch spoken by Dutch authorities and their families. We shall refer to this as Cape Dutch.

However, there was one fundamental problem. Cape Muslims were familiar with the Arabic script which was essential for the purpose of reciting the Qur’an in the original language but did not understand Arabic. This meant that they could not access the Islamic texts in Arabic which were prescribed for the *madrasah*. The logical thing to do would be to translate them into Cape Dutch which the learners were conversant with. Since they could not read the Latin script because they were not allowed to attend state schools, transcribing the translated texts into the Latin script would not have resolved this conundrum.

The religious scholars at the Cape discovered a novel way in which to communicate these texts to the learners. They proposed translating Arabic literature into Cape Dutch, while retaining the Arabic script so that learners would be able to read it without difficulty. The most prolific writer of Arabic-Afrikaans was Shaikh ‘Abd al-
Rahim ibn Muhammad al-'Iraqi who was known to have been an outstanding theologian (Davids 1989: 31).

It must be noted that a precedent for this genre of writing had already been established in the Malaysian Archipelago. When Sultan Muhammad Shah ascended to the throne of Malacca in 1276 he initiated a process of adapting the Arabic alphabet to Melayu. The Melayu-Arabic script is popularly known as jawi. It has been established that Melayu was the official medium of instruction in the Dorp Street madrasah. The texts that were prepared by Tuan Guru were written in Arabic with translations in Melayu in the Arabic script (Davids 1991c: 4). The question that arises is: why would Muslims choose Cape Dutch Afrikaans as their means of communication and, more importantly, what explains their willingness to translate their sacred texts into Afrikaans and then transcribe it in their sacred script, Arabic? Davids (1991c: 12) provides an answer: The Cape Muslims did not consider Afrikaans to be a foreign language or the language of the oppressor, but “as a spiritual language, on par with Malayu”. More importantly, though, some of the texts were written in response to issues confronting the Cape Muslims. This is evident from some of the titles. *Irshad al-Ummah li Bayan Salat al-Zuhr ba’da al-jumu’ah ‘ah al-maddahhib al—arba’ah al-Immah al-Mujtahidin wa hukuma ‘inda al-Rawafid wa al-Wahhabiyyin* (“Guiding the community by clarifying the issue of the Zuhr prayer after Jumu’ah based on the four schools of jurisprudence of the mujtahdi imams and the wise men among the Rawafid and Wahhabis”) was written in response to a dispute relating to the Friday prayer.²

Kähler’s list of manuscripts

Below I have listed the manuscripts found in Kähler’s work cited above. These have been arranged under the authors’ names. Those whose authors are unknown have been included under Anonymous.


was Shaykh ‘Abd Allah ibn al-Shaykh ‘Abd al-Rahman Bafadl al-Hadrani; Mulhak li Kitab fi Qawa’id al-Lughat al-‘Arabiyyah li Musa’adat al-Talib al-Mubtadi’i (“Supplement to the book on Arabic grammar to assist the new student”); al-Rawd al-Azhar fi al-Fiqh al-Akbar (“The radiant garden relating to greater jurisprudence”); Tuhfat li Mubtadi’in fi Usul a-Din (“Gift for those who have just started studying the principles of the faith”).


5. ‘Abd al-Rahim ibn al-Marhum al-Shaykh Muhammad al-Iraqi: Hidayat al-Wahhabi li Tariq al-Sawab (“Wahhabi Guidance to the Correct Way”); Kitab ‘Im al-Fara’id (“The book on knowledge of the obligations”); Risalat fi Bayan Fada’iil Laylat nisf Sha’ban wa al-Du’ah al-Warid fiha (“Treatise explaining the virtues of the night of the middle of Sha’ban and the invocation that has been mentioned in respect of it”); Tafsir Surah Yasin (“Commentary on Surah Yasin,” i.e. chapter 36); Tafsir Surah Yusuf (“Commentary of Surah Yusuf,” i.e. chapter 12); Sharh al-Musamma Kifayat al-‘Awwam (“Commentary on what is suitable for the general public”); Mohammedan Calendar.

6. M. A. Abrahams: al-Istighfar wa al-Tasbih (“Seeking forgiveness and glorifying God”); Qur’an: Alif Lam Mim – al-Baqarah (“The Qur’an: Alif Lam Mim, the Cow”); Surah al-Baqarah (“Chapter: The Cow,” i.e. chapter 2 of the Qur’an); Hierdie Touwgied is in (3) parte in; die Kitab praat van die Islaam en die Imaan, met die Igsaan; die 2de Kitaab se vrae is: How glo jy aan Allah; en die 3de kitaab is omte maak die werk sloan met die Arkaan saam, en die Igsaan (“This Tawhid is in 3 parts: the book talks about Islam and Iman with ihsan; the second book asks: How do you believe in God, and the 3rd book is to link action to beliefs and ihsan”).


10. Ahmad al-Ishmuni: Kitab al-Qawil al-Matin fi Bayan Umur al-Din (“The book on the firm declaration with regard to explaining the affairs of faith”).

12. ‘Abd al-Raqib ibn ‘Abd al-Qahhar: *Kitab al-Riyad al-Bad’iyyah fi Usul al-Din wa ba’d furu’ al-Shari’ah* ("The book on the wonderful garden relating to the principles of the faith and some branches of Islamic law"); *Safinat al-Najat* ("Rescue ship"), the author of which was Salim ibn Samir al-Hadrami.


14. Abu Bakr ibn al-Shaykh al-Imam ‘Abd Allah ibn ‘Abd al-Ra’uf: *Sabil al-Najat* ("Way of redemption") by Salim ibn Samir al-Hadrami; *Dit is die Tarjaman van Fatiha en van Ayat al-Kursi en ander baten die twee van du’as* ("This is the commentary of Surah Fatiha and of the Verse of the Throne and other invocations"); *Risalat fi Aqa’id al-Tawhid* ("Treatise on the doctrine of tawhid"); *al-Tanbih ila La’iqat bi Ahwal al-Muslimin* ("Advice on what is suitable for the conditions of Muslims").

15. ‘Abd Allah ibn Ta’ha ibn Jamil al-Din: *Risalat fi Qada Shahr Ramadan wa ma yata’allaq bihi min al-Shurut wa al-Arkan* ("Treatise on how to spend the month of Ramadan and the conditions and basic principles relating to it"); *Masa’il Abi Laith* ("Questions of Abu Laith") The author this work was Nasr ibn Muhammad ibn Ibrahim al-Hanafi (Shaykh Abu Laith); *Ratib al-Haddad al-Musamma al-Hisn al-Hasin* ("Ratib al-Haddad called al-Hisn al-Hasin"). The author of this work was ‘Abd Allah ibn Alawi al-Haddad.

16. ‘Abd al-Rahman Jamil al-Din (Gamiedien): *Risalat Jalilat Tashtamil ‘ala Qawa’id al-Islam* ("Sublime treatise containing the principles of Islam").

17. Yasin ibn al-Khatib ‘Abd al-Samad: *Risalat Mushtamil ‘ala Bayan Tariqatina* ("Treatise containing an explanation of our [sufi?] way of life"). The authors of this treatise were Shihab al-Din ibn Sha’ban and ‘Abd al-Rahman ibn al-Sayyid Abazar;


20. ‘Abd al-Rahim: "‘n 5 talige woordelais en kort sinnemtjies in Arabies, Persies, Hindustani en Afrikaans-Engels" ("A word list in 5 languages and short summaries in Arabic, Persian, Hindustani and Arabic-Afrikaans").

The above list reveals the following: (a) the most prolific translators or transliterators were Abd al-Rahim ibn al-Marhum al-Shaykh Muhammad al-‘Iraqi and Isma’il ibn Muhammad Hanif; (b) the manuscripts deal with Islamic doctrine, ritual, rules and regulations, social issues, explanation of Qur’anic texts and of the Prophetic Tradition, mysticism and the Arabic language; (c) the themes are consistent with “readers” designed for madrasah children; (d) the fact that tracts dealing with mysticism formed part of the madrasah curriculum not only indicates that Sufism was popular at the Cape but also that it was being consciously promoted and encouraged; (e) at least one title reflects the theological dispute that erupted between Cape Muslims on the issue of the Friday prayer.

The Bayan al-Din (“An explanation of the faith”)
The Bayan al-Din is recognised as the first extant publication in Arabic-Afrikaans. The first publication is said to have been Ahmad al-Ishmuni’s Kitab al-Qawl al-Matin (“The book on the firm bond”) (see Van Selms 1953) which was referred to in Het Volksblad on 24 February 1856 as “Die Oudste Boek in Afrikaans: Isjmoeni se ‘Betroubare Woord’”. Davids believes that this is mere conjecture and that the publication ascribed by Van Selms and Kähler to Ishmuni is, in fact, a translation by Sheikh Abubakr Abdurauf (Davids 1991c: 2). There is evidence, however, of “the existence of koplesboeke in Arabic-Afrikaans before the publication of the Bayanuddin” (Davids 1991c: 109).10

The Bayan al-Din of Abu Bakr Effendi (d. 1880), a Turkish Islamic scholar who was sent to the Cape by the Turkish government in 1862 to provide advice and guidance to the Muslim community which was besieged with theological conflicts, was without doubt the best known publication (Davids 1991b: 2–3). It was completed in manuscript form in Cape Town in 1869 and subsequently published in Constantinople in 1877. Davids considers it as the second and probably the most extensive publication in the early history of Afrikaans literature (Davids 1989b: 1).

The Bayan al-Din is essentially a text on Islamic law based on the Hanafi madhab and was written specifically for learners of the Ottoman Theological school.11 The Afrikaans text is not a translation of the complete text in Arabic but a paraphrase of the original. It deals with rules and regulations pertaining to Islamic practices.

Challenges of transcribing Afrikaans phonetically in the Arabic script
One of the major challenges encountered by Arabic-Afrikaans writers was to transcribe phonetically the Afrikaans words in the Arabic script since the Arabic al-
phabet was not adequate to convey all the Afrikaans sounds in writing. They resorted to using Persian-Turkish and Malaysian adaptations of the Arabic alphabet. However, these also did not prove adequate. They were compelled to adapt forms of the Arabic alphabet to convey distinctive Afrikaans sounds. This gave rise to a distinct Arabic-Afrikaans alphabet consisting of 29 letters that they adopted to transcribe the Afrikaans sounds. Of this number, twenty are original Arabic letters of the Arabic alphabet, four are Persian-Turkish adaptations and two Malaysian adaptations of the Arabic alphabet, and the remaining two were created to represent the “kl” and “kr” sounds (Davids 1991c: 14–15).

While the Arabic vowel indicators that are used to represent Arabic vowels, diphthongs and elongations were retained in Arabic-Afrikaans, 13 new vocalisms were created to convey Afrikaans sounds that do not exist in Arabic. This was achieved by manipulating the rules of *tajwid* (Arabic phonetic science) (Davids 1991c: 16). Another major challenge was to represent the “e” sound since this vowel does not exist in Arabic. Effendi’s major contribution, according to Davids, was his “ingenious manipulation of the lettering symbols of the Arabic phonetic science of *tajwid*” (Davids 1991b: 5). To overcome this difficulty, Effendi manipulated the Arabic alphabet and vowel indicator system (Davids 1991b: 6).

**Conclusion**

The development of Arabic-Afrikaans literature illustrates how Cape Muslim scholars-cum-teachers were compelled by force of circumstances to generate a novel strategy to achieve their goal of transmitting knowledge. On the one hand, they were challenged by the inability of their students to understand Arabic which ruled out teaching through the medium of Arabic, and on the other, by their inability to read the Latin script which ruled out the use of Afrikaans textbooks. They ingeniously combined their students’ ability to read the Arabic script with their ability to speak Afrikaans to create a new medium to produce texts that were accessible to them. The Arabic-Afrikaans texts which were the products of this innovation played a vital function in the transmission of the basic teachings of Islam to learners in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Davids (1991c: 103) attributes the subsequent demise of Arabic-Afrikaans literature to two factors, namely the emergence of Afrikaans religious texts in Roman script and the emergence of Muslim mission schools. I believe that there are several other factors which Davids did not consider. Among the most important of these are the following: (a) the gradual switch from communicating in Afrikaans to using English as the preferred medium of communication; (b) the fact that students began travelling for Islamic studies to Arab-speaking countries such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia which meant that Arabic came to hold a place of eminence among these graduates. These
factors rule out the possibility of Arabic-Afrikaans being revived as a medium of instruction. Davids has commented on the “profound influence” of Tuan Guru’s *Ma’rifat al-Islam wa’l Iman* on Arabic-Afrikaans literature (Davids 1989: 13). An analysis of the legal and theological contents of these texts can be an important source of information about the influences of their authors on the ideological orientation of Cape Muslims.

Notes

1. It appears that the ability to read and write the Arabic script was widespread in the Cape Muslim community (see Davids 1989: 1).

2. *Mujtahid* refers to a scholar who is qualified to formulate independent decisions in theological and legal matters. *Rawafid* (lit.: “those who refuse”) – historically the term is applied by Sunnis to the Shi’ah; it refers to the refusal by the Shi’ah to accept the legitimacy of the caliphate of Abu Bakr, ‘Umar and ‘Uthman. The *Wahhabis* are members of an 18th century reformist movement founded by Muhammad ibn ʿAbdul al-Wahhab, a Hanbali scholar, in Arabia.

3. *Mawlid* (birth) refers to commemoration of the Prophet’s birthday. Ja‘far ibn Hasan al-Barzanji was a 14th century Islamic poet who wrote an epic poem called “Ruwayats” which expounds the heroic deeds of the Prophet of Islam. This poem is often referred to as “Maulid Barzanji”.

4. *al-Hadramiyah* is derived from Hadramawt, a region south of the Arabian peninsula.

5. This term refers to a popular invocation in praise of God.

6. This term refers to signs of the Day of Judgement.

7. Davids (1991c: 2) claims that the author of this work was Sheikh Abu Bakr Abdurrauf.

8. *Tawhid* (lit.: the oneness of God) is the defining doctrine of Islam. It means the unity and uniqueness of God as Creator and Sustainer of the universe.


10. *Koplesboeke* were handwritten readers containing sections of Islamic books or texts compiled for the learners.

11. There are four major Sunni schools (*madhahib*, sing.: *madhab*) of Islamic law. The overwhelming majority of Cape Muslims belonged to the Shafi’i school. However, Abu Bakr Effendi belonged to the Hanafite school, so he established the Ottoman theological school where he would be free to promulgate his teachings.

Works cited


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