

Intellectual Discourse

Volume 26

Special Issue

2018



International Islamic University Malaysia
<http://journals.iium.edu.my/intdiscourse/index.php/islam>

CONTENTS

<i>Guest Editor's Note</i>	
<i>Arshad Islām</i>	983
 <i>Articles</i>	
Al-Waqf 'Ala Al-'Awlād A Case of Colonial Intervention in India <i>I.A. Zilli</i>	989
Transregional Comparison of the Waqf and Similar Donations in Human History <i>Miura Toru</i>	1007
Role of Women in the Creation and Management of Awqāf: A Historical Perspective <i>Abdul Azim Islahi</i>	1025
Turkish Waqf After the 2004 Aceh Tsunami <i>Alaeddin Tekin and Arshad Islam</i>	1047
Maqasid Sharia and Waqf: their Effect on Waqf Law and Economy. <i>Mohammad Tahir Sabit</i>	1065
Brief on Waqf, its Substitution (Al-Istibdāl) and Maqāṣid al-Shari'ah <i>Mohammed Farid Ali al-Fijawi , Maulana Akbar Shah @ U Tun Aung, and Alizaman D. Gamon</i>	1093
Exploring the Dynamism of the Waqf Institution in Islam: A Critical Analysis of Cash Waqf Implementation in Malaysia <i>Amilah Awang Abd Rahman and Abdul Bari Awang</i>	1109
Historical Development of Waqf Governance in Bangladesh <i>Thowhidul Islam</i>	1129

The Chronicle of Waqf and Inception of Mosques in Malabar: A Study Based on the Qiṣṣat Manuscript <i>Abbas Pannakal</i>	1167
The Role of Waqf Properties in the Development of the Islamic Institutions in the Philippines: Issues and Challenges <i>Ali Zaman</i>	1191
The Foundations of Waqf Institutions: A Historical Perspective <i>Irfan Ahmed Shaikh</i>	1213
A Comparative Study of Governance of Waqf Institutions in India and Malaysia <i>Anwar Aziz and Jawwad Ali</i>	1229
The Significant Contribution of Caliphs in the Efflorescence of Muslim Librarianship: A Historical Account <i>Rahmah Bt Ahmad H. Osman and Mawloud Mohadi</i>	1247

The Significant Contribution of Caliphs in the Efflorescence of Muslim Librarianship: A Historical Account

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Abstract: Muslim education started as early as the first revelation received by Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ). The quest for knowledge is an obligation on all Muslims in Islām. Hence, it has been the mission and passion of all the Muslim rulers throughout the Islāmic civilization. History has witnessed the quest and mission of the Umayyads and Abbasids caliphs and many others in the acquiring of books, establishment of institutions, and the acquisition and dissemination of knowledge. This paper investigates the begining of Muslim librarianship and development of the book industry across the centuries. It also examines the evolution of Muslim bibliophilism and the establishment of libraries that would eventually become cultural institutions. In addition, the current paper attempts to understand the significant role of caliphs who devoted their fortunes for Muslim education. The paper follows a qualitative research founded on historical and descriptive approaches, through which the data was collected and interpreted objectively.

Abstrak: Pendidikan Islām bermula seawal wahyu pertama yang diterima oleh Nabi Muhammad (ﷺ). Penerokaan ilmu merupakan kewajipan kepada semua umat Islām di dunia. Oleh hal yang demikian, penerokaan ilmu itu menjadi misi dan keutamaan semua pemerintah Islām dalam seluruh tamadun Islām. Sejarah telah menyaksikan usaha dan misi khalifah Umayyad dan Abbasid dan ramai lagi dalam usaha untuk memperoleh buku, penubuhan institusi dan

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pengambilalihan serta penyebaran ilmu pengetahuan. Tesis ini akan mengkaji permulaan pustakawan Islam dan pembangunan industri buku sepanjang abad. Tesis ini akan mengkaji evolusi bibliophilisme Muslim dan penubuhan perpustakaan yang akhirnya menjadi institusi kebudayaan. Di samping itu, kajian ini juga akan cuba untuk memahami peranan penting khalifah yang sanggup menghabiskan masa dan harta benda mereka untuk pendidikan Islam. Tesis ini mengaplikasikan penyelidikan kualitatif berasaskan pendekatan sejarah dan deskriptif yang mana data dikumpulkan dan ditafsirkan secara objektif.

Introduction

Throughout the middle ages, Muslim civilization witnessed an unprecedented intellectual and scientific progress, a level that was never surpassed before, until the years of Renaissance in Europe. Some of the fundamental institutions that led the mission of cultural and civilizational progress were the libraries. Historians often agree that the Umayyads and Abbasid caliphs were the earliest patrons of knowledge and they devoted their treasures to further the foundation and establishment of cultural centers and libraries. It is also worth noting that the Umayyads and Abbasids were not the only supporters of the intellectual movement in Muslim civilization, but Muslim rulers from several dynasties and regions were also devoted to the acquisition of books and lovers of librarianship and wisdom. (Al-Khalili, 2012)

The advancement of Muslim civilization was due to their premonition with learning; this includes searching for knowledge, acquiring it, arguing about it, defining it, writing about it, disseminating it and building institutions to preserve and serve it (Al-Khalili, 2012). The base for all this was simple: *ilm* (knowledge) which represents one of the most significant and powerful concepts in the Muslim tradition. In its various sources, expressions related to *ilm* or knowledge are considered to have been the most commonly occurring terms in the Holy Qur'an.

The considerable number of definitions given to knowledge during the early Muslim age further expanded the notion itself. It is worth mentioning that, Franz Rosenthal in his Knowledge Triumphant outlined 800 Muslim definitions of knowledge. Definitions that were based on

religious, philosophical, political, and mystical trends that merged to expand the boundaries of knowledge. (Khuda, 1902)

Arabs in the pre- Islāmic era were acquainted with the art of writing. Ibn al-Nadim the well-known author of *Al-Fihrist*, reported that Arabs of the Jahiliyyah era were well acquainted with the Abyssinian handwriting known as *Al-Khat Al-Habashī* as well as with the southern tribes of Saba and Himyar handwritings. The use of these materials was carried even in the times of Prophet Muhammad and his companions. Indeed, the Qur'an was preserved in papyrus, pals, fibres, tablets, hides, and parchment. (Ibn al-Nadim, 1872).

Muslim caliphs were a cornerstone to the appearance of libraries in the Muslim peninsula, they immensely contributed in constructing libraries both financially and intellectually. Historians generally agreed that the well-known collections of books were stored in book-chests that similarly will attain the name of *Buyūt al-Hikmah* or (Houses of Wisdom). Those buildings will serve as the core cultural institution for the intellectual movement that took place in the Middle Ages, and opened their doors to researchers, scholars and readers regardless of their religious, political or social backgrounds. (Lyons, 2010)

The Production of Books or *kutub* in the Early Muslim Society

Libraries in the Muslim civilization have a very long and interesting history, but before we deal with this subject it is very important to examine the meaning of the word *Kitab* or book. During Mohammed's prophethood, the literary achievements and written literature was quite scarce due to the lack of innovative writing materials. (Mackensen, 1936).

Zaid Ibn Thābit is believed to have been the first to write a complete edition of the Holy Qur'an, who in some fashion assembled the Qur'anic sheets or *suhuf* together. It is also believed that among the earliest patrons of documentation in Muslim civilization was Anas Ibn Malik who had recorded the sayings and sermons delivered by Prophet Mohamed (ﷺ). The companion also had kept these records wrapped. Therefore, it is certain that Zaid Ibn Thabit and the devoted companion to the Prophet Mohammed (ﷺ) Anas Ibn Malik writings on parchment sheets and papyrus are considered among the very first form of books in Muslim history. (Al-Khalili, 2012).

One more explicit example of the beginning of kutub in Muslim civilization is that of an early revert to Islām, Abdullah Ibn al-Aas, it is reported that Ibn al-Aas had recorded an approximate number of ten thousand Ḥadīths and labeled his work ‘*As-Sahifa as-Ṣādiqah*’ the word sahifa in this the context of ten thousand Ḥadīths would definitely refer to a sheet. (Shafi, 1961) A more appropriate translation of Ibn al-Aas collection of ten thousand prophetic sayings would be the *true kitab* or the True Book. Thus, it is so evident that *kitab*, *sahifa* or book were used interchangeably from the early years of Islām and perhaps earlier. (Shafi, 1961).

In addition to this understanding, *kitab* has also another meaning beside that of books. It could refer to an item of correspondence like written messages and letters collected from more than one sheet or page. The word *kitab* can sometimes be used to refer to an ordinance or a decree. The recently mentioned meanings are well entrenched in the Arabic language. Indeed, the Holy Qur'an mentions the *kitab* symbolically to refer to a letter in chapter of An-Naml (Ant). We read that when king Soloman heard of the pagan practices of kingdom of Sheba, he was furious that he sent a *kitab* or a letter to summon the queen of Sheba and her people inviting them to monotheism.

﴿اَذْهَبْ بِكِتَابِي هُذَا فَالْقِهْ إِلَيْهِمْ ثُمَّ تَوَلَّ عَنْهُمْ فَانظُرْ مَاذَا يَرْجِعُونَ قُلْ ﴾
قَالَتْ يَا ائِيَّهَا الْمَلَأُ ائِيَّ الْقِيَ إِلَيَّ كِتَابٌ كَرِيمٌ قُلْ إِنَّهُ مِنْ سُلَيْمَانَ وَإِنَّهُ
بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ﴾

“Go thou, with this letter of mine, and deliver it to them: then draw back from them, and wait to see what answer they return, the Queen said: Ye chiefs! Here is delivered to me a letter worthy of respect, it is from Soloman, and it is as follows: In the name of God, Most Gracious, Most Merciful”
(Chapter: 27 Verse: 28-31)

From the early years of Islām, whether books were made of, as Mackenson puts it, loose leaves of notes or small treatises in form of letters, it is so evident that Prophet Mohammed and his companions were in all respects well-aware of the book existence. (Mackenson, 1939)

Book manufacturing in the Golden age of the Muslim civilization went through astounding progress. Muslim and non-Muslim scholars had

copied, translated, transmitted, embellished and bound an unimaginable number of books. These works were preserved in a well-established book-chest and distinguished libraries. Book industry was one of the main absorption of the Muslim culture. Regarding the value of books, Al-Mutanabbi, a celebrated poet who lived in the Abbasid times has related that the most honourable seat in this world is the saddle of a horse, and the best companion will always be a book (Al-Mutanabbi, 1936).

The Dawn of Muslim Libraries and their Development

During the first decades of Islām, Muslim libraries were quite humble. It is widely believed that Muslim literary works in the times of Prophet Mohammed were very limited as their main interest was the Holy Qur'an alone. In addition, one could scarcely speak about books or libraries during the reign of the rightly guided caliphs for they were busy fighting the *Murtaddīn* in the apostasy wars. (Lyons, 2010)

When the Umayyads came to power, they had an explicit interest to establish libraires known as *khazāin al-kutub*. The Umayyad rulers had greatly subsidized book translating and book accumulating as it was a norm for them and their subjects. (Shafi, 1961). It is often argued that the earliest public library in the Muslim history is connected to the Umayyad king Khālid Ibn Yazīd (died 704 A.D.) who owned a significantly rich library. It is narrated that he permitted his book collections on alchemy and medical sciences to be publically used to overcome during an outbreak of some epidemics. (Mackensen, 1935).

The library established by Khālid Ibn Yazīd is not an exculsive case. Mackenson in her article pointed out that there existed other libraries amidst the reign of the Umayyads. We have known that Muāwiyah Ibn Abī Sufyān the first Umayyad caliph had his own collection of books, maps, and manuscripts as well as some past events treatises and biographies of kings which were read to him repeatedly. The famous scholar Muammar Ibn Rashid (714 A.D.) who lived in the Umayyad times confirms this when he stated that this library accumulated voluminous writings of his former teacher Imam al-Zuhri. (671 A.D.) (Mackensen, 1935).

Libraries established after the end of the Muslm political and religious crisis were heavily placed inside the mosques, such book-

chests were made by scholars who endowed their book collections for public use. These collections were freely accessed by everyone. For instance, al-Baghdadi (1002-1071) was among the first contributors who willed his book collections to be an endowment (*waqf*) for the Muslims. Some other libraries were created by wealthy men who semi-publicized their collections that contained a various subjects including logic, philosophy, astronomy, and other sciences. Though the library collections were not fully public, scholars found no restriction in having access to private collections. Libraries had several purposes when they were being used for scientific discussions, religious debates and scholarly meeting occasions. Indeed, libraries held great status among rulers and scholars. It is believed that Al-Rūmī dedicated three years of his life to collection materials for his geographical dictionary. (Al-Hamawī, 1993).

Some historians claim that Muslim libraries contained only a translation of old civilizations literary works, and that Muslim scholars contributed with nothing to the newly rediscovered literature. Nevertheless, it is very evident that Muslim scholars and authors produced voluminous works on several religious, philosophical and scientific subjects. It is crucial to realize the large number of Muslim writings whether through originality or borrowing to fully understand and acknowledge their enthusiasm for books and libraries. The fact that a large quantity of books were produced and had a significant influence on the establishment of libraries in Muslim history, such libraries were certainly a result of the “*interests and needs of cultivated individuals, literary societies and institutions of learning*”. (Mackensen, 1935, p.83).

It is no wonder that Muslim scholars and caliphs considered their libraries not as mere storehouses for literary works, but they viewed them as centres of sciences, cultures and development. Therefore, they will soon cultivate these libraries to an exceptional level that was never achieved in the ancient libraries in Greece, Rome, Persia and elsewhere. (Mahmud, 1971).

Book-chests also served as agencies of commerce and education. The celebrated author Al-Ya’qūbī confirms that in 891 A.D. one street at the capital of Abbasids in Baghdad was boasted by over hundred book dealers. Owners of these book-chests as well as sellers were themselves men of literature, calligraphers and copyists. In his early years of career,

Yāqūt al-Hamawī was a clerk of one of the book sellers, the famed *al-Warraq* or Ibn al-Nadīm to whom we owe the formidable work *al-Fihrist* was himself a librarian in one of Baghdad's book dealing stores. (Al-Ya'qūbī, 1980)

The Blossom of Royal Libraries and Role of Caliphs

Some historians claim that Muslim libraries are divided into three types only namely: private, public and half-private or half-public. However, their categorization is narrowly described according to their point of view. Indeed, this categorization represents an unjust views of the whole history of Muslim libraries. It is true that public, private and half-public half-private libraries were abundant, but there is strong evidence that there existed also other types of libraries such as school libraries, royal libraries, state libraries, palace libraries, mosque libraries and others. These libraries flourished within the Muslim civilization to become leading institutions of Muslim thought and education.

The category to be discussed here is the royal library due its relevance to the subject of caliphs. Royal libraries had some restrictions to use as they were not publically open, but only literary men and scholars had access to their collections. It is maybe because of that and some other reasons that royal book-chests are considered as state libraries. This assumption becomes concrete when we read about the Muslim royal families' enormous financial implications to establish and develop such libraries. Shafi comments on the origin of the royal library in the Umayyad dynasty in the following caption:

It was during the Umayyad caliphate when the storms and stress of military activities had somewhat abated, that the rulers' attention was directed towards literary pursuits, and foundation was laid of the state library, which hence-forth became necessary accompaniment of the cultural activities of all ruling dynasties of the Muslim world (Shafi, 1961, p. 35)

The rise of the Abbasid house to power was a landmark for the royal libraries to attaining both social and cultural status. The political stability after the fall of the Umayyads further insured the establishment of learning centers and libraries. It is then no wonder that the early Abbasid caliphs handed out much attention to learning, arts and knowledge. It is related that caliph al-Mansūr (714-775 A.D.) heartened

the translation of several Persian, Coptic, and Greek works into Arabic language. (Daif, 1971).

The fifth Abbasid caliph Harūn al-Rashīd (786-809 A.D.) is said to have established an eminent library known as the House of Wisdom that served as a sanctuary for the royal book collections and other treasures. The House of Wisdom adopted the translation movement that begun amid the reign of al-Mansūr and his successors. This library also operated as the meeting place for intellectuals, scholars, scientists, jurists and others to engage in intellectual debates and scientific experimentations as the Library was provided with an observatory for astronomers. (Hamada, 1981)

Known for his religious piety and tolerance, Harūn al-Rashīd had some agreements with the Byzantium emperor with whom al-Rashīd had very good diplomatic relations and exchanged gifts with the emperor. The above resulted in the acquisition of great number of Greek works which were eventually arranged in the House of Wisdom and translated into Arabic by the celebrated Christian scholar Yūhanna Ibn Masawaiyh (777-857 A.D.) (Shalaby, 1954).

Al-Ma'mūn, son of al-Rashīd was a man of remarkable intellect and was said to be the one who unquestionably elevated the status of the House of Wisdom. Al-Ma'mūn initiated every possible endeavour to assemble more valuable literary works from the Greek, Indian, and Persian sciences and philosophy. His diplomatic skills paved the way for him to acquire Greek works from Byzantium ruler Michael II (770-829 A.D.). The famed historian Ibn al-Nadim relates that the newly acquired collections of books, manuscripts, maps, and others were carried to the House of Wisdom under al-Hajjāj Ibn Maṭar and Ibn al-Batrīq administration and supervision and were ultimately translated into Arabic. (Ibn-al-Nadīm, 1872, p. 243).

Al-Ma'mūn allocated extremely large amount of money for the purpose of collecting pre-Islamic and contemporary Arabic literary works, He also enthusiastically collected letters and documents that dated back to the early Muslim history and communication. It is stated by Ibn al-Nadīm that al-Ma'mūn's anxiousness for the Jāhiliyah documents allowed him to acquire some written letters on parchments hand-written by the grandfather of Prophet Mohammed (pbuh) Abd al-Muttalib. (Ibn al-Nadīm, 1872, p. 5).

The translation Movement was augmented in the times of Al-Ma'mūn to a mind-boggling rate much higher than his father Harūn al-Rashīd. (Mackensen, 1935). The Abbasid caliph Al-Ma'mūn was very concerned with different fields of knowledge. For this reason, he allocated extravagant sums of money on translating the works of Greeks, Persians and Indians. It is no wonder that the House of Wisdom accommodated various translators well-equipped in Arabic, Greek, Persian, Indian, Syriac and other languages. Not only translators but all the library employees were abundantly paid and comfortably sheltered. Al-Ma'mūn admitted only skilled workers to the House of Wisdom that included eminent translators, copyist, scribes, bookbinders and librarians. These workers were employed according to their level of knowledge in science and literature. (Mackensen, 1935).

Some Compelling Caliphate Libraries in Muslim Civilization

The Caliphate libraries were accessible to both scholars and students. The caliphs paid a special attention to libraries and book collection as they believed that the best way to ruling their subjects was through learning and education. Therefore, people were instigated to acquire scholarship and seek learning opportunities and library loans. It is obvious then that some caliphs and their ministers became patrons of knowledge and sciences. The caliphs role was not only to initiate book collecting and financing the libraries but they participated in debates to discuss different topics on philosophy, theology, and sciences. (Hamada, 1981)

For the purpose of achieving the objective of this paper, the authors will limit the discussion to the most celebrated caliph libraries.

The Samanid Caliphate Library of Bukhāra

The Samanid dynasty settled in the region of Trans-Oxana in southeast Russia today and they established an extremely cosmopolitan culture and a highly distinguished education system particularly at the times of their ruler Nūh Ibn Mansūr around the 10th century. The capital of the Samanids, Bukhāra was the home of several remarkable and astonishing libraries. These libraries were initiated by the caliphs' predecessors . (Hamada, 1981)

Bukhāra, the capital of Samanids had the honour of receiving one of the distinguished scholars in Muslim history. Abu Ali Ibn Sīnā known also as Avicenna. Ibn Sīnā acquired his scholarship from the

library of Bukhāra. Ibn Sīnā was eighteen when he was summoned to attend sessions in court by the Sultan himself, Ibn Sina was marvelled by the book collection inside the library. This is evident in the following statement:

I found there many room filled with books which were arranged in case row upon row. One room was allotted to work on Arabic philology and poetry; another to jurisprudence and so forth. The books of each particular science having rooms to themselves. I inspected the catalogues and booked for the books that I required (Thompson, 1957, pp. 352-353)

Ibn Sīnā utilized every possible source in Bukhāra library to write his voluminous books until the library was vandalized and burned down.

The Fatimid Caliphate Library in Cairo

The establishment of Fatimid dynasty in Egypt (909-1171 A.D.) paved the way for the Ismaili sect of Shi'ites to have some influence on the ruling caliphs. It is narrated that a number of the Fatimid caliphs dedicated themselves to knowledge and learning by constructing libraries, collecting books, and organizing meetings and debates on several religious subjects. (Pinto, 1929).

The Fatimid caliph al-Aziz (975-996 A.D.) was the founder of the first library in Egypt. It is important to mention that the caliph al-'Azīz was a book lover. This is evident in his frequent purchase of every book he heard of. A case in point is that al-'Azīz purchased the whole entire collection of approximately thirty volumes as soon as he learned about Ibn Ahmed's *kitab Al-'Aīn* (the book of Eye). He also paid hundred dinars to purchase the *History of al-Tabari*. He also bought Ibn Duraid's manuscripts of The *Jamharah fi 'l-lugha*. The caliph al-'Azīz authorized his vizier Ya'qūb Ibn Killis (930-991 AD) to administrate the library and its collection. (Mez, 1937)

It is stated that the Fatimid caliphate library contained 600000 volumes of books. The book collections covered different subjects such as astronomy, philosophy, biography, history, jurisprudence and others. There were also more than 2400 copies of the Holy Qur'an written and ormented in gold and silver. (Pinto, 1929).

Fatimid caliphate library contained large rooms with book shelves, each room had a list of books it contained. Remarkably, the list also gave notice about the lacuna of knowledge in every room.. (Mez, 1937)

The Caliphate Library of Cordova

Historians often agree that Muslim civilization reached its peak and expanded itself largely during the era of Muslim Spain. Caliphs in the capital of Spain Cordova were no different from caliphs in North Africa or the Near East. They had an incomparable interest in sciences and knowledge, owing to their patrons of learning that Muslim Spain could enhance the new caliphate economy, agriculture, architecture and educational life. Consequently, Cordova became the largest and most sophisticated city in Europe that could be a peer to Constantinople. (Dozy, 2018).

During the Muslim rule in Spain, education flourished, literacy was so abundant and many original books were authored. Caliphs as well as common people established schools, colleges and libraries. Amazingly, education in Spain was accessed by all social classes and permissible to both men and women unlike some other parts of the world. This situation is genuinely described by Dozy, the famed specialist in Muslim history, he states:

In Andalusia nearly everyone could read and write, while in Christian Europe persons in the most exalted positions unless they belonged to the clergy remain illiterate (Dozy, 1913, p. 455).

Muslim librarianship reached its highest peak during the time of Al-Hakam II (915-976 A.D.) who was viewed by historians as one of the most prominent and learned man among Muslim caliphs. Al-Hakam II compiled a colossal of manuscripts and books in all sciences and he regularly appointed agents and sent them to different regions of the Muslim world such as Damascus, Alexandria, and Baghdad to purchase books or to copy manuscripts. Some studies estimated that the number of books exceeded 400000 books which filled over 44 volume catalogue. The valuable notes of Al-Hakam II on manuscripts' margins, helped many scholars to grasp their content, for instance, the Muslim Spain historian, al-Makkari several times found the notes of al-Hakam II to be praise-worthy. (Thompson, 1957).

Conclusion

It is no wonder that early Muslims had viewed their libraries not as a mere storehouses of literary collections, but as centres of sciences,

culture and development. They soon cultivated their libraries to exceptional heights that were never reached by the ancient libraries in Greece, Rome, Persia or any other place (Mahmud, 1971).

Despite the fact that the Umayyads fertilized the ground for Muslim bibliophilism, it was the Abbasids who brought the Muslims librarianship into light. This statement could be very true after investigating the extents of book collection, translation scale and establishment of libraries in the Muslim society. It is generally accepted that the reign of Umayyad caliphs witnessed the start of libraries establishment, but the Abbasids had more commitment to further their establishment into cultural and learning centers. Both dynasties fortunes and dedication were very crucial elements in promoting the libraries to become educational, social and cultural institution within the fabric of the Muslim community (Shafi, 1961)

The previous discussions have demonstrated that Muslim librarianship was significant in all walks of life and was not confined only in Baghdad but it spread in almost every corner of the Muslim world particularly in the times of Muslim Caliphate. Libraries served as centres for the Muslim cultural, religious and social life. Despite the political instability after the fall of Abbasids and fragmentation of the Muslim caliphate central power; the cultural and intellectual life of the people flourished and was never disrupted. On the contrary, they continued their quest for knowledge and scientific research throughout the Muslim peninsula. Consequently, we heard that throughout the period of the Umayyads in Spain, Abbasids in Baghdad, Samanids in Bukhara, Hamdanids of Aleppo, Buwayhids in Persia, Fatimid in Cairo and Muslim Spain in Cordova, history has recorded that large collections of manuscripts, maps, books and scientific equipments were accumulated, and magnificent and very impressive libraries were established.

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In This Issue

Guest Editor's Note

Articles

I.A. Zilli

Al-Waqf 'Ala Al-'Awlād A Case of Colonial Intervention in India

Miura Toru

Transregional Comparison of the Waqf and Similar Donations
in Human History

Abdul Azim Islahi

Role of Women in the Creation and Management of Awqāf:
A Historical Perspective

Alaeddin Tekin and Arshad Islam

Turkish Waqf After the 2004 Aceh Tsunami

Mohammad Tahir Sabit

Maqasid Sharia and Waqf: their Effect on Waqf Law and Economy.

Mohammed Farid Ali al-Fijawi , Maulana Akbar Shah @ U Tun Aung and Alizaman D. Gamon

Brief on Waqf, its Substitution (Al-Istibdāl) and Maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah

Amilah Awang Abd Rahman and Abdul Bari Awang

Exploring the Dynamism of the Waqf Institution in Islam:
A Critical Analysis of Cash Waqf Implementation in Malaysia

Thowhidul Islam

Historical Development of Waqf Governance in Bangladesh

Abbas Pannakal

The Chronicle of Waqf and Inception of Mosques in Malabar:
A Study Based on the Qissat Manuscript

Ali Zaman

The Role of Waqf Properties in the Development of the Islamic
Institutions in the Philippines: Issues and Challenges

Irfan Ahmed Shaikh

The Foundations of Waqf Institutions: A Historical Perspective

Anwar Aziz and Jawwad Ali

A Comparative Study of Governance of Waqf Institutions
in India and Malaysia

Rahmah Bt Ahmad H. Osman and Mawloud Mohadi

The Significant Contribution of Caliphs in the Efflorescence
of Muslim Librarianship: A Historical Account

ISSN 0128-4878 (Print)

ISSN 2289-5639 (Online)

