

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

Mohamed Mraja, Moi University

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.<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup> 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.*

Celibacy<sup>3</sup> 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 tunamuaidhi  
 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*.

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.