



INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON LANGUAGES

PROCEEDINGS

*“Striving for Excellence: Overcoming Challenges in
Language Teaching, Learning and Research”*

October 10 - 11, 2015
Seri Pacific Hotel, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia



Faculty of
Languages & Communication,
Sultan Zainal Abidin University



Faculty of
Humanities & Social Sciences,
Prince of Songkla University

2015
**INTERNATIONAL
CONFERENCE ON
LANGUAGES**

PROCEEDINGS

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Published by
Faculty of Languages and Communication
Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin

In collaboration with
Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences
Prince of Songkla University

eISBN 978-967-0899-12-1

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The Problem of Learning and Teaching of Arabic and Islamic Studies in Papua New Guinea

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1.0 Introduction

The government policy of Papua New Guinea is to make every effort not to allow entry to Muslims and the use of Arabic language in the country, even if they are educationists, engineers, physicians or managers sent by foreign companies that are active in the religion. Papua New Guinea government expect its few Muslim citizens especially men to pray at home and not in the mosque or at any Islamic centre.⁶ Papua New Guinea companies seeking foreign workers specifically state that they are not interested in Muslim or Arabic native speaker workers, and any Muslim or Arab native speaker who does manage to enter Papua New Guinea will find it extremely difficult to rent an apartment, and anywhere a Muslim lives, neighbours close by become uneasy and anxious.

To set up Islamic institutions and schools is not very easy to accomplish due to government policy and rigid constraints on such development.⁷ In contrast with what is happening in Europe and other places, very few Papua New Guineans are drawn to Islam, if a Papua New Guinean woman marries a foreign Muslim, she will be considered an outcast by her social and cultural environment.⁸ There is no application of *shari'a* law in Papua New Guinea. In 2004, the Minister for Home Affairs Andrew Kumbakor became a major anti-Muslim activist and key adversary by seeking new laws to 'monitor and control the activities of Muslims', pushing to ban or limit Islam and Muslims on constitutional grounds.⁹ Kumbakor opposed Islam on the ground that 'the religion has the potential to create havoc in Papua New Guinea' pointing to Christian-Muslim violence in Indonesia, the Philippines and in Nigeria to justify his claim.¹⁰

Islamic institutions and schools are not easy to establish in Papua New Guinea due to constitutional restriction by the government and its policy of curtailing the establishment of Arabic and Islamic schools, which is crucial to a thriving Muslim community. Yet, despite this fact the Islamic Society of Papua New Guinea provides some sort of basic Arabic learning and Quran lessons inside the mosque where Muslim children can learn how to read the Holy Quran and understand the Arabic language and ideology.

The nature of life in a non Muslim and Arab country like Papua New Guinea is such that most Muslims are still unable to meet some fundamental obligations like providing Arabic and Islamic education for their children.¹¹ The odd working hours, great distance, and the scarcity

⁶ Flower, S. Muslim in Melanesia: putting security issues in perspective. *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 62, no. 3: (2008). 408-429.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ M. A. Chowdhury. 14.

of Arabic tutors in Papua New Guinea, all combine to make the arrangements for Arabic and Islamic learning with Quran class a daunting task for Muslims of Papua New Guinea. Muslims have the lowest literacy rate and Islamic and Arabic education of Muslims in Papua New Guinea faces many numerous challenges. Parents try to teach Arabic and Islamic values and morals to their children at home, because Islamic schools in Papua New Guinea are also not financially viable.¹² "There are no institutions of higher education or universities owned or managed by Muslims, in comparison to church-run universities in the country especially universities like University of Goroka, Papua New Guinea University of technology and Pacific Adventure University."¹³ Mohammad Chowdhry thus said:

There is lack of training, no proper syllabus or rigid program. There is hardly anyone to assist one Nigerian Imam and Arabic scholar in true sense. The primary school is quite important so that children from the very tender age are trained for Islam and Arabic language, however some children are being sent to Fiji but the result we have to see after a few years. It is better to have some arrangements locally.¹⁴ There are two students studying Arabic and Islamic studies at Islamic University in Madinah, Saudi Arabia presently. Papua New Guineans are lazy by nature and due to the rich forest fruits and food, which they can achieve quite easily, this factor is killing them.¹⁵

Fortunately, technology advancements via computers, especially voice communication over the internet, has now made it possible for Muslims in many neighbouring countries of Papua New Guinea like Australia and New Zealand to take Arabic classes online, which means Muslims parents and children can now learn how to read Quran and understand Arabic language online without having to go anywhere. Yet the Muslims of Papua New Guinea don't have access to this because of the high rate of poverty and also the slow system of government in providing and implementing a fast and efficient internet system.

2.0 The Use of Media to Outshine the Learning of Arabic Language in Papua New Guinea

Media is the most important immediate influence on opinions and understanding in the industrialized world and has significantly heightened people's perception in the developing countries as well. Media has a power capacity to encourage global awareness thereby promoting cross-cultural understanding, tolerance and acceptance of ethnic, cultural, religious and gender differences in communities across the globe. Individual do not simply hold intellectual beliefs about people in distant lands, but rather, they have strong emotional responses to divisions that are perpetuated in the media. One critical example is the influential idea of the clash of civilizations, which has spread out of the domain of news journalism and into all forms of media.¹⁶

Media in Papua New Guinea reinforces such views by reporting this rhetoric and other stories from overseas, which raises fear and the scary prospects that there will be future conflict and clash between Muslims and Christians if Muslims are allow to learn and understand Arabic language in the country. Nowhere has the reproduction of the so-called conflict and clash

¹² Ibid.

¹³ M.A, Chowdhry. To international Muslims, Re; *Problems facing Islam in Papua New Guinea and the Pacific and request for support* (2000). 14.

¹⁴ M. A, Chowdhry. 15..

¹⁵ Interview of Mohammad Choudhry via skype video call. 25th Feb 2014.

¹⁶ Barber Benjamin, *Jihad Vs Media*. (1995) Times Books. 17.

been more powerful than in the two media markets of the West and the Muslim world.¹⁷ Western cultural productions display negative portrayal of Arabs and Muslims and the conflicts among these societies to the people of Pacific region especially in Papua New Guinea thus, arousing strong emotional responses in Western media consumers; similarly, media in the Muslim world has also described the West in unsavoury moral and ethical terms and this has become a daily phenomenon in news shows and popular entertainment.¹⁸

The impact of the news media in predominantly Muslim countries has traditionally been very limited, particularly in the Middle East, North Africa, and some parts of sub Saharan Africa, where government controlled media outlets have provided censored information of which populations have learned to be highly skeptical. The news media in many predominantly Muslim countries has been less trusted and is rivaled by the mosque and the *souk* (marketplace) as a source of reliable information and opinion formation.¹⁹ The dominance of religious or community sources over news media has begun to change as the development of regional satellites and television stations in Papua New Guinea and the easing of regulations of the press in many predominantly and non- dominant Muslim countries has begun to take place. This has resulted in the multiplication of sources for news and information available to Muslim populations and facts about Islam and Arabic language has provided attractive alternatives to what came before it in Papua New Guinea and most of the Island countries in the Pacific region. News media produced and distributed from western perspectives by government owned and controlled media always misrepresents Islam and Arabic language and serves to distort perception about Islam and its language in Papua New Guinea but propagate and disseminate what will favour Christian missionaries or any other European languages.²⁰

Moreover, the Western TV programs and films that are mostly popular in the Muslim world reflect none of the wholesome values which Arabic language upholds and often encourages superficial emulation of Western fashions and blind imitation of television personalities. As Daoud Kuttub, director of the Institute of Modern Media at Al-Quds in Ramallah asks, "Where are the alternative media outlets, films and heroes that reflect this religion's and Arab's rich language, culture and traditions to minority Muslim countries like Papua New Guinea and others in Pacific region?"²¹ The impact of the popular entertainment media that is disrespectful toward Islam and Arabic language sources of both policy and what is viewed as propaganda aimed at Islam and Muslims, the result of this rage has become evident with the furor that erupted in late 2005 and early 2006 over cartoons that were printed in a relatively obscure newspaper and media houses in Denmark.²²

Months before that crisis unfolded, the Gallup polling agency asked in a survey of popular attitudes in ten predominantly Muslim countries what the West could do to improve relations with the Muslim world. The single greatest response, at the 47 percent of total respondents, suggested that the west "stop disrespecting Islam and Arabic language" and "stop portraying

¹⁷ Gibbs, P. *Political Discourse and Religious Narratives of Churches and State in Papua New Guinea state*. (London: Manshell. 2005). 55.

¹⁸ Seib, Philip. *The news media and the clash of civilization*. . (2004-2005) Times Books. 155.

¹⁹ Interview of Dr. MamounFandy, Senior Fellow, United States Institute of Peace. April 21,2006.

²⁰ S, Flower. *The struggle to establish Islam in Papua New Guinea* (1976-1983)

²¹ Kuttub, Daoud. *The West and the Arab World: the case of Media*. (Westview press. 2004) 14.

²² Annex I onDanish Cartoon Controversy.

Muslims and its book's language as inferior in its media.²³ The message that Muslims and Arabic speakers are inferior and are being treated as such is conveyed through an increasing ever-present mixture of both news and popular entertaining media.²⁴ It should also be noted that the model of news in much of the Muslim world and many of minority Muslim countries like Papua New Guinea, Japan, Korea and China is controlled by political and social forces. In some places the media is restricted by state sanctioned guidelines that result in narrow portrayals and less diverse array of perspectives and information. There is both more overt official and self-censorship within the media than is found in the West. Elsewhere, government control is easing and there is a new diversity of media outlets.²⁵

However, even in some countries like Papua New Guinea where governments have eased controls, a new phase in the evolution of new media is emerging: While the media is not fully state controlled, it is also not complete free. As individuals and media corporations take over television stations and newspapers from the control of the government information ministries, media content now is often driven by money, ownership, and political power. This is reflected in the significant gap between the costs of independent or semi-free media and the money generated from commercial advertising. For example, the annual cost of operation of all Arab media from Morocco to Oman is 17 billion dollars, while net advertising spending in Gulf States did not exceed 3 billion dollars in 2004.²⁶ In such an environment, there is little opportunity for new media outlets to succeed unless massively subsidized by wealthy individuals, group or governments.²⁷

In some countries where Arabic language where Arabic language is more welcome there is a more established tradition of independent media, such as Southeast Asia like Malaysia and Brunei, or where there has been significant loosening of government control of the media, such as Turkey, similar commercial pressure of those which confront Western media have developed. While the liberalization of press law in Turkey in the 90s has led to the proliferation of print media outlets, the quality of news and information provided by the outlets is arguably worse than it was prior to that process of liberalization²⁸, as papers have raced to attract readers with sensationalist stories and shock-value reporting. As one Papua New Guinea corporate executive said that market competition does not necessarily lead to increased quality and the race to attract viewers or readers in a newly liberalized media environment is often a race to the bottom, not a race to the top.²⁹ Those market forces, both in the West and in some Muslim countries where market forces apply to media, lead directly to more sensationalistic and populist coverage of events. In parts of Muslim world, this populist-oriented programming, broadcast to viewers with strong held perception of victimization and humiliation at the hands of western powers, leads to a nationalistic orientation that which leads Muslims to think of non-Muslims. There is also re-enforcement of anti-Western sentiments, especially anti-Jewish feelings based on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict but now generalized broadly to become a regular theme reflected in the media on many Arabic

²³ "One Billion Muslims voices" Gallup poll of 10,000 total respondents in Egypt, Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Morocco, Indonesia and Nigeria.

²⁴ Kuttub, Daoud. 14.

²⁵ Ibid. 16.

²⁶ Seib, Philip. *The news media and the clash of civilization*. . (2004-2005) Times Books. 158.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid. 159.

²⁹ Kuttub, Daoud. 27.

speaking countries.³⁰ The media's influence is imprecisely quantifiable but undeniable: in Papua New Guinea a Catholic Church commission counted 900 incidents of gross anti-minority inaccuracy, stereotyping and hate speech against Arabic language and Islam reported in four distinct languages national dailies in 2001.³¹ In Papua New Guinea, there are three main television channels and Newspaper companies that are commonly use in attacking Muslims and anything in Arabic language, they are EM TV, National Television Service and Fox News Channel of Papua New Guinea. The newspapers are The Nation, Post Courier, and Papua New Guinea Today.³²

3.0 Conclusions

As explained in this conference paper that, Muslims of Papua New Guinea are facing many challenges of Arabic learning and to eradicate that, and it requires an understanding of the shift of ideological, social, religious, and political forces that are shaping the structure and function of families in Papua New Guinea. Most families in Papua New Guinea are static or monolithic,³³ each family is unique, yet it is a microcosm of the society at large and is reflective of religious, social and political values. The problem facing the learning of Arabic and Islamic studies in Papua New Guinea is to not only to maintain its Islamic identity, but to initiate changes in the social and political arena according to principle contained in the noble Qur'an.³⁴ There are also some other challenges such as those posed by education, the fundamental understanding of Islam, and need for *halal* food and other aspects which is impacted by unfair treatment, and government policy.

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- Barber Benjamin, *Jihad Vs Media*. (1995) Times Books. 17.

³⁰ This evidence by the reluctance of many broadcasters to air talk shows with prominent Jewish figures, and by the criticism faced by those stations, such as al-Jazeera and Arab news, which have taken the lead in presenting talk shows with Jewish guests and commentators.

³¹ Kay, D. *Don't Allow Muslims in our Country*. (2001). Post Courier, 12 October. 57.

³² Kuttab, Daoud. 28.

³³ M.A, Chowdhry. To international Muslims, Re; *Problems facing Islam in Papua New Guinea and the Pacific and request for support*. (2000). 14.

³⁴ Ibid.