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The Islamic Era and Its Importance to Knowledge and the Development of Libraries

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Introduction

Islam provided great impetus for the human pursuit of knowledge. The first verse that descended on the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) Was *Iqra*, meaning "read," opening the door to read, write, and ponder. The Quran urges the mankind to think, ponder, reflect and acquire knowledge that would bring them closer to God and his creation. The Quran uses repetition to embed certain key concepts in the consciousness of its listeners. Allah (God) and Rab (the Sustainer) are repeated 2,800 and 950 times, respectively, in the sacred text; Ilm (knowledge) comes third with 750 mentions.

The prophet Muhammad (SAW) commanded knowledge upon all Muslims, and urged them to seek knowledge as far they could reach, and also to seek it all times. Ali ibn Abu Talib, 4th Caliph (may Allah be pleased with him), once said, "I would be slave of a person who teaches me a letter" accentuating the importance of knowledge. Following these commands and traditions, Muslim rulers insisted that every Muslim acquire learning and they gave considerable support to institution and learning in general. This contributed to making elementary education almost universal amongst Muslims.

Genesis and Development

The necessity of preserving the Quran and the Traditions (Hadith) awakened the spirit of collecting such writings in various forms, which paved the way for the establishment of the earliest libraries in the Muslim world. The mosques which, during the early decades of Islam formed the nerve centres of all political, social, religious, and educational activities, housed valuable libraries comprising books on religion, philosophy, and science.

Muslims who distinguished themselves as patrons of learning, established some of the biggest libraries of medieval times. The great intellectuals of their age including

Ibn Rushid (Avicenna) the encyclopedist, Ibn Miskawayah, the historian-philosopher, Al-Fadl Ibn Naubakht and Humayun Ibn Ishaq, the renowned translators, who were entrusted with the responsibility for the organisation and maintenance of libraries.

Under the Abbasids, Muslims formed the vanguard of civilization. The Abbasids were influenced by the Quran and Hadith such as, "the ink of scholar is equal to the blood of martyr," stressing the value of knowledge. During this period the Muslim world became the unrivalled intellectual centre for science, philosophy, medicine, and education as the Abbasids championed the cause of knowledge and established Darul Hukama (House of Wisdom) in Baghdad, founded by great Abbasid Caliph Harun-ar-Rashid, which was divided into two sections, one was concerned with the translation work and the other related to the collection of books and housing a big library (Gregorian, 2003a). During this time every part of the globe was ransacked by the agents of the caliphs for the hoarded wealth of antiquity. Yahya Barmeki, the famous grand Minister of Harun, had summoned well known scholars from distant lands, who adorned the literary gatherings of the Caliph. Harun-ar-Rashid appointed Al-Fadl Ibn Naubakht, a renowned scholar and translator, as head of the library in Darul Hukama. The library contained a large number of books which were efficiently arranged and catalogued (Gregorian, 2003b)

In addition to the library of the House of Wisdom, there were many other libraries in Baghdad attached to the many faith schools (Madaris); each contained thousands of books and manuscripts. There were also private individual libraries, which were not open to the general public, but were available to scientists, philosophers, researchers and writers (Ma'rouf, 1968). On the same pattern, in cities of the eastern provinces of Islamic world, several "Houses of Knowledge" (Darul Al-Ilm) were established in the 9th and 10th centuries to emulate that of Darul Hakkama in Baghdad. Such cities include Mosul, Basra, Shiraz, Rayy, etc. (Jawad and Susa, 1958)

There were similar libraries in Cairo, Aleppo, and the major cities of Iran and Central Asia (Bon, 1884). Spain alone had seventy public libraries (Landau, 1967). Writing on the Muslim Spanish libraries Scott (1904) writes:

Nor must the libraries be omitted from this list of those factors of progress which so signally contributed to the public enlightenment and to the formation of national character. There was no city of importance without at least one of these treasure houses of literature. Their shelves were open to every applicant. Catalogues facilitated the examination of the collections and the classification of the various subjects. Many of the volumes were enriched with illuminations of wonderful beauty; the more precious were bound in the embossed leather and fragrant woods; some were inlaid with gold and silver. Here were to be found all the learning of the past and all the discoveries of the present age, the philosophy of Athens, the astronomy of Babylon, the science of Alexandria, the results of prolonged observation and experiment on the towers and in the laboratories of Cordoba and Seville.

A major innovation of this period was paper, originally a secret tightly guarded by Chinese. The art of papermaking was obtained from prisoners taken at the Battle of Talas, resulting into paper mills being built in Samarkand and Baghdad. The Arabs improved upon the Chinese techniques of using mulberry bark by using starch to account for the Muslim preference for pen vs. the Chinese for brushes (Pacey, 1990a). By the end of the 9th century there were hundreds of shops employing scribes and binders for books in Baghdad and even public libraries began to be established, including the first lending libraries. From here paper making spread west to Al-Andalus and from there to Europe in the 13th century (Pacey, 1990b).

Mackensen and Pinto (1929) have written extensively on Islamic libraries of the middle ages, highlighting their place and role in Islamic society. So widespread were public book collections that it was impossible to find a mosque or a learning institute of any sort, throughout the land of Islam, without a collection of books placed at the disposal of students or readers.

By the 10th century, Cordoba had 70 libraries, the largest of which had 600,000 books, while as many as 60,000 treatises, poems, polemics and compilations were published each year in Al-Andalus (Dato, 2005). The library of Cairo had more than 100,000 books, while the library of Tripoli is said to have had as many as three million books, before it was burnt during the crusades (Draper, 1878). The number of important and original Arabic works on science that have survived is much larger than the combined total of Greek and Latin works on science (Swerdlow, 1993).

It was the practice to appoint a librarian to take charge of the affairs of the library (Provençal, n.p.). Such duty was only for the most learned amongst men, those of unusual attainment; as custodians of the libraries (Mackensen, (a) 1935). The management of the Almohad libraries, says Ibn Farhun, was one of the privileged state positions, for which were selected only the best scholars (Deverdun, 1959). The Librarian of grand mosque of Aleppo library had Muhammad al-Qasarani, an accomplished poet and a man well versed in literature, geometry, arithmetic and astronomy (Eche, 1967). Such men Mackensen (b) (1935) notes, were, themselves, pleased to act as librarians. It speaks highly for the generosity of the patrons as well as for the really important work carried out in these libraries that men of marked ability in various fields felt it worth their while to undertake the duties of custodian.

Conclusion

Islam's deep urge for knowledge and its elevation of scholars and writer to exalted positions brought about the sophisticated book industry and libraries that flourished in the Muslim world within two centuries after the death of the Prophet (PBUH). The libraries were to be found in almost every corner of the Muslim world. Indeed, the whole of Muslim civilization revolved around the book. Libraries (royal, public, specialised, private) had become common and bookmen (authors, translators, copiers, illuminators, librarians, booksellers' collectors) from all classes and sections of society, of all nationalities and ethnic backgrounds, vied with each other in the production and distribution of books. This clearly divulges the gift Islam bestowed to generations—the collection and dissemination of knowledge to eradicate ignorance and enlighten the minds and souls of humankind.

The development of a nation does not just rely on a sound economy, but on sound knowledge and its proper use. Even today when we compare the countries of the east with their western counterparts, the role of information resources is clear.

If the developing world is to move forward, well-planned library and information policy needs to be chalked out. Policymakers must ponder seriously and come up with a long-term plan, because real emancipation is embedded in knowledge.

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