

## **BINDING STYLES OF QUR'ĀN MANUSCRIPTS PRODUCED IN THE SUBCONTINENT FROM 14<sup>TH</sup> TILL 18<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY C.E.**

**SAIMA SYED**

(Taxila institute of Asian civilization)  
Quaid-i-Azam University, Islamabad, Pakistan  
Email: [sarisyed@yahoo.com](mailto:sarisyed@yahoo.com)

This study within the framework of codicology, deals with almost 400 samples of the Qur'ān's binding. The samples are to be put in the chronological frame between 14<sup>th</sup> till 18<sup>th</sup> century C.E. The significance of this study is to highlight the hybrid techniques and design of binding as well as to project the Qur'ān manuscript collection of Ganjbkhsh Library (GBL) Islamabad. These manuscripts belong to different regions of the Subcontinent, Iran and Afghanistan. The basic objective of binding is to protect written testament of religious manuscripts and official documents. These bindings are often distinctive in colour combination, techniques, materials and designs. The famous centres of book binding in 15<sup>th</sup> century were Tabriz, Baghdad, Shiraz and Herat that influenced the Indian artisan's work. It is noticed that, highly illuminated manuscript of the Qur'ān has well designed/decorated cover (binding).

**Keywords:** Qur'ān, Manuscript, Ganjbakhsh, Library, Binding.

### **Introduction**

Islamic art and crafts gained importance in Egypt, Persia, Turkey, India (India, Pakistan, Kashmir and Bengal), Spain, Indonesia and China. One faith binds the whole Muslim world notwithstanding the differences of land, language, race and culture. This common faith provided one path, where they assimilate and amalgamate the different cultural values. The visual representation of mixed cultural elements exposes the close bonding of Muslim areas.

Geographical boundaries and variations in climate affect the art materials, techniques and attributes of artisan work, but not faith or commitment towards religion. Sacred text is always to be protected, covered and beautified in every faith and religion.

Binding is a protective cover of a book and necessary to ensure its long life. Only a skilled person can do this job efficiently. Many techniques are employed for better presentation of a book. The Qur'ān bindings of 14<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> centuries are not identical to each other due to regional and different cultural art elements. Sometimes binding suggests the category of the patronage of royalty, religious scholars and common man depending on the quality and variety of expensive and inexpensive material used in it. Different materials leather, paper, board, cloth, jewels, colours and precious metals are also used for the illumination of the binding of the Holy Qur'ān. Illuminated bindings are not associated only for the Muslim community. It was an art practised even before the advent of Islam.

### **Background of Muslim bookbindings and binders**

The pages of the Qur'ān were kept in two wooden boards at the time of Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ). The Qur'ān in the book form, carrying the name of the scribe (Zaid bin Thabit) is also found<sup>1</sup>. Historians see the Persian influence on Arab society in art forms. However, Arnold and Grohman in “The Islamic book” say that ‘the Abyssinians claimed the credit for having introduced the codex to the Arabs’.

As regards the use of leather in binding, Persians had established tanneries in present Yamen’s capital San'a. Taif was famous for binding and Yamen for red kid leather production. Egyptian leather trade was flourishing in the beginning of the 13<sup>th</sup> century C.E. and became famous for Arab binding during Mamlük period. Leather work/binding was known west of Spain, Maghrib (North Africa), by the 12<sup>th</sup> century C.E.

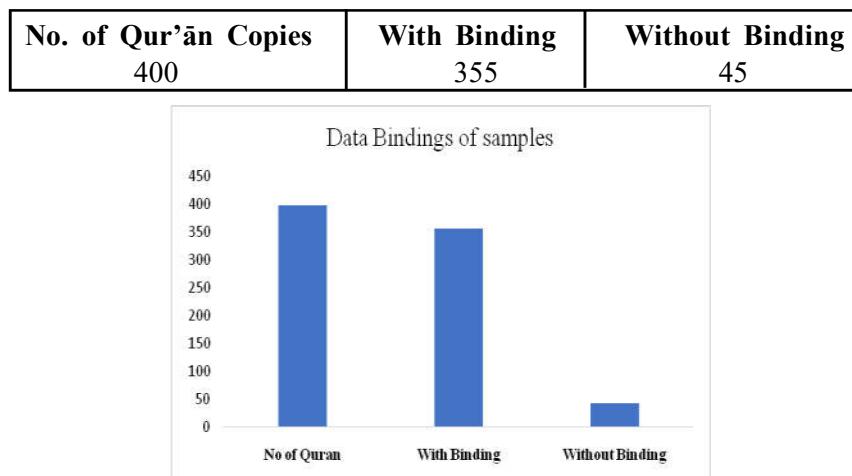
The tradition of book binding spread in the entire Muslim world. Bound books were expensive but gained acceptance during Abbasid Empire<sup>2</sup> (750-1258 C.E.). Al-Muqaddasi (946-991), a medieval Arab geographer, author, scribe, bookbinder and merchant, also worked as binder to make fortune. He used to charge two gold dinars for the binding of a copy of the Qur'ān in the Yamen. It was very high price which was paid to him for binding work. Binder’s work gained importance under the patronage of the ruling class. Bookbinder Ibn Abi Al Harish was associated with the library of Al-Māmūn (813-833).

In the fifteenth century Timurid period binders presented their work in an innovative way, cut work, foliage design and gilding were on top score. Dūst Muhammd (sixteenth century painter and calligrapher), Ustad Qiwaim al Din of Tabriz (the inventor of the cut work pattern), Kamal al Din and Abd al Wahhab (both associated to the royal library of Shah Tahmasp), Mahmud Chelbi (a Turkish chief book binder among his family members at the time of Sultan Selim I) were famous in the history of the trade of book binding. In the 19th century in Madinah excellent board's preparation for binding and repairing is attributed to Haji Saeed Efendi<sup>3</sup>.

A cultural exchange programme existed among the nations since ancient times. Skills or techniques in art work were passed on from generation to generation and travelled from one country to another. Skilled persons were considered as for the clan, civilization and countries, they belonged to. In India, all forms of Muslim art and craft, especially the art of book binding, were highly influenced by the Persian style.

As Haldane mentions in the "Islamic book binding" in 16<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> century C.E. that all leather bindings from Ulwar, an important east-west trade rout in seventeenth century, and Rajputana were true replicas of Persian style<sup>4</sup>. Kashmiri artisan travelled to Samarqand to learn the techniques of book binding during Sultan Zain al Abdin's regime. This serves as an evidence of cultural relations between the Samarqand and Kashmir. Delhi, Lahore, Bengal and Kashmir were the main centres for paper production as well as book binding.

**Table 1 Data GBL Samples of the Qur'ān**



Bar graph 1, showed difference between the covered (binding) and uncovered (without binding) samples of the Qur'ān.

GBL samples indicate that many covers have been changed due to deterioration, but not restored to their original form. These changed covers created problems for the investigators/researchers, in dating and chronological study of the manuscript. Table 1 explaines the total numbers of samples, with bindings and without bindings. Samples, with binding are 88.75 %and 11.25% without binding, however, roughly estimated at 10% to 15% out of 88.75%, have no original cover and have been changed by the owner/library due to decay.

### **Binding styles and tools**

A variety of tools were used for the ornamentation of the book bindings. Compass and rulers were the main tools used in the design, making for the Arabic style of book bindings. Different types of cutters, hammers, nails and stamps were used for the cover decoration. Leather<sup>1</sup> is the main surface for decor. For embossed design, sometimes artisans used heated tools on the damped surface of leather. Stamp<sup>2</sup> tools are the pattern (of foliage, lines and texture) to create the design on the surface. In the 16<sup>th</sup> to 17<sup>th</sup> century (C.E.) panel stamps and the central square, rounded/oval shape were very common in Islamic bindings (Figure 1, 2). Narrow repeating borders were done by means of a roller.

Different techniques were used for the binding purpose, which included blind tooling (Figure. 2), doublure<sup>3</sup>, Coptic leather work, Lacquer<sup>4</sup>, filigree gilding with gold and silver on leather surface, wood and papier mache (figure. 1), etc. Use of parchment and textile in binding is also examined<sup>5</sup>. Coloured paper and marbling techniques on paper add to the beauty in binding decoration. It was done in many bindings of the Qur'ān (selected samples) at the outer surface of binding as well as inside the cover<sup>6</sup>. In the Muslim art, there are three types of bookbinding which include box book binding, binding with flap and without flap.

---

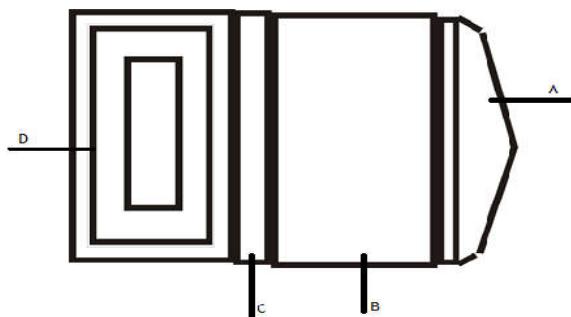
1. Goat skin and hair sheep skin was preferable material for Islamic book bindings.
2. It is engraved design on wooden block or metal, pressed by hammer or hand pressure. It was associated to Persians but found in earlier Arabic bindings, it was also in practiced by the Mamluk artists.
3. It was a kind of protection and covering the inner part of the book board.
4. This technique was also applied outer as well as for inner boards of the binding.

**Fig 1:**

Source: GBL. This image is also the part of M.Phil dissertation of Saima Syed 2015. A small size . Papier mache Filigree binding without a flap of the Qur'ān 10071. A medallion is placed in the centre of the page and two pendent at the top and bottom enhance the beauty of the center piece.

### **Binding with flap**

Muslim binders introduced the flap, which distinguished their work from the art of others. It was attached to the back of a cover and placed on the front cover. It would protect them from dust. The size of the flap depended upon the size of the cover (mostly one third of the width of the cover at top and bottom). It was like an envelope which is made of three structural works. Boards which are covered with two leathers are made from hard sheet or pasteboards to make the back and the front cover of the book. A leather spinal column is used to hold these cover boards together as one.

**Drawing No 1:**

Style of Leather binding with flap of the Qur'ān No. 10069, A: flap, B: Back, C: Middle joint, D: Front of the binding (Drawing is created on the software Coral Draw 9)

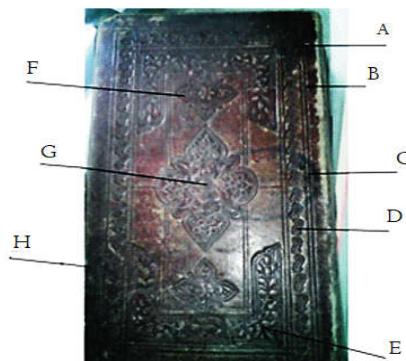
A flap envelope is attached to the back cover which is folded towards the front cover. This flap is used as a bookmark as well. The book readers used to put it under the text block to demarcate the pages after finishing the session of reading. Such type of binding was present in the ancient manuscript of Holy Qur'an in horizontal format.

Gradually, with the passage of the time these disappeared as the horizontal format was transformed into the vertical format<sup>7</sup>. The box is easily made but it is not durable. Its flaps are delicate and need to be repaired frequently. This type of binding is decorated by creating patterns, designs or by placing a string under the covering leather.

### Binding without flap

This binding has three main parts, front, back and spine. This style of book is very common nowadays, mostly light weighted books are designed in this style.

Cover is illuminated with floral patterns enclosed within frames. Outer borders are filled with a repeating pattern of flowers. It is also made with three structural components front, back and joint. This glossy cover was produced in 1688 a late 17<sup>th</sup> century manuscript of binding style. The motif in the middle is bigger than the top and lower pattern. This Indo-Iranian style is also famous in Turkey. Outer frame filled with flower lace design highlighted the central frame of the binding. It also resembles the inside design of a Qur'an manuscript, as first pages are decorated with floral motifs in the form of lace work which enclosed the text box.



**Fig 2:**

Leather binding with stamp tooling without gilding/embossed on leather of the Qur'an No. 10069, Source GBL, this image was used in M.Phil dissertation of Saima Syed, 2015.

- A. Panel one enclosed with ruled frame.
- B. Ruled frame.
- C. Double line to enclose the panel design.
- D. The small letter "a"/ mirror impact of "S" shape motif or foliage pattern in simple repeat.
- E. Beautiful lace work in symmetrical corner of upper and lower portion.
- F. Pendent located at the upper and lower portion of the central medallion.
- G. Medallion filled with different patterns of the foliage.
- H. Four petal flower.

The design of binding is filled with lace work, foliage and a box filled with leaf design. Central motif is followed up, top to bottom, two small motifs filled with flower and leaves add the beauty of the cover layout.

### **Conclusion**

Inclusive material, techniques and design made the book binding industry in the Subcontinent progressive and alive. To maintain the quality of leather, leather industry met the local demand. Leather was not only used for home utensils, clothings, tents, etc., but also for the bindings of valuable books especially religious books (the Qur'ān). Leather industry flourished in many cities of Subcontinent (Indo-Pakistan).

A cover of the Holy Book is prepared by the processed leather which may be simple and sometimes with added sheen. The study indicates that leather is used in more than 90 % samples of Qur'ān bindings. That is a very higher in percentage when compared to other materials used in the craft. There are two main reasons for it. Firstly, leather is processed and is an expensive material, it can be coloured and gilded, stamped, embossed and tooled (that's why it is preferable to other material). Secondly, it can be treated in many ways to make it durable. Papier mache, marbling and different types of textile are also used for binding, but not sustainable in a variety of seasons that Pakistan has. Colours of leather, mostly for Qur'ān bindings are red, maroon, brown, blue and black. Red and brown were fashioned in Mughul period Qur'ān binding (18<sup>th</sup> century Qur'ān). Style of binding is very simple like simple floral motif with geometrical shapes. In the 14<sup>th</sup> to 17<sup>th</sup> century bindings were based on experimental work of artists, cultural influences and progressed style was a hybrid.

### Acknowledgement

Thanks to Director Iranian culture centre, Dr. Abu Turab and organizers of GBL (Ganjkhsh library), who provided me sufficient data. Special thanks to my thesis supervisor Dr. Rafiullah for his guidance and moral support.

### Notes And References

1. Martin Levey, "Mediaeval Arabic Book Binding and its Relation to Early Chemistry and Pharmacology, *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society*, Philadelphia, 1962, p. 5.
2. *Ibid*, p. 6.
3. Gulnar Bosch, Jhon Carswell and Guy Ptherbridge, "Islamic book & book binding", Chicago, 1981, p. 6.
4. Duncan Haldane, "Islamic Book Bindings". The World of Islam Festival Trust, London, 1983, ISBN 0 905035322.
5. Francois Deroche, "Islamic Codicology": An Introduction to the Study of Manuscripts in Arabic Script, London: Al-Furqan Islamic Heritage Foundation, 2006.
6. Shela. S, Blair, Colour and Gold: The Decorated Papers Used in Manuscripts in Later Islamic Times, *Muqarnas*, 2000, vol. XVII, pp. 24-36.
7. Shela. S, Blair, *Islamic Calligraphy*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2006.

### Bibliography

#### PRIMARY SOURCE

Ranjha, Muhammad .N, *Catalogue of the Manuscript of Qur'an-I-Majid in the Ganjkhsh Library*. Iran-Pakistan Institute of Persian studies, Islamabad, Pakistan, Manza printing corporation, 1993.

#### SECONDARY SOURCE

Bosch and Carswell, "Islamic book & book binding". Chicago, 1981.

Blair, Shela. S, Colour and Gold: The Decorated Papers used in Manuscripts in Later Islamic Times. *Muqarnas* 17, no. 1, 2000, pp. 24-36.

Blair, Shela. S, "Islamic Calligraphy". Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006.

Deroche, Francois, "Islamic codicology": An Introduction to the Study of Manuscripts in Arabic Script. London, Al-Furqan Islamic Heritage Foundation, 2006.

Haldane, Duncan, "Islamic Book Bindings". London, The World of Islam Festival Trust, 1983.

Levey, Martin, "Mediaeval Arabic Book Binding and its Relation to Early Chemistry and Pharmacology, *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society*, Philadelphia 52, no. 4 (1962), pp. 1-79.