

## A Comparative Critical Study of Joseph Kenny's English Translation of Cheikh Assanouci's Al-Aquida Al-Wusta

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### Abstract:

This paper examines Joseph Kenny's translation of the Islamic manuscript AL-Aquida Al-wusta composed by the Muslim theologian Cheikh Mohammed Yucef Assanouci. Islamic manuscripts are important sources of Islamic knowledge and wisdom. Thus, they have specific features regarding the form and the content. The main purpose of this comparative critical study is to investigate the challenges of translating religious texts between Arabic and English following Newmark's model of translation criticism. It aims also to shed light on how Christian missionaries received these texts and transmit them in other languages through translation. The study reveals that Joseph Kenny succeeded to a great extent to render the meaning of the original text due to his knowledge and understanding of Arabic and Muslim Theology.

### Keywords:

Cheikh Assanouci; translation criticism; Islamic manuscripts; Joseph Kenny ; Al-Aquida Al-wusta

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Since the early Muslim era, the Arabs have given great importance to manuscripts, books and libraries, especially during the Abbasid era, when the translation movement flourished, and people were interested in books copying and purchase. Our Islamic civilization produced many interesting books and manuscripts in different religious and scientific domains. These books and manuscripts have excited the admiration of other civilizations and are collected and studied all over the world. The study of these manuscripts by foreigners necessitates of course the process of translating into other languages. This process was carried out by Orientalists and Christian missionaries as well as other scholars who made concerted efforts to gain knowledge and understanding of these writings and transmit them to the non-muslim people.

## 2. Definition and features of Manuscripts

Islamic manuscripts cover a wide range of topics which makes them a vast area of study. They reflect the heritage of the Muslim civilization and are regarded as vehicles of wisdom, knowledge and information.

### 2.1 What is a manuscript?

A manuscript can simply be defined as a handwritten document or book, etc, before it has been printed. However, for the purpose of this study, a manuscript refers to:’ **a very old book or document that was written by hand before printing was invented.**’ (Hornby, 2001, p. 781)

The first appearance of the term ‘manuscript’ -in English as well as in French- goes back to the 16<sup>th</sup> century due in part to the invention of printing. Moreover, **‘it was only when books were no longer all copied by hand, as the traditional mode of making them was giving way to this irresistible rival, that a new word entered the language: manuscript, a book ‘manually inscribed’, written by hand.’** (Déroche, 2005, p. 11)

Islamic manuscripts on the other hand, refer to the handwritten Islamic heritage. Muslims gave great importance to manuscripts as they were the only way to preserve human knowledge and contribute in the spread of

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Islamic culture and civilization. At the beginning, the main focus of these manuscripts was the Quran and al-hadith in addition to other religious areas. Then, these manuscripts were considered as precious artistic artefacts for the value they hold. They deal with different topics from knowledge about language, its evolution, its grammar, etc. to various cultural, social and religious interests of the past before the invention of printing.

A great part of Islamic heritage is constituted by Islamic manuscripts. Thus, **'A great many works of Islamic literature (in the wider sense, not just meaning belles-lettres, i.e. works of creative literature) are unpublished. That is to say, if they survive at all it is only in the form of one manuscript copy or more. And of those texts that have been published, there is a sizeable proportion of which printed editions do exist but are not satisfactory- whether because of the choice of sources, the editing itself, the production, or a combination of these.'** (Isa, 2018)

It is worth noting that Orientalists and Christian missionaries were interested a lot in the study of Islamic manuscripts and handmade books, mainly those with a theological background. They concentrated on lexical research and grammar and produced some Arabic grammatical treatises, lexical lists and dictionaries. And though the last centuries witnessed an enormous number of social, religious, anthropological and cultural studies, the knowledge of the past still depends on the study of manuscripts and their editing. (Bhotto, 2015, p. 30)

### 2.2 Features of Manuscripts

Arabic manuscripts have their specific features regarding the form and the content. Hence, **'every manuscript is by definition a handmade artefact and as such is bound to be unique in some degree, however small. Every single one can potentially add to our knowledge and understanding of the process involved in its production and the nature and value of the culture that produced it.'** (Isa, 2018)

The growing awareness of the importance of Islamic manuscripts led to the appearance and development of a whole discipline called 'codicology'. Codicology as a term and a discipline came into being in Europe in the

eighteen century. It refers to the study or knowledge of codices (from the Latin codex). It deals primarily with **‘the study of the material aspects of codices: that is, manuscript books comprising a series of gatherings, or quires, of sheets. This remains the basic structure of the book to this day, even though the printing press has replaced the hand of the copyist.’** (Déroche, 2005, p. 11)

The principal tasks of codicology consist of analysing, as precisely as possible, all the techniques used in making a manuscript and shedding light on the history of the period in which a manuscript was produced. As a matter of fact, there is a set of elements which provide evidence about the production of a manuscript. These elements can be summarized as follows (Déroche, 2005):

- **Physical form of manuscript:** codex (the conventional form of book comprising folded sheets stitched and bound together), a scroll, or one or more sheets.
- **Writing surface (‘support’):** parchment made from animal skin, papyrus made from reeds, paper of one kind or another, and occasionally other things such as wood.
- **Quires of a codex:** the number of sheets of paper (bifolia) folded and sewn together as gatherings.
- **Writing instruments:** the *qalam* or reed pen itself, as well as materials such as the ink made from soot or gall-nuts, colored inks and pigments.
- **Ruling and page layout:** In Islamic manuscripts the layout is set using of a *mastar* or frame with cords which is pressed into the page to leave a network of vertical lines framing the text and horizontal lines on which the text is written.
- **Scripts:** style of handwriting, ranging from the simple kind of hand in which a madrasa student might copy a textbook needed for his studies to the most elegant or convoluted, calligraphy.

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- **Orthography:** the way words are spelled or accented.
- **Ornamental features:** such as non-figurative illumination or figurative illustrations.
- **Binding:** ranging from simple boards to masterpieces in leather with intricate filigree ornamentation.

These were the main important physical aspects of manuscripts. Yet it is very crucial to find effective ways to preserve these manuscripts as they are the useful mean to demonstrate events from the past as long as they are preserved, protected and made accessible in whatever condition possible. (Bhotto, 2015, p. 31)

### 3. Cheikh Assanouci and his manuscripts

#### 3.1 His biography

Mohamed Ibn Yucef Assanouci is an Arab theologian of the Acharite School born in 838 or 839 AH in the year 1435-6, and died in Tlemcen in 895 / 1490 (Kenny, 1970, p. 11).

Author of numerous theological works, he is distinguished by a democratic and rational conception of theology. His fame spread to the East and the West in his own lifetime. His father was his first master who taught him how to recite the Quran at an early age. Among his renowned masters, we may state: Nasr Az-zawawi who taught him Arabic; Tunart As-sinhaji Tilimsani and Al-Qalasadi taught him arithmetic (الحساب) and inheritance laws (الفرائض); Ash-Sharif al-Hasani taught him the seven readings of the Quran; Isa Lmaghili Tilimsani taught him the Mudawwana; Isa l-ubbadi Tilimsani who taught him the fundamentals of religious science (الأصول); A. Al-Lanati Tazi Lwahrani who was one of the leading sufis of his time, gave Assanouci sufic blessings such as: Alkhirqa (الخرقة), Aldiyafa (الضيافة), almusafaha (المصافحة), the transmission of a sufic prayer (تلقين الذكر) and the spitting into his mouth (البصق في فمه) (Kenny, 1970, pp. 19-24).

It is worth noting that there are other alleged masters of Assanouci who influenced his learning and knowledge till he became a master of Theology

(التوحيد), grammar, philology, inheritance laws, arithmetic, exposition (البيان) as well as other sciences.

### **3.2 His works**

Cheikh Assanouci composed many writings in different domains and centred around the Muslim theology. He was mainly interested in purifying the creed from distortion and false allegations. Some of his works are:

\* **Al- Aquida al-Kubra (the larger creed):** this was his first theological work whose official title is ( عقيدة أهل التوحيد و التسديد، المخرج من ظلمات الجهل و ريبقة ) (التقليد، المرغمة أنف كل مبتدع عنيد)

\* **Al-Aquida al-Wusta (the intermediate creed):** this was followed by its commentary.

\* **Al-Aquida as-sughra (the smaller creed):** this doesn't have a title but in his commentary on it, he refers to it as a creed small in volume. It is called Umm-albarahin (أم البراهين) or As-sanoussia (السنوسية). There are many translations and studies on this manuscript.

\* **Sughra Sughra and Al-Muquadimma:** these and their commentaries were composed to facilitate the understanding of As-sughra and explain its terms and presuppositions.

Besides the works listed above, he has many other writings on religion, algebra, logic, etc.

## **4. A critical examination of the translation of Al-Aquida Al-wusta by Joseph Kenny**

Translation of Islamic manuscripts was carried out mainly by orientalist, Christian missionaries and other foreigners who were interested in gaining and transmitting knowledge of Islam in their own ways. Peter the Venerable, for instance, financed a company of translators to translate series of Arabic texts and produced compilations of their own, including a synthesis produced by him. The works are known as Cluniac Corpus.

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(Shitto, 2018)

Some of the works of Cheikh were translated into different languages mainly Al-Aqida as-sughra (أم البراهين). It was translated into French by J-D Luciani and into German also by P-H Wolff in addition to other studies. In this paper, we will focus on his Al-aqida al-wusta and its English translation by the Christian missionary Joseph, O Kenny.

For the sake of our critical study, we will follow Newmark's model of translation criticism. Translation criticism is an important component which links between translation theory and practice. According to Newmark any comprehensive criticism of translation should cover the following topics:

**'(1) a brief analysis of the SL text stressing its intention and its functional aspect; (2) the translator's interpretation of the SL text's purpose, his translation method and the translation's likely readership; (3) a selective but representative detailed comparison of the translation with the original; (4) an evaluation of the translation- (a) in the translator's terms, (b) in the critic's term; (5) where appropriate, an assessment of the likely place of the translation in the target language culture or discipline.'** (Newmark, 1988, p. 186)

## 4.1 A brief analysis of Al-Aqida Al-wusta

**Date and title:** Al-wusta is the only theological work of Assanouci which is dated. It was finished on the day of Arafa 875/ 29<sup>th</sup> May 1471. No title is given to the work either in the manuscript or in the commentary. Al-wusta is considered as one of the mJOR works of Assanoussi, treating in detail all the major questions of Kalam.

**Purpose:** Al-wusta is regarded as an important reference for the study of Muslim theology. Thus, in his introduction, Assanouci considers Al-kubra as being too difficult, and says that Al-wusta is **'clearer and easier to understand, and although it is shorter, it contains exact demonstrations for easy learning and remarks on creedal details which are not found in longer works, much less in shorter ones.'**

'وقد من الله سبحانه وتعالى علي في هذه الأيام القريبة بوضع عقيدة يظهر أنها أخصر من الأولى وأقرب. ثم مع اختصارها ففيها من تحقيق البراهين ما يجلو عن النفوس الميسرة لفهم الحق وقبوله من أهله كل الكرب ' (يوسف، أحمد، 1971، الصفحات 19-20)

The actual text of *Al-wusta* (المتن) is preceded by an introduction which explains the aim of the work and revealed the heartbreak of Cheikh Assanoussi living the deterioration of the state of religion of many people and their refraining from making evidence of Muslim theology.

'ولقد كنت أدركتني غيرة غما و شفقة جما على عوام المسلمين، بل و على كثير من الطلبة المتفقيين لما رأيت من بعضهم الفساد في عقائدهم وإعراضهم عن النظر في أدلة التوحيد، رواها لهم كثير من مرآشدهم، فشرعت في إقراء هذه العقيدة وغيرها.' (يوسف، أحمد، 1971، صفحة 21)

#### **4.2. The translator's purpose**

To deal with the translator's purpose, it is important to give a brief biographical data about him. **Joseph O. Kenny** was born on January 12<sup>th</sup>, 1936. He made his First Profession in the Order in 1957 and was ordained to the priesthood in 1963. Soon after his ordination, he was assigned to Nigeria in November 1964. That assignment became a permanent one because he spent his entire life in Nigeria and was always proud to say he was a citizen of both the USA and Nigeria. He started his studies at the Aquinas Institute, River Forest, where he studied Philosophy and Theology. He also studied at Aquinas Institute Dubuque, Pontifical Institute of Arabic Studies, Rome, University of Tunis and University of Edinburgh. He was a foremost expert in Islamic and Arabic Studies.

His travel to Nigeria was motivated by the first Bishop of Sokoto Edward Lawton who mentioned two reasons why he wanted Dominicans in Nigeria: (1 To admit Nigerians to the Dominican Order of the Catholic Church/ 2 To provide the church with specialists on Islam; those who are well versed in Arabic, and who will help the church understand and relate with the Muslim community in Nigeria.) (Shitto, 2018)

In (1968-1970), he obtained a PhD in Arabic and Islamic studies from the University of Edinburgh. He taught in various Institutions in Nigeria and other parts of Africa. He produced more than 170 works on different aspects of Islamic studies in Arabic, French and English. Kenny died on



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28<sup>th</sup> January 2013. (Shitto, 2018)

It is clear from the biography of the translator that his main purpose behind translating the text of Al-aquida Al-wusta -as part of the fulfilment of his PhD degree- is to gain knowledge and understanding of the Muslim theology and as he pointed out, '**Al-aquida al-wusta with its commentary represents as-sanusi's most original and synthetic indepth presentation of Muslim Theology.**' (Kenny, 1970, p. 2)

Moreover, Kenny is known by his enthusiasm to present Muslim theological thought and its development on various questions and issues. He used the theology of Cheikh Assanouci as a source for he found that it has been used as a basis of theological teaching in the main centres of Africa.

### 4.3 Selective comparison between the original and the translation

Any translation process involves making choices and solving particular problems and difficulties of the source text. In this part, we will tackle some general points regarding the translator's choices.

**The title:** Al-wusta has no title. It is called Al-wusta according to its position as being preceded by Al-Kubra and followed by As-sughra and its volume because it is shorter than al-Kubra and longer than As-sughra. The translator translates this name into English according to its position as (Intermediate Creed) and accompanies this translation with the original name using transference (or transliteration) as, 'Al-Aquida Al-Wusta'. It is important here to use the loan words in order not to confuse it with the Creed which is a statement of Christian belief that is spoken as part of some church services.

**The structure:** Al-wusta is divided into 'Bab' and 'Fasl' and further by alternating 'nass' and 'sharh'. The translator kept the same number and order. He used chapter for 'bab' and section for 'fasl', and enumerated the texts 'nusus'. In both the original and the translation, we have 8 chapters, 5 sections and a conclusion. However, the original text doesn't contain any punctuation mark.

The translator used a variety of procedures and shows some

understanding of the manuscript as he is specialized in Arabic and Islamic studies and a native speaker of the English language. We notice that the translator keeps the same number of paragraphs though they are longer than the original ones for they are expanded sometimes to clarify the meaning.

**Religious terms:** the original text mentions many religious terms that convey religious connotations in Arabic and though substituted by English correspondents the semantic charge isn't achieved. Some examples of religious terms and their correspondences are:

God the Most High (الله تعالى/ الله سبحانه); the Majestic and Mighty (جل وعز); divinity (الألوهية); multiplication of deities (تعدد الآلهة); rewarding and punishing (الثواب والعقاب); obedience and disobedience (الطاعة والمعصية); messengers (الرسول); prophet (النبي); foulness (الرنذيلة); punishment (العقاب); our master and protector (سيدنا ومولانا); Imam (إمام), the highest region of paradise (الفرديوس الأعلى), etc.

It is important to note that some religious Islamic religious terms can be transliterated to keep their religious connotations like ALLAH and Alfirmaws, because though God is capitalized, it is more appropriate to use ALLAH. Also for the use of multiplication of deities, it can simply be replaced by the existence of many gods. The term Imam conveys the meaning and is clear both languages with its different meanings. Other terms may have more appropriate correspondents such as vice for (الرنذيلة) and sin for (المعصية).

**Proper names:** there two proper names in the manuscript and they were transliterated as follows:

- Shaykh al-Ashari (الشيخ الأشعري);
- Imam-al- Haramayn (إمام الحرمين).

**Functional equivalent:** the translator was of course aware of the two cultures, so he tried to neutralise some terms and expressions such as:

- The professors of revealed-law for (أهل الشرع);
- Enchangement of revealed law (التكليف الشرعي);
- The day of judgement (يوم الدين);
- Throwing off majesty and rank (إسقاط الجاه و المنزلة),

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- Patience (سعة الصدر), etc.

**Modulation:** modulation defines a variation through a change of viewpoint, of perspective, and very often of category of thought. (Newmark, 1988, p. 88). The translator uses this procedure effectively in different situations, e.g.:

- Blind acceptance (التقليد المختلف);
- Correct reasoning (النظر الصحيح);
- Determination of intelligibility (الحكم العقلي);
- Big acts of disobedience (كباائر المعاصي);
- If you are ware of this (فاذا عرفت هذا);
- You become aware of the impossibility of anything in the world producing any effect whatsoever (تعرف استحالة أن يكون لشيء من العالم تأثير (البتة);
- This parable is patently applicable to the situation of messengers ( و (لا يخفى أن هذا المثال مطابق لحال الرسل عليهم السلام

There are other examples of modulation in the translation of this manuscript and as i said previously this shows that the translator made great efforts to understand the original. Thus, by (تقليد) it is meant 'accepting the opinion of another without reason'; this expression is successfully rendered into English using 'Blind acceptance'. The same can be said about correct reasoning (النظر الصحيح) 'which is the reflection by which a person considers the aspect which is intermediate between himself and that which is to be proved.' (Kenny, 1970, p. 87)

**Expansion:** the translator may use this procedure when he needs to explain and add other words for more accurate translation. There many examples of expansion in the translation such as:

- Something necessary (الواجب);
- Something admissible (الجائز);
- The world having come into being (حدوث العالم);
- Imam of those who were sent (إمام المرسلين);
- From widespread tradition (بالتواتر);

- For the pure choice and favour of the Most high (بمحض اختياره تعالى)
- Big acts of disobedience (كبائر المعاصي), etc.

Expansion and paraphrasing were used in almost all the translated text, since in the original text deals with some religious and cultural issues that cannot be rendered at the level of the word.

**Ambiguity:** one of the main important difficulties facing the translator when dealing with religious texts is ambiguity. Most of the religious terms have a strong effect in Arabic that is impossible to render in another language, in addition to the existence of different meaning shades for the same term or expression. To solve the problem of ambiguity, the translator sometimes resorted to literal translation as in:

- Their calling to God the Most High (دعائهم إلى الله);
- Man's acquisition (كسب العبد);
- Agent freely choosing its existence whenever he wanted and with what measures and attributes he wanted (الفاعل المختار لوجوده في ما شاء (من الأزمان على ما شاء من الأقدار), etc.

The expression (كسب العبد) implies (الزرق) which may have the equivalent (means of livelihood); though the word itself has many shades that go beyond the material means to encompass all forms of blessings of Allah. Also (دعائهم إلى الله) may have the connotation of spreading or disseminating the message of Allah.

In other cases of ambiguity, the translator omitted some parts like in:

-But it is inconceivable that something from eternity should be adventitious, or that something else should precede its existence (فقد خرج لك بهذا البرهان القطعي كون العالم كله حادثاً من عرشه إلى فرشه لا يتصور في العقل أن يكون شيء منه قديماً)

He omitted (البرهان القطعي) and (العالم من عرشه إلى فرشه) and simply explain the meaning of the whole sentence.

#### 4.4 Evaluation of the translation

Christian missionaries and Orientalists have expressed different interests behind the translation of our religious heritage and our religion as well. Being a Christian missionary, Joseph Kenny is patently influenced by his

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masters' teachings and allegations, and some scholars even said that his works on Islam are based on distortions and false interpretations (Shitto, 2018).

However, we cannot deny the fact that he played an important role in transmitting important works of the Islamic theology through translation and study. His work about the Muslim theology which includes the translation of Al-Aquida Al-wusta shows clearly his reading of all the works of Assanoussi and made reference to renowned Muslim and Arab scholars.

It is important to say that the translation as a whole is acceptable but not accurate since the translator's choices seem in some parts like generalisations encompassing ambiguity and confusion which make it difficult to understand for the target audience.

### **5. CONCLUSION**

This paper has examined the translation of Cheikh Assanouci's work Al-Aquida Al-wusta carried out by the Christian missionary Joseph Kenny. It should be noted that Christian missionaries and Orientalists succeeded in having access to important Islamic heritage and showing interest in studying, translating and transmitting this heritage to people from other cultures. It is also of a paramount importance to state that translation remains the most effective tool to transfer our Arabic heritage and culture and make them known by other foreign cultures.

Kenny produced an acceptable and accurate translation of the manuscript and expressed some understanding of the Muslim theological thought thanks to his proficiency in Arabic. Moreover, he managed to convey the messages of the source text and preserve the linguistic level despite of the cultural differences between the two languages: Arabic and English. It is also worth mentioning that there are many factors that helped him to produce a meaningful and acceptable translation such as: his knowledge and understanding of the Muslim theology, his proficiency in the Arabic language and

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