

Hand Written Books: A Hidden Heritage Of Islamic Culture

Saifullah Bhutto

*Department of Basic Islamic Sciences (Tafsir) Faculty of Divinity
Ankara University, Ankara, Turkey.*

Abstract: *Hand written books possess an important place in the research of Islamic sciences as they are a good record of past, they are a window to enter and glimpse into history. By referring to some hand written books many core issues related to Muslim Ummah can be resolved. This was well realized and anticipated by Orientalists when they started studying Islamic civilization and in that process they discovered so many crucial books from the hidden treasure of private and public libraries that many among those books are considered to be the basic reference books in various Islamic sciences. Today working on hand written books has become a separate science called Codicology. This is interesting that Orientalists rather than Muslim scholars played major role in initiation of preserving and reproducing the Islamic hand written books. Some important books have been recovered, worked on and published by Orientalists that without them it seems very difficult that we could have hand on them and may have been unaware of many historical developments in Islamic world throughout history. This article will discuss the importance of Islamic manuscripts, their history and process of reproduction through research, the role of Codicology in studying manuscripts, the role of manuscripts in the development of historical sciences and in the spread of Islamic civilization, work of Orientalists on Islamic Manuscripts and finally will suggest some actions for preserving the hand written books.*

Key words: *Manuscripts, Codex, Codicology, Islamic heritage, Islamic culture*

I. What Is Manuscript?:

A book manually inscribed, written by hand. The appearance of this term as a noun in the late sixteenth century indicates that its existence is due in part to the invention of printing¹, which started in mid of fifteenth century A.C.² It was only when books were no longer all copied by hand, as the traditional mode of making them was giving away to this irresistible rival, that a new word entered the language: manuscript.³

Hand written books were conserved and passed over from generation to generation very carefully. Qura'n was the first Islamic hand written book.⁴

II. What Is Codicology?:

Codicology can be defined as the study of codices developed in the field of Islamic hand written books.⁵

During the last twenty five years or so, a growing awareness of the importance of the Islamic handwritten heritage in Muslim societies led to new trend of production off hand written books in published form by conducting critical studies on them. This is nestling but fascinating and promising field of study.

III. Focus Of Codicology:

A book written by hand and copied for centuries- and more precisely a specific form of book, the "codex"- is the focus of the field of Codicology.

That means that Codicology, basically refers to the study of physical aspects of codices: that is, hand written books comprising of a series of gatherings, or quires of sheets. This remains even now when the printing press has replaced the hand of copyist the basic structure of the book.⁶

¹ Francois Deroche, *Islamic Codicology*, Al-Furqan Islamic Heritage Foundation, London p-11

² Mahmud Abbas Hamudah, *Tarikh Al-Kitab Al-Islami Al-Makhtut*, Dar Thaqeef Li-Nashr wat-Taleef, Riaz, 1991, p. 260

³ Francois Deroche, p.11

⁴ Yusuf Al-Mur'shly, *Usul Kitabat Al-Bahtil Ilmi*, Dar Al-Marefah, Beirut,2008, p.212

⁵ Francois Deroche, p.11

⁶ Francois Deroche, p.11

IV. The Role Of Codicology In The Study Of Hand Written Books:

This field of study is of relatively recent origin, and is explained by the growing awareness in the 20th century of the intrinsic interest of books, notably as regards their history. Codicology sheds light on the history of the period in which a book was produced.⁷

The role of Codicology makes it an ancillary field of history and hence serves the history of literature.

V. The Role Of Hand Written Books In The Development Of Historical Sciences:

Hand written books are important; they are the centre of human knowledge for most aspects of the past. In fact civilization has largely been depended on the written word. They express how much of history happened; or how can we know it happened. Manuscripts and letters are the closest means by which we can get to the lives, thoughts and emotions of the great personalities of history. To own an interesting manuscript in the handwriting of Nelson or Keats is a stirring experience. This does not depend on the text alone but also on the physical presence of the writing and paper. They are living handshakes across history; they are the first alternative to speech and therefore the most human form of history.⁸

Well, whether a hand written book will play an important role in making history depends on what it contains. As the printing had the effect of encouraging rapid standardization, so we can learn a lot from handwritten books. We can get much knowledge about language, its development and evolution, about the development of writing and about various social, religious, and cultural interests and preoccupations of the peoples of the past by conducting research on a book created before printing. Some of these hand written books are even illustrated with pictures, hence we can learn much about art from them. Even they are a good display of fashion and architecture. In other words, these materials can and have communicated to us an enormous number of facts about the past.⁹

At the same time they are the foundation of Orientalist scholarship in Europe which became increasingly independent from religious studies and developed as philology in the 18th and 19th century. Early Orientalists, who often still had a theological background, had to rely mainly on hand written books for their philological research. They concentrated on lexical research and grammar, particularly in the Arabic language and produced grammatical treatises, concordances, lexical lists and dictionaries. They not only copied hand written books for the acquisition of writing skills or imitations of calligraphy, but pioneered the editorial process. Even though the fields of Arabic, Islamic, Persian and other related studies have become enriched by a multitude of methodological approaches from nineteenth century onward- from fields such as religion, social, political and anthropological studies as well as geography. Still our knowledge of history ultimately depends on hand written books and their editing. They are the voices from the past even though their limited number allows only scattered glimpses onto the fields of history.¹⁰

However, handwritten documents and books kept in archives and rare book libraries are mostly the focus of historians' work. These can be a good source of variety of pieces of information. A historian can get a lot of information about how the older regimes used to administer funds, made appointments, award pensions, carried various projects, fought wars and conducted diplomatic relationship with other regimes by referring to the old documents preserved in a government archive.¹¹

VI. The Role Of Hand Written Books In The Spread Of Islamic Civilization:

A huge part of Islamic Heritage is constituted by Islamic hand written books. While scholars are presented with special problems in all cultures some particular problems face scholars working in different scripts. The enormous geographical extent from Morocco to the easternmost islands of the Malay Archipelago, as compared to the other great book based classical traditions of the world like the Chinese, Hindu and European, is a characteristic feature of Islamic culture. Moreover many of the most important cultural artifacts of Islamic culture particularly hand written books were distributed to the capital cities and educational institutes of the colonized countries as a result of European conquests which initially started on a small scale in 16th century in South Asia and South East Asia and latterly expanding to the whole area in the nineteenth century.

⁷ Francois Deroche, p.17

⁸ ROY DAVIDS LTD Manuscripts, archives and appraisals, *WHY COLLECT MANUSCRIPTS AND ASSOCIATED MATERIAL?* Retrieved 28 Jan 2014, from <http://www.roydavids.com>

⁹ Lili, Importance of Manuscripts, Retrieved 28 Jan 2014, from <http://in.answers.yahoo.com>

¹⁰ Stefine Brinkmann/Beate Wiesmuller, *From Codicology to Technology*, Frank & Timme GmbH, Verlagfur Wissenschaftliche Literatur, Berlin 2009, p.15-16

¹¹ Lili,

Hand written books reached to North America by purchase in twentieth century. This makes the task of the scholar working on Islamic texts of bringing different versions of a work together extraordinarily difficult.¹²

The fascination of working with Islamic hand written books lies in its direct contact with history reviving it in the moment of studying it. It is a moment of witnessing the transmission of scholarly knowledge or obtaining insight into daily affairs, of direct contact with the material produced centuries ago and with copyist and artist who created the document. Hand written books reveal cultural exchange across the borders of regions and times defined by ethnic, political, social and language patterns.¹³

VII. Languages Of Islamic Hand Written Books:

Though Arabic language has been the primary medium for the expression of Islamic culture, we can find traces of it in other languages like Turkish and Persian which have used variants of the Arabic script.¹⁴ That's why the term Islamic Codicology must not be restricted to Arabic hand written books only because that valuable asset is found in other great languages as well like Persian, Turkish etc and even in many local languages like Sindhi, Urdu etc.

The fact that Arabic letters are written from right to left and are all joined up even in their printed form has caused the delay in full use of digitization of Arabic and above all the digitization of Arabic and Latin scripts on the same page.

VIII. How To Assess The Value Of A Hand Written Book:

While assigning value to a particular hand written book, many factors are taken into consideration. Some of them are as follows:

-Writer: If it is written by the author himself then it is called as the original and considered most authentic and possesses an important position in research, or is dictated by author and scribed by one of his students who attended his lessons, or a copier in a later generation and if so what was the status of that copier?

-Another factor is the number of readings or listenings recorded on it. It has been traditional for a student to maintain that he read the book to his teacher, or heard him reading it.

-Owner of book: If a hand written book bears the personal stamp, or stamps of its successive owners, mentioning the status of that owner/owners, then it plays an important role in establishing authenticity of that book. If the owner was a scholar, then it appreciates value of the book.

-The date when the book was written is another factor,

-as are its overall physical condition and completeness.¹⁵

IX. How Can We Save That Treasure?:

Approximately three million Islamic hand written books survive today all over the world despite the fact that libraries have been the target of enemies of Muslims such as Tatars in thirteenth century and even recently Iraqi Aukaf library was burnt during the American invasion on Iraq. That library was having a good account of hand written books on various subjects like Quranic Exegesis, Hadith, Islamic Jurisprudence, logic and philosophy, Biology, Botany, Mathematics, poetry and literature, art and crafts.

Yet the most crucial point remains: The preservation of hand written books themselves. They can only demonstrate events from the past as long as they are preserved, protected and made accessible in whatever condition possible.¹⁶

For the study of classical Arabic texts, access to specialist dictionaries is essential because the Arabic language has built up a huge vocabulary in the process of an unbroken written tradition dating back to the sixth century A.D. Much excellent work has been done by Orientalists working on Islamic hand written books, but the results of their labors are hidden away in manuscript catalogues which are difficult to access.¹⁷

¹² Yale-SOAS Islamic Manuscript Gallery (YS-IMG) Project, Retrieved 28 Jan 2014, from <http://www.soas.ac.uk/ysimg>

¹³ Stefine Brinkmann/Beate Wiesmuller, p.15

¹⁴ Yale-SOAS Islamic Manuscript Gallery (YS-IMG) Project

¹⁵ AI-FURQAN ISLAMIC HERITAGE FOUNDATION, *Editing*, Retrieved 28 Jan 2014, from <http://www.al-furqan.com/events/manuscripts/editing>

¹⁶ Stefine Brinkmann/Beate Wiesmuller, p.29

¹⁷ Yale-SOAS Islamic Manuscript Gallery (YS-IMG) Project

Following are the possible ways of preserving hand written books:

i- Classification and Indexing:

The primary and very important way to establish the value of such manuscripts and uncover hidden treasures is by classification these collections. A properly classified collection is like the display at the front of a jeweler's shop, where you are able to see individual pieces before enquiring about the value of any particular piece. Of all the hand written books slumbering in basements of repositories in public and private libraries, only a small number has been classified. Many collections still await full descriptive classification and an immense number of important hand written books have yet to be published. An important inquiry at German libraries with important holdings of Islamic hand written books has shown that about a total of twenty thousand hand written books still await indexing not to mention the unknown number of hand written books in private possessions which are difficult to access.¹⁸

ii- Textual Criticism by Editing:

Another important area is editing the hand written books. "Editing" here poses a specific meaning. The role of an editor of a hand written book is to make the book ready for publication by producing a text as similar to the author's text as possible.¹⁹

Given the fundamental importance of studying hand written books, it is interesting how much of this valuable source has been neglected by researchers throughout the recent decades. It is not only the unlimited number of hand written books which gives us a limited insight into history but the fact only a small proportion of all these books has been indexed and studied over all. We simply may not be aware of many existing texts that could give new insight into historical fields. Of the classified and indexed texts, only a few have been edited so far.²⁰

Since these books have been written by long hand, and long storage might affect their conditions, this is not an easy task. Therefore, the editor tries to obtain photocopies, or microfilm or digital copies, of all the existing copies of the work. Some of these may be incomplete, but useful nevertheless. He then compares the copies he has, to choose the closest to the period of author as a master copy. He then transcribes the manuscript on his computer, adding footnotes each time when there is variation between different copies. He annotates the manuscript with footnotes, explaining what is unclear, and adding biographical notes on the people mentioned in the work.²¹

Editing mainly comprises of the following tasks:

a) Verification of the topic of book:

This becomes very difficult in the case of missing the 1st page of book or obliteration of topic for any reason or sometimes topics more than one have been reported for the same book. The researcher resolves that problem by referring to index or biographical books like *Ibne Nadim's Al-Fihrisat* or *Katib Chelebi's Kashfuzzunun*.²²

b) Verification of name of Author:

This is very important to know that the book is rightly attributed to the right author. Sometimes the manuscript does not contain the name of author or contains the wrong name because of similarities of names or nicknames and titles.²³ In that case the author is determined by making search in the catalogues of libraries, indexes of books or the books of biographies. Sometimes the terminology used in book points out time of history in which this book was written and hence helps us to determine the name of author. By referring to the above mentioned sources and means the researcher gives his verdict whether the book has rightly been attributed to the said author or not.²⁴

¹⁸ Stefine Brinkmann/Beate Wiesmuller, p.22

¹⁹ AI-FURQAN ISLAMIC HERITAGE FOUNDATION, *Editing*

²⁰ Stefine Brinkmann/Beate Wiesmuller p.19

²¹ AI-FURQAN ISLAMIC HERITAGE FOUNDATION, *Editing*

²² Mahmud Abbas Hamudah, p.241

²³ Yusuf Al-Mur'shly, p. 266

²⁴ Mahmud Abbas Hamudah, p.241

C) **Finally the analytical research on the text of book:**

The researcher has to undertake several acts while analyzing the text like he has to mention deviation in the text- if any- between different copies of book, transform book into the contemporary mode of writing, point out mistakes, mishaps, miswriting etc.

Finally the researcher summarizes in the conclusion his findings from analytical study of manuscript by mentioning the features of the book: how much important that book is, what is its value, what are specific areas in which it may guide perfectly, how it is different from other books of the same category, how it may benefit human being etc.

The book is now ready to be published and reach in the hands of scholars, researchers, book-lovers and common people.

X. Work Of Some Renowned Western Scholars On Islamic Hand Written Books:

The study of hand written Arabic books was born in the shadow of Western Paleography and has been strongly influenced by it.²⁵

Just as scholars in Islamic regions travelled far to seek knowledge and copy texts so did the early European Orientalists engage in their own *quest of knowledge*. Their study of Islamic hand written books was a precondition for the development of an independent Arabic philology in Europe during eighteenth and especially in nineteenth century. According to Arnoud vrolijk the importance of hand written books for Western scholars and challenges they had to face was: Travelling far to view hand written books ancient printing technology for Arabic letters, as well as scholarly competition leading to an "*urge to publish*".²⁶

Dr Yusuf Mur'ashly has different point of view about the rise and purpose of Orientalism. According to him the Orientalism rose as result of the defeat of Europeans at the hands of Saladin Ayubi (1137-1193) in Crusades in 13th century as they decided to study Islam to explore the secret of strength of Muslims.²⁷

Whatever the reason is, the history of preserving, editing and publishing the Islamic manuscripts is centuries old and continues in this age of technology more professionally and qualitatively.

Among many examples of such activities is the Yale-SOAS project carried out jointly by Yale University of America and School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London U.K. The Yale-SOAS project is a pilot to create an archive of and a gateway to Islamic manuscripts. Important hand written books, related manuscript catalogues, and language dictionaries held separately in the collections at Yale and SOAS have been selected for this project. In short, the purpose of this project is to facilitate the scholar by making available all the tools electronically that he may require to work on manuscripts which he normally has to accumulate on his desk in a Library's reading room.²⁸

Some of the renowned Orientalists who are famous for their work on Islamic manuscripts are as under:

- i- The German scholar G. Fluegel (death 1870 A.C) who published *Kashfuz zunun lihaji Khalifah and Al-Fahrisat Li Ibne Nadim*.
- ii- The German scholar Heinrich Leberecht Fleischer (death 1888 A.C) who published *Tafsir Al-Baizavi and Al-Muffasal Lizamakhshari*.
- iii- The German scholar Heinrich Ferdinand Wüstenfeld (1808-1899) who published [Zakariya al-Qazwini's Aja'ib al-makhlūqat](#) and [Ibn Dorejd's Kitab ul-Ishtiqaq](#).
- iv- M.J.deGoeje who published Al-Masoodi's *Kitab Al-Tanbeeh*.
- v- George Makdisi who published *Ibn-e- Kudama's Tahrir Al-Nazar*.²⁹

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²⁵ Francois Deroche, p. 214

²⁶ Stefine Brinkmann/Beate Wiesmuller, p.18

²⁷ Yusuf Al-Mur'shly p.220

²⁸ Yale-SOAS Islamic Manuscript Gallery (YS-IMG) Project

²⁹ Niaz Muhammad, *Makhtutat ki tahkik –o-editing ke bunyadi usul*, International Uloom Al-Islamia, bi-annual journal ½, August 2005-January 2006, Karachi, Pakistan p.34

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