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AL-QALQASHANDĪ AND HIS *SUBH AL-A‘SHĀ*: LESSONS FOR, AND CHALLENGES TO NIGERIAN ARABIC PROSE WRITERS

Introduction

Al-Qalqashandī was a legal scholar; secretary in the *Mamlūk* chancery and author who wrote besides a number of smaller works a guide to the artistic composition of essays and reports, especially for the use of Egyptian government officials; just as Ibn Qutaiba in his *‘Uyūn al-Akhhbār* and the supplement to that work wished to afford the secretary class an encyclopaedic survey of the most important branches of knowledge of his time, so also al-Qalqashandī’s work, composed after 791 A.H (1387 C.E), entitled *Subh al-A‘shā fī sinā‘at al-Inshā‘*, presents in a much more comprehensive and systematic form practically the whole knowledge of his time and contains information of the utmost value, especially regarding the history and geography of Egypt and Syria¹ as well as a very detailed conspectus of the theoretical sciences and the practical skills required by a secretary concerned with official correspondence².

It is evident from the above accounts that al-Qalqashandī’s life and the multi-volumes *Dawn of the Night-blind in the art of composition* from which he owes his fame deserve the attention of scholars and it is in the light of this that we wish to try our hand in writing this paper as our own little contribution to knowledge, perhaps one or two other people may benefit from it.

A Short Biography of Al-Qalqashandī

I) His birth and lineage:

His full name is Abu’l-Abbas Ahmad b. Ali b. Ahmad b. Abdullah al-Shihāb b. al-Jamāl, Abul-Yaman al-Fuzari. He was born at about 1353 C.E in an Egyptian village known as *Qalqashandah* and was thus nicknamed “al-Qalqashandī”³ in reference to his place of birth. He was of Arab descent. His lineage can be traced to Banū Badr, Quzayrah and Qayslān. History has

1. The Encyclopaedia of Islam, Vol. IV, E.I, New Edn. (1960-63), p. 699.

2. *Islamic Desk Reference compiled from Encyclopaedia of Islam* by E. Van Donzel. E.J. Brill 1994, p. 352.

3. O. Adigun (1986), *A Critical study of Ahmad al-Qalqashandī’s views on chancery prose as contained in his work Subh al-A’sha*, Thesis, Department Arabic and Islamic Studies, University of Ibadan, p. 2.

it that Banū Quzayrah had migrated to Egypt along with other tribes during the Islamic conquests⁴ and settled down in the region of Qulayb.

II) His Education

He began his traditional Islamic education in his village, and then proceeded to Cairo and thereafter to Alexandria where he spent a larger part of his life seeking knowledge from famous scholars of his time⁵. At that time, he studied Arabic Language and Islamic Jurisprudence and became distinguished in both by dint of hard-working and diligence. In about 1377 C.E. while he was resident in Alexandria, Shaykh Sirāj-Dīn Abū Hafsin ‘Umar b. Abī I-Hasan, otherwise known as Ibn Mulaqqin granted him the authority (*al-Ijāzah*) to teach and give legal decisions (*al-Fatāwā*) on Islamic legal matters according to the Shafi‘ī school of law⁶. He was also authorised to transmit many of his works on jurisprudence as well as the six standard books on hadith, *as-Sihāha as-Sittah*.

III) His Teaching Career.

At about the age of twenty-five, he started teaching and many people began to benefit immensely from him. He was regarded as an ambitious jurist who was inspired to lay down rules and principles for the study of Islamic jurisprudence.

He was said to have edited following books on Islamic jurisprudence at the early stage of his life.

1) Commentary on *Jami‘u al-Mukhtasarah fī funūn al-Shāfi‘iyyah* (The embracing summary on Shafi‘ī applied jurisprudence).

2) Commentary on: *al-Hāwī al-Saghīr fī al-Furū‘* (Mini container on applied jurisprudence)⁷.

He was not contented with these alone as he later devoted himself to research on Arabic literature whereby he wrote a number of literary books and essays. The following are samples among the host of others.

1) *Hilyat al-Fadl wa al-Karam fī al-Mufadalah bayna sayf wa al-Qalam* (ornament of honour and generosity in comparative analysis between sword and pen).

2) Commentary on the ode; *Bānat Su‘ūd* by Ka‘b bn. Zuhayr⁸.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 3.

5. O. Adigun (1987), “A study of the Historical value of chancery documents in Al-Qalqashandī’s *Subh al-A‘shā*”, JARDS, Vol. 4, Dec. 1987, The Department of Religious Studies, University of Ilorin, p. 9.

6. O. Adigun, (1986), *op. cit.*, p. 4.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 6.

8. There were many commentaries on the ode *Banāt Su‘ūd*. Al-Qalqashandī’s own is just one of them.

IV) His Membership of *Diwān al-Inshā'*

He was appointed to work in the chancery in 1389 C.E. when he was at the age of thirty-five in the early period of Mamlūk Yarakibut's reign owing to his virtue, culture and erudition. He produced some works of more literary nature. The most outstanding of which are:

i) *Subh al-'A'shā fi sinā'at al-Inshā'* (Dawn of the night-blind in the art of composition)

ii) *Nihāyah al-'Arab fil ma'rifat Ansāb al-Arab* (The apex of need for the knowledge of Arab genealogy)⁹.

Al-Qalqashandī spent the latter parts of his life in solitary, far away from official duties. He did not take any job after his exit from the chancery. He died on July 16, 1418 C.E.¹⁰, at the age of sixty-five.

Content analysis of the book, *Subh al-A'shā fī sinā'at al-Inshā'*

Al-Qalqashandī diligently arranged the divisions of the book. In fact, that meticulous arrangement has facilitated easy reference to this voluminous book of 14 volumes. The book is divided into ten *Maqālāt* (articles) with an introduction (*al-Muqaddimah*) and conclusion, (*al-Khātimah*).

The introductory part is a book itself which is made up of several chapters on the principles and methods of writing, such as; rules and regulations governing writing; the background of writer; and, of course, the general knowledge required of a writer. The description of these matters runs into about four hundred pages. Furthermore, he discusses technicalities to be observed in the matters relating to the pen and ink, formulae of writing, spacing, margins and the like.

The first *Maqālah* discusses the need for a secretary. He divides this part into two major chapters dealing with the scientific and practical knowledge respectively.

The second *Maqālah* describes the political and administrative organisation of Egypt, Syria, Iran and other lands.

The third *Maqālah* discusses the method of opening and concluding correspondence and it runs into three hundred and seventy-five pages.

The fourth *Maqālah* traces the history of writing and its development. In fact, this article represents the major subject on which he wrote the book. It deals directly with the arts of literary criticism even as it is conceived in the modern time.

The fifth *Maqālah* discusses business and contracts, type of posts open to military and civil administrators.

9. O. Adigun (1987), A Study of the Historical value of chancery documents in Al-Qalqashandī's *Subh al-A'sha*, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

10) The Encyclopaedia of Islam, *op. cit.*, p. 699

The sixth, seventh, eighth and ninth *Maqālāt* treat various specimens of official correspondence among the kings and sultans such as treaties and agreements, relationship between Egypt and other countries.

The tenth *Maqālah* treats correspondence not related to chancery prose. These are literary essays unconnected with official matters. Literary essay writing of the *Maqāmah* type, *Mufakharah* (boasting), *Ijāzah*, (licence) and others were treated.

The *Khātimah* (conclusion) discusses mail communication apparatus, such as courier-routes and pigeon posts¹¹.

From the foregoing, it can be deduced that the book reflects Egyptian method of compilation. The Egyptian writers of the period divided their books into sections and chapters, unlike their counterparts in the far East who because of their being absorbed in the concept, were often dissuaded from arranging their works in the same pattern, other scholars such as Nuwayrī and Ibn Fadlillāh al-‘Umarī who were contemporaries of Al-Qalqashandī also adopted the same method in their compilations.

In a nutshell, a close look at the documents in *Subh al-A‘shā* shows that they contain a variety of themes which include the following:

- 1) Protocol and circular letters relating to the appointment of military men, administrators and judge.
- 2) Peace accords and treaties between Muslim rulers and their enemies such as the Romans, the crusaders and the Spanish Christians.
- 3) Friendly letters exchanged among Muslim rulers.
- 4) Friendly letters exchanged between Muslim rulers and non-Muslim rulers who were their neighbours.
- 5) Certificates and messages of congratulation and those of consolation¹².

The succeeding section therefore highlights the significance of such documents on Arabic chancery writing.

The Significance of *Subh al-A‘shā* on Arabic chancery writing.

The significance of *Subh al-A‘shā* of al-Qalqashandī on Arabic chancery writing cannot be over-emphasised. Al-Qalqashandī was obviously more enthusiastic about the writing profession than any other occupation in his life, hence his enthusiasm for prose. But his commitment to good chancery writing is quite apparent from his views, and his penetrating insight into the basic principles of prose writing constitutes a remarkable contribution not only to chancery prose writing but also to writing in general. Some basic

11) O. Adigun (1986), *op. cit.*, pp. 26-27.

12) O. Adigun (1987), *op. cit.*, p. 9.

principles enumerated by him became standard for subsequent prose writers¹³. Following are part of such principles:

i) He enumerated certain essential features in the writing of introduction to chancery prose writing, some of which are; the use of *hamdalah* (the formula *al-Hamdulillāhi* “praise be to God”), *al-Salām* (salutation), exaltation and simple expression. He says:

أن يأتي الكاتب بحسن الافتتاح كأن تبدأ المكاتب بحمد الله أو السلام أو بتعظيم المكتوب إليه مع سهولة اللفظ ووضوح المعنى.

ii) He also opines that secretary could open his letter with beautiful expression in prose or verse in order to arouse the correspondent's interest sufficiently to make him to read on.

iii) He also enumerates the use of relevant words and expressions befitting the content of the correspondence such as congratulation, consolation and the like¹⁴. (That the secretary should insert in the introduction, expression that would indicate the purpose, so that it could be known from the commencement of the letter what it is all about). By way of illustrating a correspondence with good introduction he cites 'Amr b. Mas'adah, Wazīr to Caliph al-Ma'mūn. He, 'Amr, had instructed his secretary to write a letter to the Caliph, intimating him of a cow which gave birth to a calf, his face resembling that of human being. The introduction reads:

أما بعد، حمد الله خالق الأنام من بطون الأنعام.

“Next, praise be to Allah, the creator of the human race from the bellies of animals”¹⁵.

iv) He recommends appropriate expression in the introduction of a correspondence. He says:

أن تشمل المقدمة على كلام مناسب لوضوح المكاتبية ويكون أساسا لها.

i.e. the introduction should contain the appropriate material relevant to the subject matter of the correspondence, and should form its basis¹⁶.

Accordingly, a letter inviting people to *Jihād* should incorporate in its introduction the purpose of *Jihād* which is either the protection of the religion or defending the Caliphate against enemies. Where it is a correspondence relating to the liberation of new lands, fulfilment of Allah's promise to sincere jihadists should be mentioned.

13) O. Adigun (1986), *op. cit.*, p. 281.

14) *Ibid.*, p. 148.

15) Al-Qalqashandī A.A. (1915), *Subh al-A'shā fī sinā'at al-Inshā'*, Cairo, *Matbū'ah. al-Amirīyah*, vol. 6, p. 276.

16) *Ibid.*, p. 278.

v) He enumerated the role and place of prayer in correspondence by saying:

أن يعرف (الكاتب) مواقع الدعاء في المكاتبات.

“Secretary should know the proper places of prayer in correspondence”¹⁷.

While analyzing the philosophy of prayers, he maintains that الدعاء ‘prayer for eternity’ is weightier than الدعاء بإطالة العمر ‘prayer for long life’. This according to him is because *al-Baqā* ‘eternity’ does not indicate a specific term, but *al-Umr* ‘Span of life’ does. It is for this reason that Almighty Allah is often described by the word *al-Baqā* and not *al-Umr*.

vi) He recommends that the linguistic capability of the correspondents should be taken into consideration. He says:

أن يعرف (الكاتب) مقدار فهم كل طبقة من المخاطبين في المكاتبات من اللسان فيخاطب كل أحد بما يناسبه من اللفظ.

“The Secretary should know the level of understanding of each class of correspondent so that he will use the appropriate language that suits him”¹⁸.

This according to him is because the messenger of God (PBOH) often applied simple style in many of his correspondence with foreign rulers.

vii) He recommends the use of relevant expression in the introduction when he says:

أن يراعي رتبة المكتوب عنه والمكتوب إليه في الخطاب فيعبر عن كل واحد منهما في كل مكاتبة بما يليق به...

“The status of the correspondents ought to be considered, so that each person is referred to in every correspondence according to the appropriate expression that suits him”¹⁹.

The body of a letter emanating from the Caliph should be expressed in this manner.

فجرى أمر أمير المؤمنين في كذا على كذا وكذا.
أو
خرج أمر أمير المؤمنين بكذا

“The order of the commander of the faithful states”²⁰.

Where it is from a King, it is customary that the expression is used in plural sense as an exaltation e.g.

17) *Ibid.*, p. 284.

18) *Ibid.*, p. 296.

19) *Ibid.*, p. 300.

20) *Ibid.*, p. 301.

أَمَرْنَا بِكَذَا “We direct that so”
فَعَلْنَا كَذَا “We have done so”

or

بَرَزَتْ مَرَايِمُنَا بِكَذَا “Our decree shows that so”

According to him, this usage was prevalent in the chancery prose of the people of *al-Maghrib* (North-West African people). He quotes relevant verses from the Glorious Quran to support its usage.

إنا نحن نحي الموتى

“It is **We** who will bring back the dead to life” (Q.36:12)

إنا نحن نرث الأرض ومن عليها

It is **We** who will inherit the earth and all beings thereon...
(Q.19:40)

نحن الوارثون...

“...It is **We** who remain inheritors” (Q.15:23)

vii) He also opines that the concluding remark should reflect the respect to the category of correspondents.

viii) He was also an advocate of proper conclusion.

He says:

أن يأتي مكاتبته بحسن الإختتام

“The Secretary should end his correspondence in proper manner”.

According to him, the ending of a chancery correspondence shows in such a way that it will be completely relevant to the subject matter of the letter. It could be a polite expression from the subordinate to the superior and the like or in the form of subordinate exalting the superior by way of prayer and the like. Similarly the expression should be properly formulated and clear²¹.

Undoubtedly, an exposure to the aforementioned basic principles will assist a lot in moulding writing patterns of the chancery prose writers in general and Nigerian Arabic prose writers in particular.

Al-Qalqashandī in his *Subh al-A'shā* also shared the experience which he had acquired in the chancery with contemporary readers and later generations and he strongly recommends that the secretaries should emulate the writing patterns of the best known chancery prose-writers hence, he introduced model of their writing in his work²².

He equally filled the book with chancery documents that could be helpful in researching into the wide area of Islamic history, starting from the

21) O. Adigun (1986) *op. cit.*, p. 166.

22) *Ibid.*, p. 250.

emergence of the prophet to the time of the author himself²³. In fact, the work covers everything that relates to penmanship in his time.

It is also worthy of note that al-Qalqashandī employs elegant models of letter-writing for the guidance of chancery secretaries which if strictly adhere to, the succeeding generations might find in them useful models for the composition of chancery prose.

Conclusion

We have seen from the foregoing how Ahmad al-Qalqashandī who from a humble religious beginning rose to intellectual glory by dint of hardworking and diligence had left behind for interested scholars valuable products of his intellectual efforts.

The book, *Subh al-A'shā* is one of his major works and it took him about twenty years to complete. The book is among the numerous encyclopaedias bequeathed to the Arabs and Islamic world by the *Mamlūk* period. It occupies a special place among them because of its richness and variety of its subjects; the wide horizon of its author and the sound academic background he possessed.

His service in the chancery afforded him the opportunity to have access to various documents of writers since the early year of Arabic writing down to his time. Otherwise, the task would have been difficult if not impossible to accomplish.

SUMMARY

This paper attempts to reveal in succinct but plain language a biographical account of al-Qalqashandī and the significance of his *Magnum opus*, *Subh al-A'shā* on Arabic chancery writing.

The paper has been arranged in three sections. Section one treats a short biography of al-Qalqashandī vis-à-vis his birth and lineage; his education; his teaching career; and his membership of *Diwān al-Inshā'*. Section two also reveals the content analysis of the book, *Subh al-'Ashā fī sinā'at al-Inshā'* (Dawn of the night-blind in the art of composition), while section three brings into light the significance of *Subh al-A'shā* on Arabic chancery writing, followed by the conclusion and summary.

23) O. Adigun (1987), *A study of the Historical value of chancery document in Al-Qalqashandī's Subh al-A'shā*, *op. cit.*, p. 9.