

Al-Ajeruumiya: A Concise Treatise on Arabic Grammar By Imam Abu Abdallah Muhammad ibn Muhammad ibn Dawud as-Sanhaaji [Ibn Ajuruum], Introduction and Translation by Muhammad Shareef. Pittsburgh, PA: Sankore` Institute of Islamic-African Studies International, 1423/2002. 127pp.

Muhammad Shareef's introduction to this important work is a delight to read. Its lucid prose sets out clearly the African heritage of those who are counted as Arabs, constructing this history as the logical segue into a history of the Arabic language. The long presence of the Arabic language in Africa historically has been ignored; Muhammad Shareef's is a careful reconstruction of Arabic's legacy throughout Africa, from Senegal to Sudan, Tripoli to Timbuktu. He draws from historical sources to support his perspective, citing works as far back as the Sahih of al-Bukhari (on the authority of Ibn Abbas) to nineteenth century commentaries from long-neglected luminaries like Shehu Usman dan Fodiyo. Shareef's commentary on Arabic as an oral language is particularly refreshing, as this important aspect of the languages traditionally is neglected in academic foci on documents. The importance in Arabic of oral communication of the word is central to its origin and continued role among the devout. Indeed, it is fair to say that reliance on oral communication of the word is at the heart of devotion; while written expression is revered, oral/aural expression of the word of God is a Muslim's first and most pervasive means of relating to God.

With regard to the written word, Muhammad Shareef makes sense of complicated philological points. In the process of explaining hidden meanings in the order of Arabic letters, Shareef exposes layers of meaning embedded in the ordering, which brilliance is a clear indication of Arabic's divine inspiration, and therefore intrinsic spiritual power. Beyond this, there are also practical levels of higher meaning, especially in the origin of the science of medicine inherent in Arabic. As he explains, ..Arabic is not just a mode of expression, but a meta-language with an intrinsic logic which lies at the level of symbol, phrase, and syntax.[e]ach level having its separate mode of meaning .both philosophically and metaphysically.. Gradual understanding of these layers of meaning ..for those who [can] know. -- is the greater reward of study beyond elementary levels of literacy in Arabic.

Perhaps the most important point in his introduction to his translation of the al-Ajeruumiya is the point Shareef makes about the value of books and the thirst for knowledge in the context of Islamic cultures. He notes that from the 14th to 19th centuries, the most expensive trade commodity in sub-Saharan Africa was the book. Furthermore, possession of the book was not its highest value, but the potential it held for access to the absorption of knowledge on many levels. He cites a story about a scholar who asked students why they were reciting the al-Ajeruumiya when they had already achieved a high level of proficiency in Arabic; they responded that beyond its knowledge, they sought access to its *baraka*.

Comparably, Shareef notes that the study of Arabic grammar is incumbent upon Muslims because it gives insight into sources of Islam, the Qur'an and the *sunna*. Knowledge of Arabic gives access to the word of God, which, with its ever-deepening levels of meaning

is accessible to the individual according to her level of grammatical proficiency. As one's ability increases, one's understanding increases. There could be no better motivation for honing one's ability in Arabic than to better internalize the word of God and the example of the Prophet Muhammad. Beyond this, Muhammad Shareef expounds on the importance of literacy, pointing out that [t]he Qur'an and the *Sunna* gave the impulse to literacy among the Arabs., and caused many other languages to be written in the Arabic script, among them Persian, Turkish, Spanish, Urdu, .Wolof, Cayor, Fulfulbe, Ashante, Malike, Soninke, Hausa, Kanembo, Nupe, Yoruba, Fur, Funj., among others..

Shareef includes a litany of illustrious scholars as testimony to the historical depth of Arabic language scholarship by Africans, underlining the African origins of the treatise's author, Shaykh Muhammad ibn Muhammad, known as Ibn Ajeruum, born in 1273 in Fez. A few of the many renowned scholars who wrote in Arabic include: sixteenth century linguist and grammarian Shaykh al-Mukhtar [1516], Timbuktu linguist/jurist/*mufti* Shaykh Ahmad ibn Ahmad ibn Umar ibn Muhammad Aqit [1522], Shaykh Mahmud ibn Mahmud az-Zaghawa [1602], Malinke grammarian Shaykh Muhammad al-Amin [1605], al-Faqih Muhammad ibn Ahmad Barri [1611], Timbuktu *mujaddid*, *muft*, jurist, historian, judge, linguist and grammarian Shaykh Ahmad Baba [1627], Bagirma Fulani scholar Shaykh Muhammad al-Wali ibn Sulayman [1688], Katsina Hausa grammarian and philologist Shaykh Muhammad ibn Masanih [1677], Katsina mathematician, librarian, and grammarian Shaykh Muhammad ibn Muhammad al-Fullani [1741], Borno physician poet Shaykh Muhammad at-Taahir ibn Ibrahim [1776], 18th century miracle-worker Shaykh of Shaykhs Ali Jobbo al-Fullani (on Arabic verbs), and of course the renowned Fodiyo family members of the nineteenth century, especially Abdullahi dan Fodiyo [1827].

Of course, in addition to these, there are many contemporary individuals throughout sub-Saharan Africa who write on Arabic grammar, including the Waziri of Sokoto, Imam Junayd ibn Muhammad al-Bukhari in Nigeria, and in Sudan, four: Professor Abdallah at-Tayyib, Shaykh Farraj at-Tayyib, Dr. Fathi H. el-Masri, and Dr. Abdal Baqi Muhammad . Ahmad Kabiru. Such an exhaustive list impresses the reader that African scholars of Arabic have a long history of expertise and credibility.

Muhammad Shareef's comprehensive historical overview of the importance of Arabic grammar and its African scholars is a fitting introduction to his translation of Ibn Ajeruum's *Al-Ajeruumiya: A Concise Treatise on Arabic Grammar*. It can be appreciated by and informative for all, regardless of their level of understanding of Arabic grammar itself. In making his introduction so accessible, he is following the laudable example of thirteenth century Ibn Ajeruum, and we in the twenty-first century are the richer for it.

Alhamdulillah.

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