

Role and Contribution of Shaykh Abdallah Salih Al-Farsy (Tanzania) to Islamic Poetry

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The Zanzibar-born Shaykh Abdallah Salih al-Farsy (1912-1982) was the main populariser and leading proponent of Islamic reformist ideas in East Africa in the 1960s and 1970s. His reform activities have been the subject of a number of recent studies.¹ Yet, little known is al-Farsy's passion for poetry, which has found expression in most of his literary works. This essay seeks to bring to light how this East African Muslim scholar (*alim*) tried to use this art as a means of conveying gratitude to his various literary accomplishments and also as an instrument of educating the Muslim masses on salient aspects of Islam.

There is no doubt that poetic skills were deeply rooted in al-Farsy's family. For instance, his paternal grandfather, Abdallah b. Salih b. Qasim al-Farsy (d. 1939), who served as a pilot for the fleets of Zanzibari ships during the reign of Sultan Sayyid Balaghash (1870-1888), was a great poet.² Indeed, in his twenties, al-Farsy was already writing Arabic poems. While he took a radical position against the festivities commemorating the prophet's birthday (*maulidi*, Ar. *mawlid*), considering such celebrations and recitals as "religious innovations" (*bid'a*), he was very liberal in the use of poetry (*mashairi*), not only in his works but also in accepting their recital in his presence or honour.

Perhaps nothing underscores his love for poetry better than the fact that al-Farsy began the preface (*dibaji*) to his celebrated first complete Sunni translation of the Quran in Kiswahili with the following poem:

Mwanzo kushika kalamu Naanza kiislamu
Bismilla kukadimu Na Alhamdu pamoja.

Namsalia Bashiri Na Alize At-hari
Na Sahaba wenye kheri Na sisi sote pamoja.

Namshukuru Rahimu Neema zake adimu
Kwa Jadidi na Qadimu Nazishukuru
pamoja.

In holding the pen, first, I begin in the Islamic way
(By invoking) the Name of Allah, together with His Praise.

I offer Salutation to the Prophet and to his pure descendants
And to the blessed Companions, and all of us collectively.

I thank the Merciful (whose) blessings are manifold
The great and the small, to all (such blessings)
I give thanks.

In the same preface, al-Farsy describes his Quranic commentary-cum exegesis (*tafsiri*, Ar. *tafsir*) as "complete and genuine" (*hii tafsiri kamili Sahihi ya Qurani*). He wrote the following poem, which I have cited in part:

Tafsiri njema Hii inatoka
Isiyo kilema Na kutetereka
Kwa yako Neema Mola Msifika

A noble exegesis, this (is) produced
That has no defect or blemish
As part of your Blessing, Lord the Glorious.

His *tafsir*, entitled *Qurani Takatifu* (“The Holy Qur’an”) also contains a great usage of poems in the form of commentaries. For instance, in his commentary on Q. 57:27 (*We sent other messengers to follow in their footsteps. After these We sent Jesus, son of Mary: We gave him the Gospel and put compassion and mercy into the hearts of his followers. But monasticism was something they invented- We did not ordain it for them- only to seek God’s pleasure, and even so, they did not observe it properly. So We gave a reward to those of them who believed, but many of them are lawbreakers*), al-Farsy notes that God does not ordain celibacy as a means of attaining piety as claimed by the Christians (*Manasara*).

Such imposition on celibacy has been an impossible task for Christians to live up to and many today are hypocritical of their vows. To buttress this point, al-Farsy writes:

*Ujane una simanzi N a
 mashaka na mavune
 Ujane una majonzi N a
 mawazo nane nane
 Wala mtu hauwezi Bure asijidanganye
 Autakaye ujane Asishe kutuhumiwa.*

Celibacy³ brings sadness, as well as difficulties and bodily pain
 Celibacy brings sorrow, and many thoughts
 No person can lead such a life, dare not cheat yourself
 Whoever chooses celibacy, will oft be suspected (of immorality).

In his 1964 book, *Saumu na Maamrisha Yake* (“Fasting and Its Instructions”), al-Farsy posits that it is acceptable (*inafaa*) for a Muslim to say the supplication (*dua*) after breaking the fast in Kiswahili. Indeed, he composed the following prototype, in the form of a poem:

*Asubuhi na Jioni Tusali vipindi piya
 Na kufunga Ramadhani Mwezi wote kutimiya
 Na Zaka tusiikhini Tufunge kama shariya
 Na sadaka daimiya Dua tutakabaliya.
 Tubaidie na deni Pasi mwenye kutuwiya*

*Tuishi ulimwenguni
 Waja wako tuauni
 Dhahiri na batiniya*

*Tufungulie riziki
 Utuokoe na dhiki
 Munaimul afaki*

Usiri tuondoleya

Morning and evening, we also establish the (ordained) prayers
 And fasting in Ramadan, completing the entire month

The Poor-due should we not withhold, fasting as prescribed we should

And persist in (giving) charity, accept our supplication.

Keep us free from debt, without any exception
 So that we live on earth, in protection and health
 Aid us your creatures, (and) fulfil our needs

The concealed and the

manifest (of our needs), accept our supplication.

Open for us the Providence, in succession with health

And save us from hardship, while still living on earth

‘*Munaimul afaki*’, without leaving out anyone

Remove adversity, accept our supplication.

In underscoring the importance of marriage among Muslims, al-Farsy also used *mashairi*. As an admonition (*mawaidha*) aimed at encouraging men to marry, al-Farsy, in his book *Ndoa – Talaka na Maamrisha Yake* (“Marriage-Divorce and their Regulations”), wrote:

*Oa uache khadaa Ya moyo kukhadaiwa
 Oa atakayefaa Mke anayesifiwa
 Oa upate kuzaa Kama ulivyozaliwa
 Oa utabarikiwa Upendane na mkeo.
 Oa aliye wa kheri Mshikamana na dini
 Oa yai la johari Litie nuru nyumbani
 Oa mdomo mzuri Upendezao lisani
 Oa uwe barakani Upendane na mkeo.*

This essay seeks to bring to light how this East African Muslim scholar (alim) tried to use this art as a means of conveying gratitude to his various literary accomplishments and also as an instrument of educating the Muslim masses on salient aspects of Islam.

Marry so as to shun deception, of the heart being deceived
 Marry the one who will be of benefit, a praiseworthy woman
 Marry so as to reproduce, just like you were born
 Marry you will be blessed, to be affectionate with your wife.
 Marry the merciful one, the religiously devote
 Marry the glittering egg, to brighten the home,
 Marry the good spoken, with a pleasant tongue
 Marry to be in bless, to be affectionate with your wife.

The above poem (only the first two verses out of seven have been cited here) outlines (legitimate) procreation as one of the benefits of marriage. It also identifies a number of qualities that men should look for in a prospective wife, including religious devotion and good character.

Again, in *Ndoa – Talaka na Maamrisha Yake* and in what appears to be a description of wifely duties, al-Farsy composed the following poem on the occasion of his son's wedding, which was meant as counsel (*wasia*) to the bride (*bi-arusi*):

*Sasa tunamuidhi
 Bi-Arusi mwenye*

*Yalo wajibu Faradhi
 Kaa naye kwa mahaba
 Haya kwako matuluba
 Uonapo uso wake
 Mume afurahike
 Bashasha kitu kizuri
 Ndiyo sifa ya Bashiri
 Mtukuze atukuke*

*Akwambialo lishike
 Na awe radhi mumeo
 Kila yote ufanyao*

*hadhi
 Mume kumfanyia
 Uwe mke mahabuba
 Daima kumtendea
 Funua meno ucheke
 Uwe mke maridhiya
 Cha kuleta kila kheri
 Mtume wetu Nabiya
 Machoni kwako na
 kwake
 Ila kuasi Aliya
 Siku zote mkaao
 Yawe ya
 kumridhiya...*

Now we are tutoring, the dignified bride
 The things which are obligatory, for her to fulfil upon her husband

Stay with him in love, (and) be an affectionate wife
 These are for you to follow, always to fulfil for him
 When you see his face, meet it with a smile
 Make him happy, grant him his wishes
 Laughter is a good thing, which invites all sort of goodness
 This was the attribute of the Warner, Our Prophet
 Honour him with respect, before his and your eyes
 Heed whatever he tells you, and never disobey
 Make your husband be pleased, in your entire stay
 Whatever you do, let it be agreeable to him.

In most of his works, al-Farsy spices his discourses and viewpoints not only with his own poetic writings but those composed by Kiswahili and Arabic poets. Examples of Arab poets that al-Farsy cites in his *Ndoa – Talaka na Maamrisha Yake* include Abu Tammam (lived in the reign of the Abbasid Caliph al-Mutasim), and Muhammad Hafidh Bey Ibrahim of Egypt.

In conclusion, poetry occupies an important place in the writing of al-Farsy. The examples cited in this essay are only for the purpose of illustration and are not exhaustive. One may opine that the value of poetry is to give colour and bring diversity in the possible options available in conveying a given message. Unlike prose, poetry is more captivating. Al-Farsy, in his use of poetry also succeeded in broadening the potential of Kiswahili as a language of religious discourse in East Africa.

Notes

1. See F. H. Elmasri, 1987. "Sheikh al-Amin b. Ali al-Mazrui and the Islamic intellectual tradition in East Africa". *Journal Institute of Muslim Minority Affairs*, 8:2: pp. 229-37; Saidi Musa, 1986. *Maisha ya Al-Imam Sheikh Abdulla Saleh Farsy Katika Ulimwengu wa Kiislamu*. Dar es Salaam: Lillaahi Islamic Publications Centre; Justo Lacunza-Balda, 1997. "Translations of the Quran into Swahili, and Contemporary Islamic Revival in East Africa", in David Westerlund and Eva Evers Rosander

(eds.), *African Islam and Islam in Africa: Encounters between Sufis and Islamists* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press.

2. Musa, *Maisha*, p. 5.

3. I have translated the Kiswahili word *ujane*, which literally means *widowhood* as *celibacy*.

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