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The Impacts of Shu‘ubite in Islamic Historiography

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ABSTRACT

It is axiomatic that the period of ‘Abbasid was proven as one of the remarkable periods for Muslims especially in its early and middle epoch. Knowledge for instance, was one of the most significant achievements during this particular time. It can be said that leaders as well as ordinary people were involved in activities associated with knowledge. Thus, this article attempts to prove whether there were influences by Shu‘ubite historians on the knowledge development. It commences by a discussion on Shu‘ubite historians such as ‘Allan al-Shu‘ubi, al-Haytham b. ‘Adi and Abu ‘Ubaydah Ma‘mar b. al-Muthanna. This will be done by explaining their actions that led to the influence on the knowledge development during the period of ‘Abbasid. Besides, that focus shall be given on the production of their works particularly on the disgrace of the Arabs and Shu‘ubite virtues. At this point, it is interesting to note how true the claims of the Shu‘ubite historians concerning superiority of the Arabs was. Back then, these claims succeeded in attracting the attention of the pro-Arab historians to activate knowledge development at that time by producing works to counter the claims. Finally, this paper endeavors to construe on al-Jahiz and Ibn Qutaybah who produce al-Bayan wa al-Tabyin and Kitab al-‘Arab or al-Radd ‘ala al-Shu‘ubiyyah.

Key words: Impacts, Shu‘ubite, Islamic historiography

Introduction

Shu‘ubiyyah (Shu‘ubite) is a group which encompasses the concept of equality between all Muslims, irrespective of their ethnic background; as well as between non-Arabs who either reject the claims of the superiority of the Arabs or even go beyond that and despire the Arabs. In other words, Shu‘ubiyyah could either mean a group who believes in equality between all people, or who reject the claims of the superiority of the Arabs, as well as those who despire the Arabs.

The Great Shu‘ubite Historians:

Among of the great and prominent historians of Shu‘ubiyyah is Abu ‘Ubaydah Ma‘mar b. al-Muthanna. He was a Persian and Mawla Bani Tamim b. Murrah. Abu ‘Ubaydah was born in Basrah in Rajab, 110AH. It was at this place he was brought up and gained his early education. In 188AH, he came over to Baghdad on the request of Khalifah Harun al-Rashid and attended the academic programs at the castle. He recited part of his books to the Khalifah Harun al-Rashid at the castle (Al-Zirikli, n.d). Abu ‘Ubayda was from the Shu‘ubiyyah group who discussed a lot on Mathalib al-‘Arab. Most of the books of biographies mentioned about his thoughtfulness towards Khawarij. Abu ‘Ubaydah died in 209AH during the period of Abu Ja‘far ‘Abd Allah al-Ma’mun when he was at 99 years old (Ibn al-Athir, 1965).

Abu ‘Ubaydah was excellent in the field of literature, Arabic grammar, Arabic language, poets, genealogy and Ayyam al-‘Arab. He was one of the members of philologists who contributed creative efforts in Islamic historiography via his works that touched various topics of history. The methodology of his writings was by collecting the particular narrations (Riwayat) that related to any events and by putting them under a specific topic. Among of the main themes written by Abu ‘Ubaydah were regarding the pride and eminence (Mafakhir). Mathalib al-‘Arab, the history of Arabs tribes, Khawarij and Mawali (Faruqi, 1979). Abu ‘Ubaydah also wrote on Ayyam al-‘Arab in his two books, namely Kitab al-Ayyam al-Kabir which contains about 1,200 events of Ayyam al-‘Arab and Kitab al-Ayyam al-Saghir which consisted of 75 events of Ayyam al-‘Arab. Both books were considered as the main references to the later historians.

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Abu ‘Ubaydah had analyzed and examined information which related to the history and culture of the Arab tribes. Based on oral narrations, he wrote books on the history of the Jahiliyyah period, Islamic period and Qaba’il al-‘Arabiyyah. Abu ‘Ubaydah also wrote on Quran and Hadith literally. He based his discussions on the narrators those of Abu ‘Amr b. al-‘Ala’, Yunus b. Habib and of Bedouins who had migrated and lived in Basrah areas. His writing was very reputable by stating the names of narrators as well as the collection of the various narrations for comparative purpose (Al-Duri, 1960).

The analysis done by Abu ‘Ubaydah demonstrated his favoritism towards the movements of Shu‘ubiyyah. He tried to promote the Persian nation through his book of Kitab al-Mawali and Kitab Fada’ il al-Furs. Indirectly, this phenomenon exhibited that the Shu‘ubiyyah movement had influenced the Islamic historiography. Ibn al-Nadim (1985) had jotted about 106 books of Abu ‘Ubaydah. Even though most of those books were connected to the arts and Arabic grammar, Abu ‘Ubaydah also wrote several books that considerable important as sources of information in history such as Kitab al-Jamail wa Siffin and Kitab Futuh al-Ahwaz.

Besides Abu ‘Ubaydah Ma’mar b. al-Muthanna, al-Haytham b. ‘Adi was also one of the historians who supports Shu‘ubiyyah. His late father, ‘Adi b. ‘Ismail was from Wasit while his mother was previously one of the Manbij hostages. al-Haytham bin ‘Adi was born in Kufah and there he was brought up. He later migrated to Baghdad and lived there as a teacher. al-Haytham bin ‘Adi once had been imprisoned for several years as he was found criticizing the status of al-‘Abbas b. ‘Abd al-Muttalib. Nevertheless, after that occurrence, he improved his relationship with the ruling government of ‘Abbasid by attending the formal castle programs organized by al-Mansur, al-Mahdi, al-Hadi dan Harun al-Rashid. al-Haytham b. ‘Adi was always been criticized by the poets such as Abu Ya’qub al-Khuzyaymi, Di’bal al-Khuza’i and ‘Ali b. Jabalah. Abu Nuwas for instance had insulted him by denying the fact that he was from the Arab descendent when he stated: O! Ye! Haytham b. ‘Adi you are not from the Arab descendent xx You are not from the Tay desentdends too except on false. al-Haytham b. ‘Adi died in the year 207AH/822AD. during the period of the al-Ma’mun at Faram al-Silh when he was 93 years old (Al-Dhahabi, 1953).

al-Haytham b. ‘Adi was a knowledgeable historians in genealogy. He narrated various historical events as well as the poems in Arabic dialects. He was one of the famous writers in the period of ‘Abbasid through his books that talked on Mathalib al-‘Arab. Moreover, his works also covered the history of Persian, genealogy of the Arabs tribes, the history of the Umayyad and ‘Abbasids, the affairs that related to the cities such as Basrah dan Kufah, the role of the governors and the structure of the administration (Ibn al-Nadim, 1985). One of his writings was Tarikh al-Asfra’ al-Kabir, a historical book that written within the scope of genealogy. His other book was Kitab al-Tarikh ‘ala al-Sinin on Islamic history that was written in chronological. This methodology was followed by the later historians such as Khalifah b. Khayyat and Abu Ja’far al-Tabari. al-Haytham bin ‘Adi also wrote book of Kitab Tabaqat al-Fuqa’ha’ wa al-Muhaddithin on biography of Fuqaha’ and Muhaddithin. This book was written based on Tabaqat namely, it was arranged in stages. This method was then followed by Ibn Sa’d in the book of al-Tabaqat al-Kubra. al-Haytham b. ‘Adi demonstrated his care towards the affairs of those places he used to live in by writing books such as Kitab Khatilat al-Kufah that contains information on topography and the geography of Kufah.

al-Haytham b. ‘Adi took a part of the sources for his writings from those books that had been translated into Arabic language on Persian history. His narrations were considered as the main references to al-Baladhuri and al-Mas’udi. Abu Ja’far al-Tabari too did refer to his narrations about the prophetic history, Sirah al-Nabawiyyah, the history of Khulafa’ al-Rashidin, the history of Umayyads and ‘Abbasids. Generally, al-Haytham b. ‘Adi had brought a huge change in the field of historiography by introducing new topics that related to the civilization affairs and the development of the judicature, the administration of politics and the geographical of certain area (Mustafa, 1979). Ibn al-Nadim had mentioned about 56 books of those were written by al-Haytham b. ‘Adi.

The characteristic of al-Haytham b. ‘Adi of getting busy with others personal matters and spreading to the public made some of the scholars scorned him especially those of Hadith scholars. Yahya b. Ma’in (d.233AH) and Bukhari (d.256AH) stated: ‘He was not reliable and untrustworthiness’. Abu Dawud Sulayman b. al-Harith al-Sijistani (d.275AH) mentioned: ‘He is one of full lies ‘ and Ahmad b. Shu’ayb al-Nasa’i (d.303AH) said: ‘His narration were abandoned’ (Ibn Hajar al-‘Asqalani, 1986). Nonetheless, his knowledge on the historiography was never questioned.

The Great Pro-Arabs Historians:

al-Jahiz was from the pro-Arab cause who discussed a lot on the refutation of the Shu’ubiyah in a particular section called Kitab al-‘Asa in his book entitled al-Bayan wa al-Tabyin. Although this section seems to concentrate on the matter of the Arab’s use of the staff, according to how the chapter is called, it in fact, goes further and also answer other attacks made by the Shu’ubis. He defended the use of Mikharsarah (something which is held by a man in his hand. It could be a staff, whip or stick) at public speeches when he proves that there is a basis for the staff being used by the pre-Islamic Arabs. He also refuted the Shu’ubiyah regarding the stirrups which according to the Shu’ubis, were one of the best equipment used for stabbing with the spear and the Arabs, according to the Shu’ubis, had no idea about the stirrups. In this case, he mentions that the iron stirrup had been available to the Arabs from the time of Azariqah (The Azariqah are named after Nafi’ b. al-Azraq al-Hanafi, one of the four famous groups of the Khawarij). Because of this, the Shu’ubi argument that the Arabs had no idea about stirrups seems to be baseless. The analysis done by al-Jahiz demonstrated his favoritism towards the Arabs. He tried to promote the superiority of the Arabs through his particular section entitled Kitab al-‘Asa.

Besides Abu ‘Uthman ‘Amr b. Bahr al-Jahiz, Abu Muhammad ‘Abd Allah b. Muslim b. Qutaybah known as Ibn Qutaybah was also one of the historians of the pro-Arabs stock. He was born in 213AH of Iranian extraction (Hitti, 1940). He had acquired his information on Hadith and Fiqh from Abu Ya’qub b. Ishaq b. Ibrahim known as Ibn Rahawayh. He was indebted for his information on Arabic language and literature to Abu Hatim Sahl b. Muhammad al-Sijistani, Abu Ishaq Ibrahim b. Sufyan al-Ziyadi and so on (Ibn Qutaybah, 1949). He was noted for the correctness of his information, as a grammarian and a philologist. On grammar he wrote Kitab Jami’ al-Nahw and Kitab Jamii’ al-Nahw al-Sahir, and he wrote Adab al-Katib on philology. Ibn Qutaybah was also a learned man in explaining the rare expression occurring in the Quran (Ibn al-Nadim, 1985). On this, he wrote Tafsir Gharib al-Quran (Ibn al-Nadim, 1985).

Ibn Qutaybah was from the pro-Arab stock who discussed a lot on the themes of the Shu’ubi polemic in Kitab al-‘Arab or al-Radd ‘ala al-Shu’ubiyyah (Roziah, 2003). It is interesting to note that he refutes the Shu’ubi attack towards the Arabs. He puts the Arab’s power a bit higher than that which the Persians had. This is based on the fact that the principles of the Arab rule are prophethood whereas the principles of the Persian rule were looting and conquest. Apart from that, the Arab rule penetrated deeply into the remotest parts of the earth, compared to the Persian rule which was less extensive that the Arab rule, since Persian rule did not cover al-Sham and al-Jazirah as well as Khurasan.

He also hints that the Shu’ubis took pride in boasting of Adam and of prophethood. He thinks that this is an inappropriate boast, as though the Arabs were not descended from Adam. He also argues the statement that all the prophets are from non-Arab stock with the exception of Hud, Salih, Isma’il and Muhammad, by saying that it was set up on the wrong basis. Although he did not argue about the stated four prophets, he slams that others like Musa, ‘Isa, Zakariyya, Yahya and so on are not from the Persians, but are from Banu Isra’il. The chief point here is that there is no tie between Persians and Banu Isra’il, and therefore the Shu’ubi argument is baseless.

The Influence of Shu’ubite in Islamic Historiography:

During the period of ‘Abbasids, the movement of Shu’ubiyah demonstrated the aggressive criteria and their activities were focused on: i) to enrich the translated the Persian literature materials into the Arabic language; ii) to stress on the function of the history and Persian culture in their writings as well as to promote the greatness of the previous glory that had been achieved and, iii) to produce the new writings under the theme of the privilege of the ‘Ajam and their role in developing the civilization (‘Umar, 1980).

It was at this point, the historians of Shu’ubiyah started the writings of the historiography that formulated those bases. They were also who humiliated the descendents of Arabs and their history. For example, ‘Allan al-Shu’ubi al-Warraq (d. early 9th century) had wrote Kitab al-Maydan fi al-Mathalib that discussed on the weaknesses and the handicapped of the Arabs tribes. Moreover, ‘Allan had connected these tribes with the false stories and had degraded them. It was said that he had received about 30,000 Dinar as a reward for writing this book from Tahir b. al-Husayn who supported the movement of Shu’ubiyah. Among of the topics which had been presented in this book were: Mathalib Quraysh, Mathalib Tamim b. Murrah, Mathalib Bani Asad b. ‘Abd. Al-‘Uzza, Mathalib Bani Makhzuman, Mathalib Bani ‘Adi b. Ka’b, Mathalib Rabi’ah, Mathalib ‘Abd al-Qays and Mathalib ‘Abd al-Dar b. Qusay (Ibn al-Nadim, 1985).


Abu ‘Ubaydah Ma’mar b. al-Muthanna was one of the prominent historians in the Shu’ubiyah movement. He was known as one with an attitude of full hatred towards the Arabs nations. Abu ‘Ubaydah tried very hard in his...
writings to regain the glory and greatness of the Arabs civilization and rename them to the Persian. He stated that the works of literature of the Arabs were a plagiarism of the Persian literature. Among of his books that degraded the Arabs nation were Kitab al-Mathalib, Kitab Mathalib Bahilah and Kitab Lusus al-'Arab. Through his book of Kitab Akhbar al-Furs, Abu ‘Ubaydah endeavored to praise and compliment the Persian by mentioning their kings’ genealogy and the victory that had been achieved. He also wrote another book Kitab Fada’il al-Furs that discussed on the specialty of the Persian (Amin, n.d.).

Conclusion:

The Shu'ubiyyah movement had a close relation to the Mawali since their supporters were among of Mawali. The historians of Shu’ubiyyah had distorted the historical facts by creating false stories. This action welcomed the comments from the Arabs writers including those of Mawali who did not join the Shu’ubiyyah. This group of writers defended the Arabs tribes and those related matters. For instance, Abu ’Uthman ‘Amr b. Bahr al-Jahiz and his book of al-Bayan wa al-Tabyin and Ibn Qutaybah through his book of Kitab al-‘Arab had discussed this matter and rebutted those allegations. Thus, it is clear that there was great influence of Shu’ubiyyah in the Islamic historiography.

References