YOUSSEF ECHE AND HIS CONTRIBUTION TO
THE HISTORY OF ISLAMIC LIBRARIES

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When discussing the history of Islamic libraries the first name that comes to mind is that of Youssef Eche, the author of *Les Bibliothèques Arabes, Publiques et Semi-Publiques en Mésopotamie, en Syrie et en Égypte au Moyen Age,* Damas 1967, a work published 30 years ago which initiated the study of this field of scholarship and still remains the dominant work in it. It is somewhat surprising therefore that several articles and books have appeared in the Middle-East and India[1] which not only failed to acknowledge our debt to the scholar but omit his name completely and repeat much of the information which can be found in his work, published as I mentionned above 30 years ago[2].

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[1]   See for example Kabir Ahmad Khan, "Organization and Administration of Libraries in the Islamic World, *Islamic Culture,* 55/2 (Hydarabad 1981), pp. 123 - 129: idem "Library Movements in the Muslim World", *Islamic Culture,* 56/4 (1982), pp. 303 - 316; Dr. Ribhi Mustafa Alian, "On the History of Early Book-Keepers" *el-Vesika,* v. 15 no. 30 (Bahreyn 1996), pp. 180 - 197. There are numerous articles in Arabic in which one may find much of the ideas which have already been expressed and ultimately find their origin in Youssef Eche's work albeit unacknowledged. The titles of some of these articles can be found amongst the list of articles I have given in my study on libraries in the Islamic civilization (in *Doğuştan Günümüze Büyük İslam Tarihi,* v. XIV, pp. 211 - 256).

[2]   Youssef Eche's work has now been translated into Arabic, under the title Dûr al-kutub al- 'Arabîya al-'amma wa şibh al-amma li-bilâd al-'Irak waş-Şâm wa Misr fi'l-'asr al-wasît, translated by Nidâr Abaza and Muhammad Sabbâğ (Beirut 1991). In an introduction to the translation the translators in explaining the need for an Arabic translation, noted that "Although this work was essential for many Arab scholars in the field, their lack of knowledge of the French language prevented them from using the work. Neverthless some researchers seem to have exploited a good deal of information provided by this work without acknowledging their source (p. 5). A persian translation of this work came out recently: *Kitâbhâne-ha-yı Umûmî ve Nime-'Umûmî-yi Arabî der-Kurûn-ı Vusta Bayn an-Nahrayn, Suriye we Mısr,* (Suriye ve Mısır), translated by. Esedullah Alevi (Meşhed 1994).

⹂The purpose of this short article is to attempt to reinstate the name of Youssef Eche as the original and dominant scholar in this field. For some years now I have read articles from non-European countries which ignored his contribution. I was slightly worried when I saw Abdul Latif Abdullah Ibn Dohaish's article entitled "Growth and Development of Islamic Libraries" in *Islamic Quarterly* (v. XXXI/4, London 1987, pp. 217 - 229) in which the study of Islamic libraries is discussed with absolutely no mention of Youssef Eche. When exactly the same article appeared in *Der Islam*, Band 66, 1989, pp. 289 - 302) two years later, my worry turned into alarm. I felt that the record had to be set straight lest the name of this eminent scholar, which has been omitted from many non-european works now begins to be omitted in articles and works published in Europe[3] .

The reason that his name is omitted in many works by non-Eurepeans[4] may be explained by the difficulties in acquiring foreign publications, the lack of library resources and also unfamiliarity with the French language as well as the long-established practice of failing to acknowledge ones sources. One is hopeful that now the Arabic and Persian editions of the work are now available to all Arabic and Persian reading scholars that his contribution to this field of scholarship will in future be acknowledged[5] .

In order to correct the omissions that have occured in the past I would like to draw the attention of library historians to his works and at the same time give a few scanty details about the life of this great scholar.

Youssef Eche was born in Tripoli in Lebanon in 1911. He went to University in Aleppo and Damascus. In 1931 he went to the Sorbonne in Paris and studied in the departments of literature and librarianship. On

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[3] In 1984 an English edition of Pedersen's *Den Arabiske Bog,* originally published in 1946 in Danish , was translated into English and edited with an introduction by Robert Hillenbrand in 1984, appeared with a chapter devoted to libraries. Curiously Eche's name appears in the bibliography but Hillenbrand's introduction makes the starking claim that ".. the material assembled by Pedersen on libraries and on the development of the printed books in Islam draws on rich and varied sources and holds its own admirably" whereas any comparison of the way that Pedersen and Eche have treated Islamic libraries must come to the conclusion that Eche's work published twenty-one years later overshad ows the treatment by Pedersen and makes it virtually obsolete.

[4] Two recently published books devoted to the history of Islamic libraries, Muhammad Mahir Hammada's *al-Maktabat fi'l-Islam* (Beirut 1978) and Yahya as-Sa'ati's *al-Wakf wa Bunyat al-Maktaba al-'Arabiya* (Riyad 1988) òmit Youssef Eche's name entirely.

[5] The Arabic Edition of Y. Eche's work I hope will not share the fate of Philip Tarrazi'sin 3 volume monumental work on the history of Islamic libraries: *Haza' in al-Kutub al-Arabiya fi'l-Hafikain* (Beirut 1947). P. Tarrazi's work has all but disappeared from the bibliographies.

returning to Damascus after three and half years, he became the director of the Dar al-Kutub al-Wataniya az-Zahiriya. While in that position he established a classification system for the library, which is still in use today. He went to Egypt for a period during which he taught at University and became the director of the Ma'had al-Mahtutat and a member of the translation comission of UNESCO (1946 - 1950). While in Egypt he became acquainted with Ahmad Amin, Taha Husain, Satı'al-Husari, 'Abdarrazzak Sanhuri and other eminent Arab scholars and thinkers.

He continued his work on Islamic libraries which he had begun in 1934 and while in Egypt he travelled to Paris several times, and on one occasion submitted his study of Islamic libraries for which he was awarded a Doctorat d'Etat (1949). During this period he also produced several studies on the history of the emergence of the Arabic book, the classification of the Islamic sciences and the catalogue of the historical works in the Zahiriya Library.

After returning to Damascus in 1950 he became the director of the Syrian Broadcasting Service, taught at the university and also held several administrative posts there. For a brief period he went to Benghazi University to establish a library. Throughout his life and travels he was occupied greatly by two subjects of study, the first was the development of civilizations, on which he gave many papers which were always well received in many countries, while the second was the history of Islamic libraries. He died in 1967 just before his work on this subject was published.[6]

His Works

1. *Tasnif al-'Ulum wal-Ma'arif*, Damascus 1937, second editon Damascus 1979.

2. *al-Hatib al-Bağdadî, Mu'arrihu Bagdad wa Muhaddisuha*, Damascus 1945.

3. *Kıssat 'Abkari*, Cairo 1943.

4. *Fihris Mahtutat at-Tarih wa Mulhakatih*, Damascus 1947.

5. *Takyid al-'Ilm li'l-Hatib al-Bagdadi*, Damascus 1949, second edition 1974.

6. *Naş'at Tadwin al-Adab al-'Arabi*, Damascus 1953.

7. *ad-Dawla al-'Arabiya wa Sukutuha*, translation of J. Welhausen's work, Damascus 1956.

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6   These details on his life come from an introduction by his son. Dr. Safwan al-'Uş, to the Arabic translation of his father's work.

8. *ad-Dawla al-Amawiya wàl-Ahdas Allati Sabakatha wa Mahhadat Laha,* Damascus, 1965.

9. *Tarih 'Asr al-Hilafa al-'Abbasiya,* Damascus 1982, second edition 1990.

10. *Les Bibliothèques Arabes, Publiques et Semi-Publiques en Mésopotamie, en Syrie et en Égypte au Moyen Age,* Institut Français de Damas, 1967.

This is still the most authorative book on the history of Islamic libraries, and has not yet been superseded. It is a revision of his Doctorat d'Etat thesis submitted in 1949. In the introduction to the work he states that the work was based on a search throughout every book printed or manuscript that passed through his hand for references to Islamic libraries, be they books of geography, history, literature or even unpromising sources such as Islamic Law.[7] He travelled extensively to find sources in Syrian, Egyptian, Turkish and European libraries. As he discovered a tradition of libraries common to Egypt, Syria and Iraq he confined his study to those areas. Had he lived longer he may well have produced a future study of other Islamic areas. Identifying which types of libraries were to be the most influential on the development of Islamic culture he decided to concentrate his study on libraries open to the public and those libraries which offered limited acces to the public (he terms these as the semi-public libraries) because they were very numerous and often contained rich collections.[8]

The work consists of a foreward which surveys the existant literature on Islamic libraries (pp. IX - XVIII), a bibliography (pp. XXI - XXXVI), an

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[7] "D'autre part, comme le sujet de bibliothèques ne constitue pas un chapitre délimité de l'histoire de la civilisation Arabe, mais se rattache a un grand nombre de manifestations culturelles, il me fallait passer en revue tous les ouvrages renfermant des materiaux relatifs a cette civilisation. Je me représentais le travail a faire et découvrais qu'il me fallait pour arriver à des résultats définitifs lire en entier tous les ouvrages Arabes d'historie et de géographie. Cet écrasant travail n'était pas suffisant toutefois. Les ouvrages de littérature, de poésie, de conduite religieuse, de théologie ne manquent pas d'offrir parfois des renseignements utiles", *(Les Bibliothèques Arabes,* pp. XV - XVI).

[8] "Le cadre topographique du sujet étant fixé, il fut nécessaire de réduire le sujet à une proportion convenable. Réflexion faite, il me parut que les Bibliothèques privées, importants par leur nombre aussi bien que par leur richesse, représentaient des cas particuliers et n'avaient pas joué un rôle marquant dans l'évolution de la civilisation Arabe et dans la diffusion de la culture générale. On peut donc ne pas surcharger cette etude du poids de leur longue et detaillée histoire. Il me fallait évidemment ne pas négliger un nombre de Bibliothèques originairement privées mais qui étaient ouvertes à un public déterminé. Je veux dire les bibliothèques semi-publiques ", *(Les Bibliothèques Arabes,* pp. XVII).

introduction in which he classifies Islamic libraries (pp. 1 - 6) and two main sections. In the first of these (pp. 9 - 267) he deals with the Bayt al-Hikma, the Dar al-'Ilm and the libraries annexed to instutions in order to trace the evolution of the Islamic library. In the second section (pp. 271 - 391) he deals with the collections in the libraries, their classiflication systems, catalogues, personnel and budgets and their operation and lending facilities. At the end of the work there is a conclusion (pp. 393 - 397) in which he evaluates the role of the Bayt al-Hikma, the Dar al-'Ilms and the college libraries, particularly the role they played in the expansion of Islamic culture.

I hope that by drawing attention to the neglect which Youssef Eche has suffered at the hands of many scholars, his place as the foremost authority on the Islamic library will once more be established. In this way I will have paid a debt of gratitude I owe a scholar who has inspired me in my own work on Ottoman libraries[9] which were in many ways modelled on his great work.

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[9]   On reading his work on the medieval Islamic libraries I immediately felt that the same had to be done for the Ottoman libraries and thus I began my research which was to result my book: *Türk Kütüphaneleri Tarihi 1: Kuruluştan Tanzimata Kadar Osmanlı Vakıf Kütüphaneleri,* (Ankara 1988) and my articles: "Ottoman Libraries: A Brief Survey of their Development and System of Lending", *Libri* 34:1 (1984), 65 - 76; "Medieval Ottoman Libraries", *Erdem* 1:3 (1985), 745 - 754; "Catalogues and Cataloguing in the Ottoman Libraries", *Libri*: 37:4 (1987), 333 - 349; "The Establishment and Maintenance of Collections in the Ottoman Libraries: 1400 - 1839", *Libri* 39:1 (1989), 1 - 17; "Services Offered by the Ottoman Libraries: 1400 - 1839", *Libri* 43:1 (1993), 1 - 18.