

# **Chapter I**

## **The Language & Development of Hymns**

- 1. Coptic language .**
- 2. The script of Egyptian language.**
- 3. The stages of development of the Egyptian language.**
- 4. The Church role in spreading the use of Coptic script.**
- 5. Etymology of the name “Copt”.**

## **1- Coptic Language**

Before talking about the Coptic hymns and delving into their spirituality, music and history, I would talk a little about the language of these hymns.

The word and the tune have been closely connected since the very beginning to such an extent that one cannot determine which of them began first. Being myself in favor of music, I say “Certainly tunes began first, then they sought words that would apply to them. But some would say, "Nay. Words began first, took the form of poetry, and sought tunes to give them sense".

Plutarch, in a treatise entitled “Predictions of Pythie the Fortune Teller” says, “It seems that the use of language is subject to change just like money. For each of these has different values in the different epochs. For man accepts only that which is known and familiar”.<sup>1</sup>

Actually Plutarch’s words are true from the secular point of view. But of course the case is different when we speak about such a language as that of the Coptic hymns, for these are the basic pillar of the church rituals . The main reason is that the Coptic hymns chanted in this language have never changed along ages as in the case of money or of the songs of other nations or of dealings.

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<sup>1</sup> Scholars of the French expedition- Music and singing of ancient Egyptians, Description of Egypt- translated by Zoheir El Shayeb, El Shayeb Publishing House, Seventh Book,P.46

Therefore, if we deal with the Coptic language as other languages, thinking as some people so, that it is no more in use and unknown to many, this will be the real danger. For this wrong concept will spread, many will accept it, and the Coptic language will disappear gradually. As a result, hymns will be translated into Arabic and will be distorted. The Arabic Alphabet will not be able to bear such a heavy burden as the Coptic hymn. It will be no more a Coptic hymn, but rather an Arabic hymn! An irrelevant title indeed! Because they still bear the name “Coptic” while they have become Arabic.

### **Translating the Coptic hymns into Arabic:**

I, personally, reject completely the idea of arabicizing the Coptic hymns for the following reasons:

1. Translating hymns into Arabic, on one side, distorts the musical characteristics of the hymn, and imposes on the Arabic words the melody which was not intended for such words. So we find a new tune emerging from unequal combination. The hymn is separated from its Coptic words with which it has melt through the Holy Spirit for more than two thousand years. Then it was attached, forcibly, to foreign Arabic words for no reason but ignorance of Coptic language. Moreover, there was no desire to preserve this language or to exert the least effort to learn it.

We have a similar example, the attempt of a large group of artists to translate the Operas of the renowned musician Mozart into Arabic. This attempt faced sharp criticism from many critics because it distorted the

melody introducing words and subjecting them forcibly to the tune. As a result, the transparent tunes which this composer formulated became obscure and weighed down with the burden of the words which could not absorb them.

Dr. El Sanfawy explained, “The universal songs now popular are those which keep their original text and form. Though redistributed and translated into different languages, the original text of the composer is the most important. For instance:

although the Italian language is the most beautiful language in which the world operas were composed, CARMEN by George Bizet, which he composed from the original French context, is considered much better when listened to in French than in Italian. The same applies to German Operas.”

Actually, If those people were so cautious about their songs which merely reflect their own feelings, should we not be cautious about our Coptic hymns which represent, our spiritual past, present and future in eternity.

2. The process of translating these hymns into Arabic usually take place without any musical or spiritual background. This brings forth a completely different hymn- even musically-wise from the original text. Let us take for example the hymn “Hitenne Presvia” which was translated into Arabic: with the intercession of the Lord’s mother, the tune is completely different from the tune of the original hymn. The tune of the Arabic text does not begin with the repeated tone which reflects the persistent request for forgiveness

through the intercession of the holy Virgin Mary. Nor does it express the bowing down when uttering the names of the Holy Trinity, nor does it slow down when introducing “the Praise Sacrifice” to reveal the accuracy in choosing the sacrifice so that it might be like the sacrifice of Abel not like that of Cain.

Likewise the tunes do not rise up high and sharp to declare that the sacrifice which is being introduced on the heart altar has ascended unto heaven, to the heavenly Father to smell it exactly as He smelled His Only-Begotten Son’s sacrifice offered on the Golgotha in the evening.

Actually these beautiful spiritual meanings are lost in the Arabic words, whereas the Coptic text has revealed them all in a short hymn taking only one minute.<sup>2</sup>

From this example of the hymn “Hitenne Presvia” and other hymns translated into Arabic, we conclude definitely such a translation causes a radical change in the musical and spiritual formation of the hymn. This certainly spoils the spiritual meaning which the early fathers intended to convey through melodies of these hymns.

3. If the aim of translating hymns into Arabic is to make the congregation understand what they pray, there are actually many other ways to achieve this aim. Translation is perhaps the easiest way, but why should we use it since it spoils the spirituality and the music of the hymn making it difficult to comprehend?

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<sup>2</sup> refer to chapter 6 “Explanation and Contemplation ...” for more details.

Why do we not for example teach the Coptic language in all churches and in Sunday Schools regularly for a quarter of an hour to teach youths and children the rules of this language? Why do we not allocate a short period in all the spiritual meetings for teaching this language to the attendants?

We would like to mention here the leading attempt of Dr. Emile Maher the Professor at the Seminary (now reverend father Shenouda Maher), to teach the Coptic language. This attempt could have applied to many places, but for the difference of accent he teaches i.e. “the Old Coptic” from the accent used in all learnt hymns of the church. This attempt of Dr. Emile faced hard opposition from many who were keen on maintaining the present accent pure from confusion, seeing that the present accent is that handed down to the cantors from their predecessors.

However, Dr. Emile is of the opinion that the modern Coptic accent is the fruit of significant mistake that caused much harm to the Coptic language. This modern accent -as Dr. Emile says- has been created by cantor Erian Guirgis Mofteh, about the year 1858 A.D. the reason of the difference is that cantor Erian applied the modern Greek sounds to the Coptic words. But the old pronunciation inherited from our forefathers is the correct one; the nearest to our genuine language.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> see Dr. Emile Maher “The Old Bohairic Coptic Pronunciation- History and Preference” part 1, 1978 A.D.

I would remind the readers here of Pope Kyrillos IV who gave much practical care to the Coptic language. He formed a committee in order to write a text book for teaching such a language. Furthermore, he commanded introducing it among the curricula of the Coptic schools. Thereafter, he appointed cantor Erian Guirgis Mofteh as teacher of Coptic. That is why Pope Kyrillos IV was called “the Father of Reform” history testifies to him also that he restituted the Coptic sound to its origin after having deviated a little and words mingled. Moreover, to support Coptic studies, His Holiness chose one of El-Azbakia St. Mark Church priests: Hegumen Thekla, to teach church hymns and melodies to students with melodious voice so that prayers would ascend before the divine throne in attractive harmonious tones.

Why should we not put a plan for teaching the Coptic language within the Christian Religion Curriculum to cover the whole academic years in schools, with practical applications of the most common Coptic hymns used in the Church Liturgy? This would be a step towards maintaining the Coptic language as the mother language, besides drawing the students’ attention to the Coptic hymns which represent an ancient music culture of two thousand years.

Hopefully, some of the rich Christians support the Coptic language revival by the blessing of H.H. Pope Shenouda III. They can even establish branch institutes in some churches in order to encourage children, youths, and old people to learn the Coptic language. In such institutes educational aids and modern technological systems, like

computers, that facilitate teaching languages. Money prizes may also be allocated for those who attain high levels in learning Coptic.

This would restore to the coptic language its glory, and history will remember for them who will support the revival of this language in our Christian homes as a live language of communication as in the past, instead of being confined to worship within the liturgical prayers.

I remember when David Ensemble was invited to the International Festival (Expo-2000) in Hanover- Germany, H.G. Amba Demian attended the Performance and invited the Ensemble to offer a similar Performance at Saint Mark Church of Frankfurt where reverend Father Bigol Basilli serves. There, we, David Ensemble, were surprised and greatly astonished to see Father Bigol talking with his family members and with some of his congregation in Coptic language fluently. This shows that the return of the Coptic language as a language of communication at home and in churches is not unattainable.

We can use some systems for translation like those used for translating German of Italian texts of world Operas.

Actually, we have a lot of solutions, but I wonder why we choose the weakest! By this we may lose that heritage which the Coptic church has kept with blood and sweat throughout the different persecuion ages until it reached us pure without any defects.



No doubt, to maintain such a heritage is more difficult than to neglect it!!

4. since our church has been known throughout the whole world by the name "Coptic Church", what will be her name if the Coptic language disappeared from our prayers and hymns that distinguish her? Can we accept to have her called "The Arab Church"?

In Al Ahram Newspaper issue of 23 February, 2000, my attention was drawn by a line on the first page that reads "Mother Tongues are dying out":

New York - News Agency - In an initiative for protecting live languages against dying out as a result of globalization, Kofi Anan, the General Secretary of the United Nations, calls for doubling the efforts on both national and international levels to activate teaching and using about six thousand languages which are considered a common heritage to all mankind. Anan warned that most of those languages are in danger of dying out throughout the next twenty years due to the prevalence of some languages like English, French and Japanese over the international dealings, in cooperation agreements among countries, and due to globalization. Anan indicated in a statement before the first conference on "The Universal Day for Mother Tongues" that language represents a major element of the national and personal identity, and an important means for established existence in the world. Hence, we should preserve it from dying out.

If the whole world is calling today for protecting languages because they represent a nation's heritage, and because they are considered the main constituent of the national and personal identity and a means of established existence in the world, should the Copts not care for their Coptic language which is considered not only a historical heritage, but also a dogmatic, ritual and spiritual heritage?!

### **The relationship between the Coptic Language and other languages:**

It is well known that the Coptic language is the latest phase of the Egyptian language in which the Ancient Egyptians spoke and wrote more than five thousand years ago. Another opinion says that the Coptic language existed as a language of communication from the most ancient times side by side with the Egyptian language which –according to this opinion- was only a language for writing. Actually, the Egyptian language is related not only to the Semitic languages such as Hebrew, Arabic, Aramaic or Babilonyan, but also to Hamitic languages such as East African languages (Galla, Somali and Berber dialects of North Africa)

The modern Coptic language continued to be the official language of the country during the Roman and the Greek eras, and after the Arab invasion till the year 709 A.D. when Abdullah, the brother of El Waleed Ibn Abdel Malek Ibn Marawan, substituted it by Arabic in the Government Departments.

In 799 A.D. Al Hakem Bi Amr Allah prohibited its use even in the streets and houses. But the Copts preserved it inside their churches. Moreover, it

continued to be the language of communication among all the Egyptians, Copts and Muslims for several centuries. However, by time it faded away.

Nevertheless, Al Makrizy could prove that the monks continued to use it as the only language they knew until the beginning of the fifteenth century. Furthermore, the women and children in Upper Egypt used it in their daily life during that era.

The savants who visited Egypt in 1267 A.D. found some Copts still speaking the Coptic language fluently as their mother tongue.

## 2- Egyptian Script

Egyptians wrote down their language in the early stages in the following scripts:

### **First: Hieroglyphic Script:**

This script was used for inscription on the walls of temples and tombs, as well as for writing on papyri. Writing in Hieroglyphic script actually dates back to the first dynasty epoch (3110-2884 B.C), i.e. more than five thousand years ago. However, some refer it to some hundreds of years earlier. The use of Hieroglyphic script in writing on shank of clay vessels or on papyri extended up to the Christian epochs.

The latest hieroglyphic writing can be traced back to late fourth century A.D., exactly to the year 394. It has been discovered in Feyala Island “Anas Al Wegoud” in Aswan, for idol worship continued up to that time. it is thus clear that writing in Hieroglyphic script continued for about three thousand five hundred years .

### **Second: Hieratic Script:**

This name is derived from the Greek word "Hieratikos", which means "priestly". It was so called because priests used it often in the Greco-Roman epoch. It is actually the simple form of the Hieroglyphic script. Its simplicity and the round bendings are due to writing in haste with a reed instead of using a chisel in writing, which causes sharp angles when writing in Hieroglyphic on stone.

### **Third: Demotic Script:**

The name is derived from the Greek word "Demotikos" which means "popular". It is a very hasty form of the Hieratic Script. It appeared for the first time in the epoch of the Ethiopian dynasty, that is the twenty fifth dynasty (736-657B.C.)

In the Ptolemaic & Roman epochs it became the common script in daily life usage, and sometimes on stone panels. The latest texts in Demotic Script date back to the year 452 A.D. It is noteworthy that the appearance of a certain script never abolished former scripts . But each script had its special use. In the Ptolemy-Roman epoch, the three aforementioned scripts were used together at the same time.

### **3- The Stages of Development of the Egyptian language**

#### **First: old Egyptian language:**

It is the language of the first to the eighth dynasties (about 3110 – 2155 B.C). It includes the language in which the "Pyramid Texts " were written, as well as the official documents, original funerary texts, grave inscriptions containing biographies of some people. From this stage the old language developed into:

#### **Second: Middle Egyptian language:**

It is probably the language of communication in the epochs from the ninth to the eleventh dynasties (2154-1999 B.C). It continued in novels and literary works, then in late years of the twenty fifth and twenty sixth dynasties reviving the glories of the past and imitating the old heritage.

#### **Third: late Egyptian language:**

It was the language of communication in the epochs of the 18<sup>th</sup> to the 24<sup>th</sup> dynasties. It is the language in which documents, letters, stories and novels were written.

#### **Fourth: Demotic language:**

It is the language used in books and documents since the twenty ffth dynasty up to late Roman epoch (736 B.C.-452 A.D.)

#### **Fifth: Coptic language:**

It is the latest stage of the Egyptian language. It began to appear in the third century. From that time on Copts spoke it (by Copts is meant the Christian descendants of the Ancient Egyptians).

The majority of scholars are of the opinion that Coptic has its origin in the Egyptian language, particularly late Egyptian.

In Centuries before the Coptic alphabet was known, there had been no written records identifying the language of daily life.

The scholar "Chaine" asserts that both the Egyptian and the Coptic languages have existed together since the olden times. He goes as far as to say that the Egyptian language was not a spoken language, but was derived from the Coptic, which he considers the original, and was formulated in such a way that the priests and scribes could use it only in writing. In other words, the Egyptian language was formulated by some Coptic speaking Egyptians merely for writing.

### **The Coptic Alphabet:**

Coptic language used the Greek Alphabet with the addition of seven letters from the Demotic language to compensate for the Coptic sounds that have no correspondents in Greek letters. These seven letters are:

**S      V      Q      H      J      [      ]**  
Shai ; Fai ; Khai ; Houri ; Genga ; Tchima ; Ti

It is worthnoting also that the Coptic is the only form of Egyptian language that provides vowels.

### **The influence of Greek on Coptic language:**

Since Alexander the Great has conquered Egypt in 332B.C, Greek was used in Government offices. Egyptians were keen on learning it, so it spread among all classes: the high, the middle and the low.

This is the reason why some Greek words have been introduced into the Egyptian language, and by time the Coptic language contained so many Greek words. It can be noticed that Coptic books translated from Greek contained more Greek words than other books. This may be due to the slackness of the translator, or his preferring the use of the Greek words rather than the Coptic words, especially when translating certain theological texts, for Copts believed that sacred things get defiled if given heathen names.



#### **4- The Church Role in spreading the use of Coptic Script**

The credit for establishing the Coptic alphabet in the form we know today, and the spelling system, adaptation of rules and style is certainly due to the Egyptian church.

No doubt this was part of the missionary work in Egyptian villages and towns, organized by the church in the during the papacy of H.H. Pope Demetrios of Alexandria, the Twelfth Patriarch, and his successors.

##### **Evangelizing in Alexandria:**

Christianity spread first in Alexandria in the 1<sup>st</sup> & 2<sup>nd</sup> centuries. The theological school of Alexandria had an effective missionary role. Therefore, as Greek language was prevailing in Alexandria, it was used to preach the Gospel even though preachers were Egyptians not Greek. In such era, there was no need for translating the Holy Scripture from Greek to Coptic because the Alexandrians understood the Greek text well and used it in the liturgy service.

##### **Evangelism in Egyptian provinces:**

By the end of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century A.D. Christianity has spread widely among Egyptians. Therefore, most of the believers were not learnt in Greek. No doubt then, the Egyptian language was used in preaching outside Alexandria, especially in the rural areas of Delta and Upper Egypt. It was natural also that some chapters of the Holy Scripture be translated for the inhabitants of those regions who knew only their Egyptian language.

The substitute was the Demotic language which was difficult to understand, therefore the preachers took upon themselves developing the Egyptian language by writing it down in Greek letters and adding seven Demotic letters only.

### **The Coptic translation of the Divine Books:**

Translation of the Holy Scripture started in the third Century A.D. The Gospels were translated into Coptic before the year 270 A.D. We have an evidence in the biography of St. Anthony (251-356A.D): He was a simple Egyptian from a rural area . He was not taught to write. The only language he spoke was Coptic, and when he had to talk with Greeks, there was always a translator. We know from his biography recorded by St. Athanasius the Apostolic, that once he went to the church, and when the Gospel was being read, he heard the Lord's words to the rich youth, *"if you want to be perfect, go, sell what you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come follow Me "* (Mt.19: 21). Immediately St. Anthony went out, sold all his possessions and gave to the villagers. How could he understand the words unless they were read in Coptic language?

## 5- Etymology of the name “Copt”

The interpretation of the name “Copt” has been subject to many views, two of which we will present here:

1. Some are of the opinion that the word “Copt” is derived from the name of the city called “Coptos” or “Kepht” in Kena Governorate in Upper Egypt. Kepht was an important trade center since the days of the Pharaohs. Caphtorim<sup>4</sup> was one of the sons of “Mizraim” from whom the people of :epht descended. However, this opinion lacks Biblical and historical evidence.
2. The second opinion, which is acceptable to scholars, says that the word “Copt” is derived from the same word in the Egyptian language from which the name “Egypt” is derived. In Greek, it is “Egyptos”. So the Europeans borrowed the name “Copt” to refer to the Egyptian Christians since the 16th centuries.

Due to the steadfast faith of the Copts, the words “Copt” and “Christian” have become synonyms. However, the word “Copt” in its origin does not refer to the religion but rather to the race. It is the same as “Egyptian”.

According to etymology, an Egyptian is a Copt, whether a Christian or a Moslem. Likewise, we can say the “Coptic Church” or “the Egyptian Church”.

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<sup>4</sup> “Mizraim begot Ludin, Anamim, Lehabim, Naphtuhim, Pathrusim, and Casluhim (from whom came the Philistines) and Caphtorim” (Gen 10: 13)

### **The Coptic Race:**

The Copts are the natives of the Mediterranean Sea. They are the immediate descendants of the Ancient Egyptians. They have not mixed with the various races that immigrated to Egypt except to a very little extent that hardly had any influence on them.

Probably the main reason that helped the Copts keep their high purity of Egyptian blood is their holding fast to their Christianity and Orthodoxy that is free from the influence of Chalcedonian doctrines which prohibit marriage from those of different faith or denomination.

### **The language in which the Lord sanctified the Last Supper:**

According to the Gospels –even the Greek Translation- and based on the research works of specialized scholars, we can assert that the Lord spoke Aramaic and Hebrew.

The Scholar “Dalman” translated into Aramaic the texts on Eucharist in the Gospels of St. Mark and St. Luke, as well as in St. Paul’s Epistle to the Corinthians. Thus the original Aramaic text on Eucharist was restored, and the meaning became clear and harmonious. Dalman wrote also an invaluable book on the Aramaic Grammar in the Era in which Christ lived, where he expounded many of these texts.

However, Dalman is of the opinion that the blessing the Lord uttered over the bread and the cup was in Hebrew, seeing that Hebrew was the language of the mysteries or the sacred language. Therefore, it is supposed that the common talk and words which the Lord –glory be to Him- spoke

were in Aramaic, i.e. the slang language. Whereas the sanctification i.e. the blessing, the explanation of the Mystery and the words of the Covenant, He uttered in Hebrew, which was the sacred language.

### **The language of the Divine Liturgy:**

The Liturgies have been originally written in Greek, then translated in Coptic, without the response of the deacons and some hymns which the congregation chanted.

Under the Arab rule, Abdel Malek Ben Marawan (685-705 A.D.) and his son, succeeded by Al Hakem Bi Amr Allah (985-1021 A.D.) commanded that Coptic language be replaced by Arabic. The latter therefore became stronger, and by the end of the nineteenth century, Arabic has prevailed over the language of the Liturgy also. Coptic became confined to the Praise Songs, the long hymns, and the seasonal hymns.