

# Spirit of Bosnia / Duh Bosne

An International, Interdisciplinary, Bilingual, Online Journal  
Međunarodni, interdisciplinarni, dvojezični, online časopis

## Arebica in Bosnia - Short Notes and One Review: From the Treasury of Bosnian Authentic Syncretism

Adnan Tufekčić

Arebica is a name for Arabic script adjusted to the vocal system of Bosnian and other Slavic languages, usually closely tied to Bosnian Aljamiado literature. It started to develop from the very beginning of arrival of the Ottomans in Bosnia and represents the aspiration of Bosnian people to write and to read in their native language. This language was called Bosnia always, regardless of its different scripts (Bosancica,<sup>1</sup> Arebica, Latin, Cyrillic) which were used in certain periods, individually and/or in parallel, by their speakers. Rizvic (1999, 28) says the following about this:

From the duality of scripts, Bosancica and Arebica, it can be concluded that the Bosnian language had not presented a problem of *speaking* for Bosnian Muslims, because they were born in it, spoke and wrote in that language - in Bosancica and even more in Arebica. The problem was in script that was supposed to be used for writing, printing and reading and to bring them into the new era of their renaissance... With that regard, Arebica both in handwriting and especially in printing, considered to be a Muslim script for Bosnian language of Bosnian Muslims, had represented a significant transitional phase in literacy and culture.

Arebica underwent numerous transformations in Bosnia with reference to the modality of the adjustment of Arabic graphemes to the phonetic structure of Bosnian language.

<sup>2</sup> Therefore, the arrival of Ottomans in the area of Bosnia signifies a period of the very amply creativity of Bosnian people in Arabic, Turkish and Persian language. <sup>3</sup> As a part of that creative process, works created were very frequently signed by their authors as *bosnevi* (Bosnian) or *sekalib* (Slav). At the same time, as the need and desire to write in the Bosnian language grew, a script started to be created from Arabic and Persian harps (letters), to be used for the implementation of this need and desire. Since Arebica is visibly different from the phonetic structure of our language, there were several attempts at its adjustment. The person who did much in this regard was Omer Humo, and the final shape to this script was established by Džemaludin Čaušević. It is important to highlight that this model of Arebica, whose author was Čaušević, was sometimes called (it is still called in some places today) "*matufica*",

“*matufovaca*” as well as ‘mektebica’. These determinations of Arebica are derogatory names for this script and are primarily associated with attacks against Čaušević. For that reason, this alphabet should be called its real name, *Arebica*, and names, such as *matufica* or *matufovaca*, should be taken as derogatory names.

Aljamiado literature, written in Arabic, is an important Bosnian cultural phenomenon that warrants special attention. Moreover, it is important to mention that there has been a significant effort to have religious education textbooks written in Bosnian.<sup>4</sup> In this context, several creators can be singled out, such as Muhamed Uskufi, Abdulah Bošnjak, Muhamed Erdeljac, Hasan Kaimija, Osman Sugli Ilhamija (Abdulvehab Ilhami), Fejzo - softa, Ehem Čatić, Omer Hazim Humo, Ahmed Arsinović Zirai, Hamza Sulejman Puzić, Abdulah Bjelavac, Muharemaga Dizdarević (Muhamed Ruzdi). In *Arebica* wrote, as Lamija Hadžiosmanović (1971) points out, “the first Bosnian Muslim poet”, Umihana Čuvidina Sevdā.<sup>5</sup> She wrote her poems in Arabic letters and in Bosnian language. This means that she knew one form of Arebica. Her life ended the same year when Čaušević was born (1870). This information is important because Umihana Čuvidina wrote in Arabic letters, in her own language, long before the final shaping of Arebica by Čaušević, in the form it has remained to this day.

The mention of all these writers in this paper does not aim at any special treatment of aljamiado literature. This goes beyond the intentions of this paper and certainly the possibilities and abilities of its author. We are of the opinion that it is simply necessary to briefly recall the work of thinkers, poets and writers who created in Bosnian language and in Arabic script (*Arebica*), to point out the importance of the appearance of this script in the cultural history of Bosnia and, in the context of authentic Bosnian syncretism, to draw attention to this unusual fact that this letter, which is being used today as well as in the time of Čaušević, gets belittled by giving it another name “*matufica*” or “*matufovaca*.” (These names have been derived from the Turkish work *matuh* or *matuf* which means *senile, silly, aged, forgetful*.)<sup>6</sup> Calling *Arebica* these names (as something that reminds one of a person who is senile, silly or forgetful) by those who called this script these names, had only one intention, and that was to belittle Čaušević’s efforts to reform Arabic and make it receptive to use by as many people as possible, especially in the field of religious education.<sup>7</sup> In this way, *Arebica* represented, as already mentioned at the beginning of this paper, a very important “transitional stage of literacy and culture.” Namely, with the arrival of the Austro-Hungarian administration in Bosnia, a large number of people were considered illiterate due to their ignorance of the Latin alphabet, while they wrote and read very successfully in their own language, albeit in *Arebica*. Čaušević’s form of *Arebica* paved the way for other letters (Latin, Cyrillic). While the work of Džemaludin Čaušević received many approvals, it was also attacked and ridiculed. Part of the resistance to his work is the use of derogatory names for *Arebica* “*matufica*” or “*matufovaca*”. Unfortunately, among contemporary authors who write about *Arebica*, we still come across these names as a substitute for the name *Arebica*, and there is almost a complete equivalence of these names. That this should not be the case is indicated by the following short theses, which are also short reminiscences:

- Despite the very rich and significant work in Oriental languages, there was a

constant need for local writers and poets to create in their Bosnian language.

- As early as the 15th century, many works started to be written in Arabic script, Turkish (i.e. Ottoman Turkish) and Persian script, but in Bosnian language. This language started to be called "lisani bosnevi" (Bosnian Language), and the script started to be called Arebica.
- The appearance of Arebica was also associated with the appearance of aljamiado literature which is important because of its role in preserving the language and identity of the Bosnian people within the Ottoman Empire.
- Aljamiado literature was very widespread and popular in all parts of Bosnia, and there were a considerable number of authors who created and wrote in Arebica.
- Arebica has changed its form over time (depending from author to author), but it always retained its name Arebica, regardless of how some of these authors adapted the script of Oriental languages to the phonetic structure of Bosnian language.
- Thanks to Arebica, the first women poets appeared who did not know Oriental languages, but wrote in their own language.
- The printing of religious textbooks, with the use of various forms of Arebica, enabled the education of a large number of young people. In Bosnia, there are still grandmothers and grandfathers reciting different 'ilahija' or 'hikaje' songs and poems that they learned and read in Arebica script, because, at that time, that was the only script they knew.
- The final form of Arebica was determined by Džemaludin Čaušević, after which a large number of books and papers started to be published in Arebica, and only later those same books began to be printed in Latin script;
- Regardless of the period in which the works were written, regardless of its form the authors used, and regardless of researchers' commentaries who have dealt with this subject, these literary works in this letter were called Arebica. No other name has been recorded anywhere, except where there were attacks on Čaušević. Only in those cases was this script is called *matufica* or *matufovaca* and placed under quotation marks.

Arebica has found its place in one long continuity, and its role in the development and survival of the Bosnian language as the language of the Bosnian people is important. It is as well an invaluable exemplification of authentic Bosnian syncretism.

### **Literature:**

Bajrektarević, F. (1962) *Dubrovačka arebica*, Beograd

Brdar, M. (1985) *Reforma osnovnog muslimanskog školstva u Bosni i Hercegovini*, Islamska misao, Br. VII (83), Sarajevo.

Doubt, K. & Tufekčić, A. (2018). *Ethnic and National Identity in Bosnia and Hercegovina: Kinship and Solidarity in a Polyethnic Society*. Lanham.

Hadžijahić, M (1990) *Od tradicije do identiteta*, Zagreb

Hadžiosmanović, L (1971) *Umihana Čuvidina-prva bosanska pjesnikinja muslimanka*, Glasnik VIS-a, 11-12: 655-657, Sarajevo.

Handžić, M. (1934) *Književni rad bosanskohercegovačkih muslimana*, Sarajevo.

Hasan, I. (1980) *Danteovski motiv u jednoj muslimanskoj pjesmi*, Glasnik VIS-a, 5: 303, Sarajevo.

Huković, S, Kasumović, A., Smailović, I. (1990) *Muhamed Hevai Uskufi*, Tuzla.

Kemura, I. (1969) *Prva štampana knjiga arebicom na našem jeziku*, Glasnik VIS-a, 5-6: 208-223, Sarajevo.

Muftić, T. (1969) *O arebici i njenom pravopisu*, Prilozi za orijentalnu filologiju sv. XIV - XV, 101-102, Sarajevo.

Rizvić, M. (1996) *Bosna i Bošnjaci jezik i pismo*, Sarajevo.

Sokolović, A. O. (1959) *Pregled štampanih djela na srpskohrvatskom jeziku muslimana BiH 1878-1948*, Sarajevo.

Škaljić, A. (1989) *Turcizmi u srpskohrvatskom jeziku*, Sarajevo

Traljić, M. (1976) *Hadži Mehmed Džemaludin Čaušević*, Glasnik VIS-a, 5: 221-225, Sarajevo.

## Notes

1. Bosnian Cyrillic, widely known as Bosančica is an extinct variant of the Cyrillic alphabet that originated in medieval Bosnia ↵
2. More about phrases on Arebica development see at: Muftić, T. (1969) *O arebici i njenom pravopisu*, Prilozi za orijentalnu filologiju sv. XIV - XV, Sarajevo. ↵
3. More information available with: Nametak, F. (1989) *Pregled književnog stvaranja bosansko-hercegovačkih muslimana na turskom jeziku*, Sarajevo.; Ljubović, A., Grozdanić, S. (1995) *Prozna književnost Bosne i Hercegovine na orijentalnim jezicima*, Sarajevo.. ↵
4. See more at: Hasan, I. (1980) *Danteovski motiv u jednoj muslimanskoj pjesmi*, Glasnik VIS-a, 5: 303, Sarajevo; Huković, S, Kasumović, A., Smailović, I. (1990) *Muhamed Hevai Uskufi*, Tuzla; Kemura, I. (1969) *Prva štampana knjiga arebicom na našem jeziku*, Glasnik VIS-a, br. 5-6, str. 208-223, Sarajevo; Sokolović, A. O. (1959) *Pregled štampanih djela na srpskohrvatskom jeziku muslimana BiH od 1878-1948*; Handžić,

- 
- M. (1934) *Književni rad bosanskohercegovačkih muslimana*, Sarajevo; Bajrektarević, F. (1962) *Dubrovačka arebica*, Beograd. ↵
5. Hadžiosmanović, L (1971) *Umihana Čuvidina-prva bosanska pjesnikinja muslimanka*, Glasnik VIS-a, 11-12: 655-657, Sarajevo. ↵
6. Škaljić, A. (1989) *Turcizmi u srpskohrvatskom jeziku*, str. 449, Sarajevo. ↵
7. Vidjeti više u: Brdar, M. (1985) *Reforma osnovnog muslimanskog školstva u Bosni i Hercegovini*, *Islamska misao*, VII (83), Sarajevo; Traljić, M. (1976) *Hadži Mehmed Džemaludin Čaušević*, Glasnik VIS-a, 5: 221-225, Sarajevo; Hadžijahić, M. (1990) *Od tradicije do identiteta*, Zagreb. ↵

The preceding text is copyright of the author and/or translator and is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Unported License.