

# **Arwi Script of Tamil Language and Jawi Script of Malay Language: Script as Religious Entity and Cultural Heritage**

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## **Abstract**

Script is a means of communicating thoughts, ideas, and concepts. Through this medium, ideas are conveyed from one person to another, from one place to another, and from the past to the present and recorded for the future. The Arab Muslim traders and the native Tamil converts to Islam in Tamil Nadu state of India, and Sri Lanka came into closer contact as a result of their commercial activities. They were bound by a common religion, but separated by two different languages. They felt the necessity for a link language. They started to write Tamil in an adapted Arabic script called as Arwi. The Arwi script represents the Tamil language using an Arabic style of scripts. From eighth century to nineteenth century, this language enjoyed its popularity among Tamil speaking Muslims of Tamil Nadu and Sri Lanka. Like Arwi script of Tamil language, Malay language also employed Arabic based Jawi scripts for their means of communication and writing. The use of Arabic writings put many of Malay scholarly works more productive and accessible to the public. The primary objective of this study is to share their magnificent literary history and the Islamic legacy of Arwi script of Tamil language and Jawi script of Malay language.

Key words: Arwi, Tamil, Jawi, Malay, Arabic, Religious Entity, Cultural Heritage and Muslims

## **1. Arwi Script of Tamil Language**

Arwi is an Arabic-influenced dialect of the Tamil language written with an extension of the Arabic alphabet. Arwi was used extensively by the Muslim minority of Tamil Nadu state of India and Sri Lanka. It is an outcome of the cultural synthesis between seafaring Arabs and Tamil-speaking Muslims of Tamil Nadu.

It was popular in Tamil Nadu and Ceylon. It has a rich body of literature of which little has been preserved. There are historical records of the prevalence of

Arwi in far Eastern countries, such as Indonesia and Thailand, until the 1970s (Zubair 2014, 70).

### **1.1 Islam in Tamil Nadu**

Long before the birth and rise of Islam, there were frequent contacts between Arabia and Tamil Nadu, and there were Arab colonies in South India. The classical Tamil literature, like in the literary works like *Patththu Pattu*, *Ettutthogai*, bears evidence to the Arab contact with Tamil Nadu. After its birth, Islam came to Tamil Nadu and Sri Lanka through these contacts. After the rise of Islam, the Arabs continued to remain actively in contact not only as traders but also as missionaries. So trade and Islam flourished actively and the Muslims were permitted to follow their religion freely. The companions of the Holy Prophet Mohammed (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) namely Saint Tamim al-dari al-Ansari (peace be on him), Saint Ukkaza (peace be on him) were buried in Tamil Nadu ( Zubair 2014, 16).

Tamil Muslims of Tamil Nadu are famous figures and they contributed their best to the Tamil culture and civilization. The rulers of these areas patronized Islam and Muslims to flourish in Tamil Nadu. Some of them even donated lands to places of Muslim worship (Masjid). They include the kings of Chera, Chozha and Pandyas. Muslims built Masjids in various places of this country. The first and foremost among such Masjids is the one which can be seen even today near the railway station in Tiruchirapalli in Tamil Nadu. However, it is now in a dilapidated condition. The Arabic inscription stone available in that Masjid indicates that it was constructed in the year 734 (corresponding 116 AH, Islamic Era), and it was built by Mohammed bin Hamid bin Abdullah. This proves that Muslims lived in this region in the eighth century liberally with all proprietary rights in this land (Zubair 2014 , 15) .

### **1.2 Islam in Sri Lanka**

The Muslims are the second largest minority in Sri Lanka approximating to eight percent of its population. In Sri Lanka, the Arab settlements were along the coast of Jaffna, Mannar, Kendremalai, Puttalam, Colombo, Beruwala, Galle and at the eastern port of Trincomalle. A large population of the Moor population in Sri Lanka is descended from the traders who arrived from Arabia and the lands around the Persian Gulf (Zubair 2016 ; Maharoof 1995,08).

The similarities of the socio-religious paradigms of the Muslims of South India and Sri Lanka are quite enormous. These may be summarized as follows (Maharoof 1995,409).

- a. The home language of Sri Lankan Muslims and those of Tamil Nadu is Tamil.

- b. The Muslim Tamil (spoken at home) in Sri Lanka and Tamil Nadu is a dialect in that it has substantial number of Turko-Perso-Arabic loan words
- c. There are close cultural systems between the Muslims of Sri Lanka and Tamil Nadu
- d. Muslim Missionaries in Tamil Nadu throughout the ages have entered Sri Lanka and helped shape the religious thinking of the Muslims of Sri Lanka. These Muslim missionaries helped in the establishment of Tariqa. Most of the Qadiriyya sub-fraternities in Sri Lanka originate from their headquarters in Kilakarai, Kayalpattanam and Kottaru. Kilakarai and Kayalpattanam are ports in Ramnad and Tirunelveli districts respectively. Kottaru is a town in Tamil Nadu, close to the Kerala state .

### **1.3 Origin of Arwi**

Arwi was used by Arabs who came and settled in Tamil Nadu. The settled Arabs in Tamil Nadu learnt Tamil through Arabic Script and wrote Tamil in Arabic script. It is believed that the origin of Arwi is as old as contact of Arabs with Tamil Nadu (Rahman 1985,23).

Arwi was the product of the cultural synthesis between the Arabs and the Tamil speaking Muslims. It is a combination of Arabic and Tamil, but written in Arabic script. After the advent of Islam the Arabs who already settled down in the area naturally became the representatives of Islam in these areas. In course of time, there were also converts to Islam from among the native population. When two communities, bounded by a common religion but separated by two different languages, came into closer contacts, a result of their commercial activities, they felt the necessity for a link-language. This ultimately gave birth to the Arwi language. Arwi represents the fusion of two great languages, belonging to the great ethnic groups, one being the Semitic-Arabic and the other the Dravidian-Tamil (Zubair 2014, 70 ; Zubair 2016, 03)

### **1.4 Place of origin of Arwi**

The fact that Arwi was prevalent in Colombo, Kayalpattinam, Kilakarai indicates that it was in use, as early as the eighth century of the Christian era (Samuel 275). The Arabs and the Tamil Muslim might have played their role equally in the formation of Arwi. It is the logical result of joint efforts of the Arabs and the Tamil Muslims. It originated in South-West Coast of Ceylon as well as in the South-East Coast of India, more particularly in Kayalpattinam. This language was enriched, promoted and developed in Kayalpattinam. It rendered a most useful service for the advancement and progress of Arab culture and Tamil culture. ( Zubair 2014 ,74 ; Zubair 2016 , 04 ; Zubair 2013 , 110)

### **1.5 Arwi Script**

The Arwi consists of 40 letters, out of which 28 letters are from Arabic and 12 letters are devised by adding some marks and dots to the original Arabic Alphabet. Eighteen Arabic letters do not have their equivalents in Tamil from the phonetic point of view and similarly ten Tamil letters and two vowel sounds have no equivalents in Arabic. Thus the Arwi alphabet is the Arabic alphabet with the devised twelve additional letters to represent the Tamil vowels and several Tamil consonants that could not be mapped to Arabic sounds.(Zubair 2014, 76).

ا ب ت ث ج چ ح خ د دِ دِ ذ ر رِ ز س ش ص صِ ض  
ضِ ط ظ ع غ ف فِ ق ك ل م ن نِ ه و ي

The orthographic practices adopted by the many authors, who wrote in Arwi were not all alike. The consequent variations are noticeable in their writings. In linguistic term the language is composed of more than one set of grammars and vocabularies that a speaker may switch back and forth, depending on the situation. As a written language it employs an invented orthography for a creolized, or mixed, system of speech patterns. The structure and principles of its development are possibly related to similar systems known for other similar Islamic speech and writing systems such as Swahili language of Tanzania of East Africa, Jaawi language of Malaysia and languages of other countries namely Turkey, Uzbek, Berber, Somali and Malay.(Zubair 2014 , 80).

## **2.0 Arwi Script of Tamil Language: Script as Religious Entity and Cultural Heritage**

The following Arabic words, which are used not only in Tamil language, but also in all Indian languages, which are as follows: ‘Amul , Aşal , Dīwān , Ta’luk , Nakal , Mile , Amīna , Munşif , Wakkil, Inam, Sharathu, Maşşūol, Waşşūl, Mirasa, Varisu, Lāyak, Bāqī, Jawābu , Kamm, Jubba , Faişal , Ma’amūl , Maidanam [(Maidan)],...etc. ( Zubair 2014, 73 ; Zubair 2016 ,03).

Again, Tamil words lack the capacity to convey the full significance of the Islamic terms like Rasūl, Saḥābah, Wājib, Jannath, Jahannam, Īmān ,Taqwá etc., (their respective meanings are Messenger, Companions of Holy prophet, Obligatory, Paradise, Hell, belief, Piety...etc). Therefore Arwi words are used in these cases for better expression and understanding. Hence the Tamil Muslims naturally preferred the Arwi Language. The new language was shaped in a manner that retains all the basic aspects of the finest spoken Tamil, and all of its grammatical forms, put on the beautiful garb of the Arabic script. Arabic letters with suitably added diacritical marks were devised.

These words constitute daily conversations among Muslims for example are: Muṣībah, Maut , Janāzah, Rāḥat , Shifā' ,Khair , Ta'līm , Kitāb , Sharbat , Saḥan , Bait , Bi'at , Shirk, Ṭayyib and Ikhilās (Zubair 2014,73; Zubair 2016 ,04)

Four hundred years ago, a particular procedure and a new literary style was adopted in Arwi writing. This new literary style was adopted by Hafiz Amir Wali Appa, a saint of Kayalpattinam. He is considered to be the first person who re-introduced Arwi after the Portuguese devastation in around 1600 (Zubair 2014,82). His tomb is available in the weaver's street, in Kayalpattinam. The style of Hafiz Amir Wali Appa perfected the Arwi to a large extent. Method of its writing and speaking, though existed even before Hafiz Amir Wali Appa, was not systematic. It was purely a colloquial one. Amir Wali was the first man to systematize it. Its literature flourished even in Burma and the Far Eastern countries where the Tamil Muslims lived. A book in Arwi by the name "Haqiqatul Insan" was printed in Rangoon, in 1882. The book contains 174 pages. Three more books were written and published from Akyab, Mohmein of Burma (Presently Myanmar). According to A.M.A. Azeez of Sri Lanka, the Leiden university in Holland has several Arwi books written by Muslims of Tamil Nadu and Sri Lanka. There are Arwi schools functioning on an elaborate scale in Malaysia, Singapore, Burma and Pakistan (Karachi) even today. According to Aziz, out of 15,000 books kept in the Indian Office Library in London, nearly 60 are in Arwi; famous among them are Nondi Nadagam (1872) and Sira Nadagam (1878) .(Zubair 2014 , 82)

The UNO has accepted Arwi as one of the approved languages of the world. "The UNESCO COURIER" published by the UNESCO, in August – September 1981, has published an article on the life of the Holy prophet, written by Mohammed Yaasin (Shuaib 90; Zubair 2014 , 76).

Arwi Periodicals were as follows (Shuaib 1993,103)

- a. Allamat Lankapuri –A Journal which was published in Colombo from 1869.
- b. Ajaibul Akhbar - A Weekly which was published in Madras(Chennai) in 1870's.
- c. Muslim Nesan- A Newspaper which was published in Colombo from 21-12-1882.
- d. Kashfurrān an Qalbil Jan which was published in Colombo from 1889.

The religious revival of the Muslims was made possible because of this voluminous literature in Arwi produced by the Muslim Savants after the devastating cultural onslaught by the Portuguese in this area in sixteenth century. This onslaught took place in 1528 and in 1537. Literature produced in this language covered the fields of Jurisprudence, Sufism, Law, Medicine, and Poetry. Compositions of devotional songs used in certain Islamic ceremonies were originally written in Arwi by their authors. Thalai Fathiha - a well known Arwi song is devotionally sung by women in ceremonies.(Zubair 2014 , 06)

There are thousands of Arwi books on different subjects. Names of the various books on different subjects with their authors are systematically organized, in the Madras Archives Catalogues. These catalogues are maintained from 1890. Periods of the catalogues are as follows: 1890-1901; 1901-1910; 1911-1915 and 1921-25. According to the catalogues, there are more than 3,000 Arwi books. The most important book is Arwi Dictionary in four bulky volumes written by Hakkim Mohammed Abdullah Sahib. This literature helped the Tamil Muslims to know about their religion and their culture. And in a way this literature also made the Arabic literature simpler (Zubair 2016, 14; Samuel 2010, 277).

Arwi served as a medium of transformation of the Muslim Tamil society of Tamil Nadu and Sri Lanka in their daily affairs to write many religious, literary and poetry texts for communication. The Arabu -Tamil script represents the Tamil language (having left-to-right script) using an Arabic style of script (having right-to-left script). The Arwi script was widely used by the Muslim Tamils of Asia for their day-to-day communication. From the eighth century to the nineteenth century, this language enjoyed its popularity among Tamil-speaking Muslims of Tamil Nadu and Ceylon. It continues to enjoy the same popularity with the Muslims of Ceylon even today. The Tamil-speaking Muslims of Ceylon consider this Arwi literature as their most beloved literature. (Rahim 1976,16)

The Muslim communities of Sarandib (Sri Lanka ) and **Tamil Nadu** were able to use this language as an effective shield for the preservation of their cultural identity. They were able to safeguard their culture without sacrificing their religion (Shuaib 1993,91).

### **3.0 Jawi Script of Malay Language**

#### **3.1 Islam in Southeast Asia:**

History shows that Islam expanded in the Malay World through Arab merchants and their trading activities that were carried in the Malay Archipelago in the 10<sup>th</sup> century. Some historians argued and believed that *Jawi* writing was introduced since the 11<sup>th</sup> century. The use of Arabic writings put many of Malay scholarly works more productive and accessible to the public

and Muslims of other continents as well. Thereby, Arabic writing or now known as Jawi script is produced and becomes a vital tool in spreading Islamic knowledge and expanding the Malay cultures. (Abdullah 2017, 391)

### **3.2 Origin of Jawi:**

Jawi alphabet was one of the first alphabets that had been used to write the Malay language since the time of the Pasai Kingdom, until the time of the Sultanates of Malacca, Johor, as well as Aceh and the Sultanate of Patani in the seventeenth century. (Mukti 2017,201)

At the early stage of Islamization, the Arabic script was taught to the people who had newly embraced Islam in the form of religious practices, such as the recitation of Quran as well as in Prayer. It is not too far-fetched to say that the Arabic script was accepted by the Malay community together with their acceptance of Islam and they only took a short time to modify the script and adapt it to suit the spoken Classical Malay – it is written from right to left and has 6 sounds not found in Arabic: *ca pa ga nga va* and *nya*. Many Arabic characters are never used as they are not pronounced in Malay language, and some letters are never joined and some joined obligatorily so.(Johns 1996,36) This was the same for the acceptance of Arabic writing in Turkey, Persia and India which had taken place earlier and thus, the Jawi alphabet was then deemed as the writing of the Muslims. (Mukti 2017,201)

### **3.3 Jawi Script:**

The use of the Jawi alphabet employs the Arabic letter was an effort to implement an Arabic-like writing system in Malay. When we hear people say the word ‘Jawi’, we may be thinking that it immediately refers to one specific area in the Indonesian region, Java. This is actually incorrect as the term ‘Jawi’ in this context refers to Archipelagic area as a whole which includes in this context present-day Malaysia, Indonesia and Southern Thailand. The use of the Roman alphabet was first found in the late 19th century. The Jawi alphabet was the official writings of the Unfederated Malay States under the British colonialism. (Mukti 2017,201)

In 19<sup>th</sup> century, Islamic literature was written in Jawi script and then in dual script (Jawi and Rumi) in 20<sup>th</sup> century. Finally, in 21<sup>st</sup> century, Jawi script has been replaced by a Latin alphabet called Rumi. Current changes had caused Jawi script transformation into Rumi script and its impact felt on the need of Islamic Jawi script in the Islamic writings of this region.



Among the oldest Jawi work in Malay Archipelago is Aqaid al-Nasafi by Syekh Nuruddin al-Raniri. It is a translation work on Aqaid written by Abu Hafs bin Muhammad bin Muhammad Nasafi. The prominent role of Aqaid al-Nasafi in delivering Islamic knowledge is undeniable in the Malay Archipelago since the book discussed the Islamic teaching. In additions, the book contained numerous Islamic fundamentals and Aqeedah which are very important to Muslims daily life. In the early days of Islam of this region, Jawi script also contributed in improving the system of education. With the arrival of Islam, madrasah learning became more organized and systematic. Jawi script helped people to understand more about the pillars of Islam, al-Quran and al-Hadith as both of them are originally in Arabic language. The progression of Jawi writings is in line with the growth of Islam. At the beginning of the 20th century, Malay community has been introduced to various old Jawi magazines. The emergence of magazines like Pengasuh, al-Imam, Saudara, Majlis, Warta Malaya and others gave exposure to the community at that time in various aspects of knowledge in particular, various issues related to Islam, socially, politically and economics. All these magazines were written in Jawi. (Abdullah 2017, 392)

### **3.6 Jawi Magazine:**

Pengasuh is one of the oldest *Jawi* magazine in Malaysia. Pengasuh magazine is founded by Muhammad Yusuf Ahmad or famously known as Tok Kenali. It was published in 1918 by Majlis Agama Islam Kelantan (MAIK) and is still in publication until today. Pengasuh focuses on issues related to religion of Islam. (Abdullah 2017, 393)

## **4.0 Jawi Script of Malay Language: Script as Religious Entity and Cultural Heritage**

In the Muslim tradition, wherever in the world, including in the Malay-Indonesian world, texts occupy an important place. The major teachings of Islam are found in written texts, including the Quran and the hadiths of the Prophet. The Quranic interpretations and interpretations of the hadiths were also put into writing and became to form a multitude of texts in themselves starting with texts on interpretation, jurisprudence, Sufism, theology and other is a multitude of languages as well. All these texts came to form guidelines for a way of living for each Muslim and it is therefore apt to call the Muslim society a 'text society'. Of

course, the script (Arabic) used for these respected texts became respected itself in Muslim society.(Mukti 2017,202)

As for their historical development is concerned, Islam forms the most important factor as Arabic script itself is used for the Quran. It was thus parallel to the intensification of the Islamization process in the area that Jawi alphabet also experienced the top of its immense distribution. (Mukti 2017,202)

Jawi script is considered as the heritage of the Malay people and thus preserving and sustaining the script is vital since it shapes the identity of the Malays and their cultural heritage.The Jawi scripting system had played important roles as a medium to spread Islam and Malay culture enhancements. Towards the end of the 20th century, the Jawi script began to fade away as it was gradually replaced by the Rumi (Roman or Latin alphabet) script that have a very strong influences in the education curriculum system. As a result, not many Malay younger generations know about Jawi alphabet yet again are unable to read or write in Jawi literature. These younger generations no longer fluent in Jawi literature compared to earlier days where everybody were Jawi literate regardless of their age category.(Rahman 2017,01)

Malay community at large to be accustomed with the script while learning their religious teachings mostly written in Arabic and Jawi scripts. Their initiatives were also aimed at enabling Muslim to read the Quran as well. There are a lot of advantages of using Jawi Script in religious writings.

Jawi script has become an integral part of the Malay cultures. This could be seen with the transfer of knowledge from Arabic language into Malay languages and writings thus, resulted in the rapid growth and development of knowledge traditions in the Malay World. Jawi script has evolved through the modernization phases and still become a vital medium in spreading Islam and its knowledge traditions. Malays are known for their traditions and customs that have long been practiced.

Jawi script is more compatible with the Islamic terms which are originated from the Quran and Hadith sources. Jawi script is mostly used in the Southeast Asia compared to other region. It has been used by Malays and even other races. Through Jawi script, Islam also was able to expand in the Malay Archipelago. Malay language and literature also flourished via using the Jawi script. Jawi script played a more important role when it was widely used to write religious books, tales, law and administration. Malay language has been enriched by

terms of Arabic in the knowledge transfer process. This development can be seen not only in the books and literary works during the past eras, but even in daily life and business activities. Through Jawi script, Muslim scholars were encouraged and became more proactive to come up with scholarly works for the benefit of the surrounding Muslim community. Among Muslim scholars that took part in spreading Islam using Jawi writings were Shaikh Hamzah al-Fansuri, Syeikh Nuruddin al-Raniri, Shaikh Shamsuddin al-Sumatra'i and Shaikh Abdul Rauf Ali al-Fansuri al-Singkili. Many other works from Muslim scholars that have been translated to Jawi script such as Tarjuman al-Mustafid, Sirat al-mustaqim, Sayr al-salikin ila 'ibadah rabb al-'alamin, and Warda al-zawahir. The translation is one of the ways to help the Muslim community in Malay Archipelago understanding religious teachings as majority of them are not able to understand Arabic language. The scholarly works have a diversity of content such as Tawheed, Tasawuf, Fiqh, Quran, Hadith, and others. Thus, the role of Jawi is enormous in preaching Islamic values and Islamic fundamentals. (Abdullah 2017, 392)

## **5.0 Conclusion and Remarks:**

Arabic is the language of the Qur'an and Hadith. It is the medium through which the Islamic concepts and laws is conveyed to us. It is impossible to know what Allah wants us to do without knowing and understanding Arabic. Since Islamic law deals with all aspects of life and since the Qur'an and Hadith constitute the foundation of Islamic civilization, any serious study of Islam should include the study of Arabic. Qur'an and Hadith are in Arabic. This is the legacy left behind by the world's greatest minds. Without Arabic we would deprive ourselves of the fruits of almost fourteen centuries of Islamic scholarship. Numerous sciences sprung up after the advent of Islam with the principal aim of preserving and explaining the Primary Islamic Sources. These sciences are still being studied and taught up to today in Islamic institutions and circles around the world – the result is an ever expanding heritage.

Arabic has significant role in disseminating Islamic teaching and Islamic studies in Indonesia. In the past, in addition to using Arabic, many people use the Jawi alphabet. Because, Islamic books were written in Jawi alphabet in Malay. Unfortunately, nowadays this Jawi alphabet is no longer taught to the younger generation. (Mukti 2017,199)

The role of Arwi and Jawi scripts are very influential in Islamic discourse and Islamic knowledge. Muslims are no longer need to rely on Arabic books solely to learn the beliefs and so on. Arwi and Jawi manuscripts are used as a new platform to have a deeper understanding of Islamic guidance for local communities. These writings became the helpful hand for the Muslim community in learning Islamic knowledge as compared to the students in Islamic studies. These writings provide them very useful insights to the Muslim community in adhering to the faith of Islam and Islamic fundamentals.

The valuable and useful ideas of Muslim minds in Tamil Nadu state of India, Sri Lanka; Southeastern Asian regions namely Malaysia, Indonesia and Thailand were conveyed in Arabicized Scripts called Arwi and Jawi. These two scripts rendered a most useful service for the advancement and progress of Arab, Malay, Indonesian, Thai and Tamil cultures. However, the beginning of the twentieth century saw the decline of Arwi and Jawi scripts. And no step was taken to arrest their decline.

Arwi and Jawi scripts, which are flourished during the medieval ages saw their decline from the beginning of the twentieth century. In the Globalizational Era, no step was taken to arrest this decline of these scripts which had the Asia based cultural and historical background. Today, these scrips did not receive much attention in the later part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. English replaced them in many contexts.

In the system of modern education, Muslim children failed to learn Arwi and Jawi scripts, as these scripts are out of the school curriculum. These Islamic scripts safeguarded the interest of these communities. These are fondly and reverently nurtured by noble savants. Therefore, these two scripts' necessity must be felt by the present Tamil Muslims of India, Sri Lanka, Middle and Southern Asia and Muslims of Southeastern Asia namely Malaysia, Indonesia and Thailand community. Their revival and renaissance is badly needed. The following steps are suggested to arrest their decline and revitalize these scripts for the cultural benefit of the Tamil and Malay Muslim Communities:

- a. All the Arwi and Jawi books available should be collected and re-printed. Unpublished manuscripts also should be collected and printed
- b. Arwi and Jawi languages should be made compulsory in all the *Madrasahs* of Tamilnadu and Sri Lanka; and also in the Pesantren of Southeastern regions of Asia.

- c. These scripts must be taught to children attending schools as a part of school curriculum.
- d. These communities must be encouraged to use these scripts in their daily affairs.
- e. Periodicals and magazines in these languages should be re-introduced.

With these measures taken we may witness the period of renaissance in Arwi and Jawi literatures in the years to come.

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