

KORAN QUOTATIONS IN THE
"DICTIONARY OF COMMON PEOPLE"
BY YŪSUF AL-MAĠRIBĪ

O. B. Frolova

University of St. Petersburg

There is no need to dwell on the importance of the famous *Dictionary of Common People* compiled by Yūsuf al-Maġribī (d. 1611) which has been preserved in the unique manuscript from the Sheikh Taṭṭāwī collection in the Oriental Room of the Scientific Library of St. Petersburg University. It is known that the reason for the *Dictionary* was the wish of the compiler to prove that the spoken language of the Egyptians, the Egyptian dialect, was the "genuine Arabic or close to it"¹. Yūsuf al-Maġribī's position was that of a "supporter of the people's language" who rejected all notions describing the dialect as a low and vulgar form of the language². A natural and essential part of his arguments were Koran quotations in which he found the same words and figures of speech that are characteristic of the Egyptian dialect.

For instance, Yūsuf al-Maġribī – also known as the composer of songs of the folk type (the Egyptian *mawwāl*) – in his songs often used, for rhyming purposes, the same word with different meanings (the homonymous rhyme)³. One of his songs was composed on the rhyme for which the word *furqān* (of Aramean origin, meaning "liberation, redemption" in the Aramaic language) was used in the various meanings that it had acquired in Arabic, viz. the "Koran", "Holy Scripture", "proof", "distinction between good and evil", and – as Yūsuf al-Maġribī

¹ Yūsuf al-Maġribī, *Daf al-iṣr ‘an kalām ahl Miṣr*. MS facsimile, with foreword and index by A. S. Awwad, Moscow 1968, p. 21. (Abbreviated to: al-Maġribī, *Dictionary*.)

² *Ibid.*

³ O. B. Frolova, "Mawwāls by Yūsuf al-Maġribī", *Manuscripts of the East: Historical and Philological Studies, Year-book for 1975*. Moscow 1982, pp. 163-167.

pointed out – “grace”, “victory”, “morning”, “the sea breaking apart”, “battle at Badr”:

al-Muṣṭafā l-badru a'ṭāhu l-ilāh furqān
furqāne rabbu l-warā anzal lahu furqān
lā zāla bi-n-naṣre wa-l-burbān humā furqān
furqān li-Mūsā w-lahu yōm Badr hū furqān⁴

To the Chosen Complete Moon, God gave the Koran.

In the morning, the Lord of the mankind gave Him the battle at Badr,
 It remains a victory and a proof, which is grace.

For Moses, the sea breaking apart and for Him, the day at Badr is a
 triumph.

When explaining the word *furqān*, the following words from the Koran are used: *wa-in ātaynā Mūsā l-kitāb wa-l-furqān* (2:53).

Beside *marwāls*, Yūsuf al-Mağribī made use of other poetic forms of folklore with Koranic words in them and found Koran quotations elsewhere.

When explaining the verb *sāqa* and the nouns *sāq* and *sāqa* and the dialectal expression *fulān yisawwaq iṣ-šerr* (someone sells/spreads evil) the following Koran quotations are cited: *yawma yukšafu 'an sāqin* (68:42), *wa-ltaffati s-sāqu bi-s-sāqi* (75:28), as well as the following *marwāl*:

Husnu l-ḥabīb šāqanī wi-š-šawqu qad šāquh
qabbaltu rigluh min al-ašwāqi bal sāquh
wi-lā'imī fih mu'ahhar dāma fī sāquh
mahqūre madrūbe man qad šāhaduh sāquh⁵

The beauty of my beloved attracted me, and passion led me to him.

I kissed his foot because of love, or rather his leg.

And he who blamed me was late because of him, it took him long to
 drag his feet.

⁴ al-Mağribī, *Dictionary*, L. 52b.

⁵ *Ibid.*, L. 46b.

Miserable and broken are the leg of him who has seen him (i.e. he has been charmed by him).

It is the Koran that Yūsuf al-Mağribī refers to when he speaks of songs and folk tales. Thus he writes: "A funny thing happened to me when I was with a friend. We were reading a story in which a man was treating another man to some food, and he offered him a chicken on this condition: he was not to eat any part of the chicken unless he could quote a suitable phrase from the Koran. At this, the guest took the breast, saying *wa-naza'nā mā fī ṣudūribim min gillin* (7:43), then he took a wing saying *wa-lā tā'irin yaṭīru bi-ğanāḥayhi* (6:38). Upon which, my friend addressed me remarking 'What would he have said if he wanted to eat the sauce?' To which I answered immediately *wa-qīla man rāqin* (75:27). All that was in my youth when we did not stick to ceremonies"⁶.

Yūsuf al-Mağribī reply to his friend contains a pun based on the assimilation of the sounds *n* and *r*, so that – when pronounced – the phrase *man rāq* sounds *mirrāq* or *murrāq* meaning heretics, which in its turn has another form, *marāqa*, meaning also sauce.

The above example proves that Yūsuf al-Mağribī made use of the phonetic peculiarities observed in reading the Koran aloud. Thus, when commenting on the vernacular pronunciation of the word meaning "saliva, spittle" and giving its phonetic variants, *buzāq*, *busāq* and *buṣāq*, he remarks that it is possible to read the Koranic word *ṣirāt* as *zirāt*, *ṣirāt* and *sirāt*⁷. When speaking of the incorrect dialectal pronunciation of the word for ginger (*ziṅğabīl*), he remarks that the correct pronunciation will be the one used in the Koran, *zanğabīl* (76:16), which proves that he noticed the phenomenon in the vernacular when the vowel *a* transforms into *e*, with the subsequent transition of *e* into *i*, a constant feature of the Egyptian dialect, which results in the different

⁶ *Ibid.*, L. 55.

⁷ *Ibid.*, L. 37.

forms of transcription used by European scholars who give *elli* and *illi* for "which", or *keda* and *kida* for "so", etc.

Koran quotations were used by Yūsuf al-Mağribī to support the words and phrases that were common for the Egyptian dialect of his time. For instance, when commenting on the phrase *er-rayyis indakk* "the master is exhausted", he explains, "the master's perception has diminished", and quotes from the Koran: *fa-dukkatā dakkatan wāḥīdatan* (69:14) and also: *ḡa'alahu dakkan* (7:143). Here the compiler remarks that *indakk* is a dialectal form of the passive voice while the correct form should be *dukka*⁸.

When dealing with the expression *fulān ḡalaq mā 'aleyh* "one covered the thing that was upon him", "one did what was wanted of him (one was true to his duty)", "one did his duty", Yūsuf al-Mağribī gives his version of the phrase: *aḡlaqa abwāb at-ṭalab minhu* "he closed the gate upon what was wanted of him". He gives the verbal forms (I, II, IV) *ḡalaqa*, *ḡallaqa*, *aḡlaqa*, which all have the same meaning, then he quotes the Koran: *wa-ḡallaqati l-abwāba* (12:23) with form II, remarking that form IV would be more correct⁹. In other words, the author of the *Dictionary* points out that the Egyptian dialect generally has form II for the causative meaning while the literary language has form IV; in arguing that the dialect and the literary language are equal, he gives quotations from the Koran where form IV is also replaced by form II. At the same time it may be suggested that the argument contains a criticism of the Koranic language since it uses the same forms as the language of common people.

The total number of Koran quotations in Yūsuf al-Mağribī's *Dictionary* amounts to 86. The Koran quotations in the *Dictionary* are first and foremost the evidence of a democratic process taking place in the Arab society of the 16th and 17th centuries in terms of the attitude towards the native tongue and literature. The Egyptians' public opinion,

⁸ *Ibid.*, L. 58b.

⁹ *Ibid.*, L. 50b.

which was expressed by Yūsuf al-Mağribī, no longer accepted the idea that their spoken language – the Egyptian dialect – was a low, vulgar, distorted language that was not sufficiently good for composing works of literature. As an argument in favour of his native tongue, Yūsuf al-Mağribī writes poems which are similar to folk songs (*marwāl*) and contain the homonymous rhyme and words from the Koran. When quoting from the Koran, he points out the phonetically acceptable vernacular standards of pronunciation, also supporting the dialectal grammatical forms with Koran quotations.

Yūsuf al-Mağribī's work reveals and exposes the deeply rooted process in the Arab society of the late Middle-Ages, when the written word and the oral tradition in literature were getting closer to one another, when a tendency was gaining strength to overcome the rigid standards of the Classical Arabic language. The verses from the Koran were used as an argument to prove the regularity and lawfulness of this democratic process. The growing activity of the process resulted in similar works by other authors. Consequently, Yūsuf al-Mağribī's *Dictionary* cannot be considered to be a unique sample of the kind, as it was previously believed by some scholars studying the dictionary¹⁰: namely in the 14th century, a famous poet Ṣafī ad-Dīn al-Ḥillī compiled a *Dictionary of Mistakes* (*al-Ağlātī*), in the 16th century a Syrian author Aḥmad at-Tībī wrote *A Complete Explanation of Things Found in the Language of Common People* (*al-Idāḥ at-tāmm li-bayān mā yaqa'u fī alsinat al-ʿawāmm*). Until recently, all these works were available in manuscript only.

It may be concluded that during the period of clerical predominance the verses from the Koran were used by progressive authors as a means to struggle against stagnation in the society of the time. At the same time, the use of Koran quotations was an evidence of living historical traditions and of the unity of the vernacular and the literary forms, with the differences between them unessential and of external character. The dichotomy of literary language and dialect was a common concern for the Arab world beginning from the Middle-Ages, and Yūsuf al-Mağribī

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 10-12.

was among those who tried to find an adequate solution to the problem. His views remain actual nowadays, and they should be taken into account by those modern linguists and political leaders who support a different point of view, i.e., by those who believe in the existence of a great difference between the literary Arabic language and the Arabic dialects.