KORAN QUOTATIONS IN THE
"DICTIONARY OF COMMON PEOPLE"
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There is no need to dwell on the importance of the famous Dictionary of Common People compiled by Yūsuf al-Mağribî (d. 1611) which has been preserved in the unique manuscript from the Sheikh Ţanţāwī collection in the Oriental Room of the Scientific Library of St. Petersburg University. It is known that the reason for the Dictionary was the wish of the compiler to prove that the spoken language of the Egyptians, the Egyptian dialect, was the “genuine Arabic or close to it”¹. Yūsuf al-Mağribî’s position was that of a “supporter of the people’s language” who rejected all notions describing the dialect as a low and vulgar form of the language². A natural and essential part of his arguments were Koran quotations in which he found the same words and figures of speech that are characteristic of the Egyptian dialect.

For instance, Yūsuf al-Mağribî – also known as the composer of songs of the folk type (the Egyptian mawwāl) – in his songs often used, for rhyming purposes, the same word with different meanings (the homonymous rhyme)³. One of his songs was composed on the rhyme for which the word fīrqān (of Aramean origin, meaning “liberation, redemption” in the Aramaic language) was used in the various meanings that it had acquired in Arabic, viz. the “Koran”, “Holy Scripture”, “proof”, “distinction between good and evil”, and – as Yūsuf al-Mağribî

² Ibid.
pointed out - "grace", "victory", "morning", "the sea breaking apart", "battle at Badr":

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\begin{align*}
\text{al-Muṣtāfā l-badru ʿtāhu l-ilāh furqān} \\
\text{furqānī rabbu l-ʿarāʾ anzal lahu furqān} \\
\text{lā zālā bi-n-nāṣr wa-l-burbān humā furqān} \\
\text{furqān li-Mūsā w-lahu yām Badr hū furqān}^4
\end{align*}
\]

To the Chosen Complete Moon, God gave the Koran.

In the morning, the Lord of the mankind gave Him the battle at Badr, It remains a victory and a proof, which is grace.

For Moses, the sea breaking apart and for Him, the day at Badr is a triumph.

When explaining the word furqān, the following words from the Koran are used: wa-in ātaynā Mūsā l-kitāb wa-l-furqān (2:53).

Beside mawwāls, Yūsuf al-Maġribī made use of other poetic forms of folklore with Koranic words in them and found Koran quotations elsewhere.

When explaining the verb sāqa and the nouns sāq and sāqa and the dialectal expression fulān yisawwaq iš-šerr (someone sells/spreads evil) the following Koran quotations are cited: yaʿwma ʿuḳṣu fi sāqī (68:42), wa-l-taffati s-sāqū bi-s-sāqi (75:28), as well as the following mawwāl:

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\begin{align*}
\text{Ḥusnu l-ḥabīb sāqani wi-š-sawqu qad sāqūh} \\
\text{qabbaltu rigluh min al-ašwāqi bal sāqūh} \\
\text{wi-lāʾimī fiḥ muʿahbar dāma fi sāqūh} \\
\text{mahğūre maḍrūbe man qad šahaduh sāqūh}^5
\end{align*}
\]

The beauty of my beloved attracted me, and passion led me to him. I kissed his foot because of love, or rather his leg. And he who blamed me was late because of him, it took him long to drag his feet.

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^4 al-Maġribī, Dictionary, L. 52b.

^5 Ibid., L. 46b.
Miserable and broken are the leg of him who has seen him (i.e. he has been charmed by him).

It is the Koran that Yūsuf al-Mağribī refers to when he speaks of songs and folk tales. Thus he writes: "A funny thing happened to me when I was with a friend. We were reading a story in which a man was treating another man to some food, and he offered him a chicken on this condition: he was not to eat any part of the chicken unless he could quote a suitable phrase from the Koran. At this, the guest took the breast, saying wa-naza‘nā mā fī sudūrihim min gillin (7:43), then he took a wing saying wa-lā tā’irin yaṭiru bi-ğanāḥayhi (6:38). Upon which, my friend addressed me remarking ‘What would he have said if he wanted to eat the sauce?’ To which I answered immediately wa-qila man rāqin (75:27). All that was in my youth when we did not stick to ceremonies’”

Yūsuf al-Mağribī reply to his friend contains a pun based on the assimilation of the sounds n and r, so that – when pronounced – the phrase man rāq sounds mirrāq or murrāq meaning heretics, which in its turn has another form, maraq'a, meaning also sauce.

The above example proves that Yūsuf al-Mağribī made use of the phonetic peculiarities observed in reading the Koran aloud. Thus, when commenting on the vernacular pronunciation of the word meaning "saliva, spittle" and giving its phonetic variants, buzāq, busāq and busāq, he remarks that it is possible to read the Koranic word širāt as zirāt, širāt and širāt. When speaking of the incorrect dialectal pronunciation of the word for ginger (zinğabīl), he remarks that the correct pronunciation will be the one used in the Koran, zanğabīl (76:16), which proves that he noticed the phenomenon in the vernacular when the vowel a transforms into e, with the subsequent transition of e into i, a constant feature of the Egyptian dialect, which results in the different

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6 Ibid., L. 55.
7 Ibid., L. 37.
forms of transcription used by European scholars who give *elli* and *illi* for “which”, or *keda* and *kida* for “so”, etc.

Koran quotations were used by Yūsuf al-Mağribī to support the words and phrases that were common for the Egyptian dialect of his time. For instance, when commenting on the phrase *er-rayyis indakk* “the master is exhausted”, he explains, “the master’s perception has diminished”, and quotes from the Koran: *fa-dukkatā dakkatan wāhidatan* (69:14) and also: *gaʿalahu dakkān* (7:143). Here the compiler remarks that *indakk* is a dialectal form of the passive voice while the correct form should be *dukka*.

When dealing with the expression *fulān gaʿalaq mā ʿaleyh* “one covered the thing that was upon him”, “one did what was wanted of him (one was true to his duty)”, “one did his duty”, Yūsuf al-Mağribī gives his version of the phrase: *aqlaqa abwāb aṭ-ṭalab minhu* “he closed the gate upon what was wanted of him”. He gives the verbal forms (I, II, IV) *gaʿalaqa, gaʾallaqa, aqlaqa*, which all have the same meaning, then he quotes the Koran: *wa-ǧallaqati l-abwāba* (12:23) with form II, remarking that form IV would be more correct. In other words, the author of the *Dictionary* points out that the Egyptian dialect generally has form II for the causative meaning while the literary language has form IV; in arguing that the dialect and the literary language are equal, he gives quotations from the Koran where form IV is also replaced by form II. At the same time it may be suggested that the argument contains a criticism of the Koranic language since it uses the same forms as the language of common people.

The total number of Koran quotations in Yūsuf al-Mağribī’s *Dictionary* amounts to 86. The Koran quotations in the *Dictionary* are first and foremost the evidence of a democratic process taking place in the Arab society of the 16th and 17th centuries in terms of the attitude towards the native tongue and literature. The Egyptians’ public opinion,

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which was expressed by Yusuf al-Maghribi, no longer accepted the idea that their spoken language – the Egyptian dialect – was a low, vulgar, distorted language that was not sufficiently good for composing works of literature. As an argument in favour of his native tongue, Yusuf al-Maghribi writes poems which are similar to folk songs (mawwāl) and contain the homonymous rhyme and words from the Koran. When quoting from the Koran, he points out the phonetically acceptable vernacular standards of pronunciation, also supporting the dialectal grammatical forms with Koran quotations.

Yusuf al-Maghribi’s work reveals and exposes the deeply rooted process in the Arab society of the late Middle-Ages, when the written word and the oral tradition in literature were getting closer to one another, when a tendency was gaining strength to overcome the rigid standards of the Classical Arabic language. The verses from the Koran were used as an argument to prove the regularity and lawfulness of this democratic process. The growing activity of the process resulted in similar works by other authors. Consequently, Yusuf al-Maghribi’s Dictionary cannot be considered to be a unique sample of the kind, as it was previously believed by some scholars studying the dictionary10: namely in the 14th century, a famous poet Safi ad-Dīn al-Ḥillī compiled a Dictionary of Mistakes (al-Āglātī), in the 16th century a Syrian author Ahmad at-Ṭibī wrote A Complete Explanation of Things Found in the Language of Common People (al-Idāḥ at-tāmm li-bayān mā yaqa‘u fī alsinat al-‘awāmm). Until recently, all these works were available in manuscript only.

It may be concluded that during the period of clerical predominance the verses from the Koran were used by progressive authors as a means to struggle against stagnation in the society of the time. At the same time, the use of Koran quotations was an evidence of living historical traditions and of the unity of the vernacular and the literary forms, with the differences between them unessential and of external character. The dichotomy of literary language and dialect was a common concern for the Arab world beginning from the Middle-Ages, and Yusuf al-Maghribi

10 Ibid., pp. 10-12.
was among those who tried to find an adequate solution to the problem. His views remain actual nowadays, and they should be taken into account by those modern linguists and political leaders who support a different point of view, i.e., by those who believe in the existence of a great difference between the literary Arabic language and the Arabic dialects.