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Facets from the Translation Movement in Classic Arab Culture

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Abstract

When investigating the early evolution of the Arab Islamic civilization, one can hardly evade the role played by translation. It formed the cornerstone of the evolution of the Arab civilization and thought. Pioneers of translation were always in competition to expand their knowledge as well as introduce Islam to peoples of other faiths and civilizations. This led to the recognition by leaders of translators who were accorded a distinguished status that was well-deserved as many had dedicated their lives to the translation enterprise. Their devotion to transferring new ideas, especially those coming from ancient Greek origins, played a major role in introducing many novel ideas into the Islamic Arabic culture. Later, all these ideas were reintroduced into Western culture through Arabic because most of the original scripts were lost, and the only sources were preserved in Arabic.

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1. Introduction

Nations are small parts of a multi-cultural world whose identity lies somewhere between the local and the global. Human civilization can be defined as what man does as a result of dealing with nature and life. This includes whatever man/woman makes, creates or changes in the world around him/ her in addition to new ideas that make an ordinary thing become more valuable. Hence, the civilization that emerged in the Arab world is a collective creation of the people who settled in this region. Besides, Man always benefits from his fellow man. This means that nations have become indebted to each other in one way or another. Thus, civilizations live and thrive as a result of this intellectual and moral interaction (Atteya, G. *The Levant in the Byzantine Era*, p. 139, 141- 142) Civilization, according to Toynbee, is a reflection of a society that has a comprehensible historical unity. (Atteya, G.:139) However, a civilization does not appear in a vacuum. The Arab scientific heritage evolved gradually with the spread

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of Islam and afterwards. Philosophy, medicine and natural sciences, for example, emerged from different origins and multiple sources, and translation played a major role in shaping the Arab scientific world; it was a distinctive civilization that resulted from the overlapping of human civilizations. (Dajani, B. 2009:204)

1.1. The early traces of translating into Arabic

It was cited that some Arabs had spoken the languages of their neighboring countries in the pre-Islamic era. This makes us understand how Imreo Al-Qays, an Arab poet, could ask for the help of the king of Romans and visited Constantinople (in around 561 AD) in order to recover his father's lost monarchy (Ibn Qutayba: 58). As well as what was told about another poet, Umayya bin Abi Al-Salt, (died 5 AH/ 626 AD) who recited the stories of prophets and could read books written in languages other than Arabic. This enabled him to introduce foreign words that were never used before into Arabic (Shekhu, L. 1985: 219). Later, with the advent of the Prophet of Islam, Muhammad, it is reported that he ordered Zaid bin Thabit (died 45 AH / 665 AD) to learn Hebrew and Syriac languages to communicate with Jews in their own language (Asqalani, ch2: 23).

Furthermore, the framework of the Arab Islamic civilization had many grammarians and linguists who knew Persian or Turkish and were considered an integral part of the Arabic culture. Sibawayh, the Imam of Arabic grammar (died in 180 AH/ 796 AD) for example, originally discusses Arabic grammar in Farsi. (Hijazi: 122). Ibn Abbas (died in 68 AH/ 688 AD) was the first distinguished linguist who excelled in understanding foreign words. His deep interest in Qur'an motivated him to investigate the roots of the vocabulary used in Qur'an. Credit goes to him and to his school for extracting a number of words used in Qur'an that had foreign origins (Stetekevch: 130). Furthermore, he wrote *Languages in the Holy Qur'an* in which many languages such as Roman, Hebrew, and Nabataean among other languages were mentioned. (Ibn Abbas: 30) He also wrote *Tribal Languages Contained in the Holy Qur'an*, in which he looked for the origin of many languages spoken in the Arabian Peninsula. He mentioned the languages of Copts, Nabateans, Hebrews, Syriacs, and Ethiopians. (Ibn Salam: 20, 44, 69, 105, 134-35,146)

2. The evolution of translation in the Abbasid era

The Abbasid era is considered one of the brightest eras of Arabs in terms of literature, science and art. Arabs began to realize, by means of direct contact, what neighboring nations had reached pertaining certain aspects of culture and civilization. (Fakhoury, 1951: 759). The first signs of the new adaptation in Islamic thought were revealed in the production of great Arabic translations of important global materials about philosophy and science. It was eighty years after the end of the *Umayyad* state when the Arab world had translations of most of the works of Aristotle, commentaries on updated Platonism, some works of Plato, most of the works of Galen, parts of other works on medicine and their explanations as well as many Greek, Indian, and Persian books. (De lacy, 1961: 129)

Historian Marshall Hodgson says in *The Venture of Islam* (1974: 3) that during the five centuries that followed 945 AD, a new and wider community replaced the old caliphate community. This community witnessed a great expansion at both lingual and cultural levels under the umbrella of independent governments. It was not a community controlled by the central political order, or by one common language or culture. Nevertheless, that community remained one whole which was conscious about its culture, existence and particularity. This transcultural and multi-lingual community was undoubtedly the most extensive and influential in the whole world.

Syriacs, for instance, played an important role in the transfer of many parts of the Arabic heritage. They played the mediator's role because Arabs did not understand Greek while Syriacs were in contact with Greece for more than ten centuries. (Hitti, 1959:174) Among the most famous of these translators were Hunayn Bin Ishaq, his son Ishaq, and his nephew Hubeish.

Translation was the most prominent cultural activity in the Abbasid era as it gained great interest from the caliphs. The beginning however, was in the Umayyad era when the first transfer from a foreign language into Arabic after Islam was recorded. This was done by Khalid bin Yazid bin Muawiyah (85AH /704 AD). During the continuous conquests that extended to reach Transoxiana in Turkistan as well as Morocco and Andalusia, the Arabic language pervaded the people of those countries; it also overcame their original tongues. Muslims of different races and nations used Arabic in writing. Thus, the unity of religion necessitated the unity of language and civilization.

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