

Research Note

An appraisal of Shaykh Kishk's *khuṭbah* presentation

Abu-Bakr Imam Ali-Agan*

Abstract: Shaykh Kishk's pulpit sermons dominated the political scene in Egypt and beyond. For 20 years (1961–1981) when he held sway at the 'Ayn al-Hayāt Mosque in Cairo as the Imam, Kishk's fearless sermons were a reference point to his admirers and the less privileged. He was actively involved in the campaigns for socio-political justice in Egypt. This blind Egyptian scholar was imprisoned twice because of his powerful Friday sermons that often led to public outrage against the despotic governments throughout the Middle East. Though the Egyptian Government appointed him as an employee Imam, he refused to be silenced by the government-prepared sermons until he was sacked in 1981. The significance of his *khuṭbah* (sermon) lies in their relevance to the socio-political situations in most Gulf countries. This paper navigates the content and style of Kishk's *khuṭbah* presentation.

Keywords: Egypt; *Jum'ah sermon*; Kishk; *khuṭbah*; Middle East politics.

Abstrak: Kutbah Shaykh Kishk di mimbar telah mendominasi scenario politik di Mesir dan di serantau dengannya. Selama dua puluh tahun (1961–1981) sejak beliau mengangkat sumpah di dalam Masjid 'Ayn al-Hayāt di Kaherah sebagai Imam, kutbah Kishk yang begitu berani sekali telah menjadi aras rujukan kepada peminat-peminat beliau dan juga kepada mereka yang kurang bernasib baik. Beliau turut terlibat secara aktif dalam kempen-kempen untuk keadilan sosio-politik di Mesir dengan menggunakan mimbar tersebut. Ulama' Mesir yang buta ini telah dipenjara dua kali disebabkan oleh kutbah

* Abu-Bakr Imam Ali-Agan is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Religions, Faculty of Arts, University of Ilorin, Nigeria. Email: aaliagan2003@yahoo.com.

Jumaatnya yang begitu berpengaruh sekali dan juga yang selalunya menaikkan kemarahan orang ramai terhadap kerajaan kuku besi di seluruh Timur Tengah. Walaupun beliau dilantik oleh Kerajaan Mesir sebagai seorang Imam, namun beliau enggan berdiam diri dan hanya menuruti sahaja kutbah yang disediakan oleh kerajaan, sehinggakan beliau dipecat pada tahun 1981. Kutbah beliau yang ketara sekali terletak dalam kaitannya dengan keadaan sosio-politik di kebanyakan negara-negara Teluk. Kertas kerja ini menyelami ke dalam isi kandungan dan gaya persembahan kutbah Kishk.

Kata Kunci: Mesir; khutbah Jumaat; Kishk; khutbah; politik Timur Tengah.

Some disabled individuals erroneously believe that they are a misfit in society and consequently submit to indolence in the name of fate. They withdraw from the society, making no contribution, however little it may be, to improve and develop it. It is striking to note, however, that in the time of Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W.), some disabled people served and protected the Islamic state. ‘Abdullah ibn ‘Umm al Maktūm, a visually impaired man, is a prominent companion of the Prophet whose narrative was given in verse 80:1–10 of the Qur’ān. The Prophet later made him an Imam to lead prayers whenever the Prophet was away on an expedition (Ibn Ḥibbān, 1988, p. 151). Understandably, a blind man is not expected to fight in battles, but the fact that the Prophet recognised the potential contributions of Al-Maktūm is an indication that disabled individuals are not to be treated as socially useless and recluse. During the period of the Companions, ‘Atā’ ibn Abī Rabah was paralysed and blind. He dedicated his life to seeking knowledge from the Companions of the Prophet and later became the Mufti of Mecca (al-Dhahabī, 1985, pp. 88–90). Similarly, during the medieval period, Abū al-A‘lā al-Ma‘arrī lost his sight in his early childhood. He, nevertheless, cut a good image for himself and was regarded as a great Arab poet of the medieval period. Many distinguished individuals with disabilities have made significant contributions to Muslim societies (“Disability in Islam,” 2016; The Islamic workplace, 2012).

Among the very few who turned their misfortune into positivity in modern history is the Egyptian scholar, Shaykh ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd ‘Abd al-‘Azīz Muhammad Kishk, who became blind at a very tender age. His thought has attracted numerous researchers on contemporary Islamic thought and movements in Egypt. Jansen (1982) studied how Kishk addressed some socio-political issues in Egyptian society and how he

related to Egyptian Christians. He claimed that Christianity has some influence on Shaykh Kishk's thought and cited instances where Kishk made direct quotations from or allusion to the New Testament. Kepel (1985) examined the significance of Kishk's sermons on Egyptian society and the uniqueness of his style of delivery. Malti-Douglas (2000) explored Khisk's autobiography, *Qiṣṣat Ayyāmī: Mudhakkirāt al-Shaykh Kishk* (The Story of My Days: Memoirs of Shaykh Kishk) as a prototype of a new emerging relationship between Islam and modern literature (p. 390). She classified Kishk's style as part of the modern genre (p. 393).

Kishk was a distinguished Muslim preacher whose popularity swept the entire Arab world and beyond. Kepel (1985) referred to him as "a sensation in contemporary Egyptian Islam... [whose] popular, down-market eloquence won him considerable successes" (p. 173). A Saudi-funded magazine dubbed him "the star of Islamic preaching" (cited in Kepel, 1985, p. 172). Antoun (1989) called him "the popular, highly critical anti-establishment 'free' Egyptian preacher" (p. 94). The state could not ignore his powerful oratory ability as demonstrated by his unique presentation of the pulpit sermons. He was cautioned on several occasions and even sentenced to prison for what the state regarded as subversive activities. It is this unique posture of Kishk's powerful pulpit sermons, which usually steered public emotion and outrage against successive governments of Egypt, that this paper explores in some detail.

A brief profile of Shaykh Kishk

Shaykh 'Abd al-Ḥamīd 'Abd al-'Azīz Muhammad Kishk was born on March 10, 1933, at Shibrakhit Village in the province of Buhayra, not far from Alexandria. His father 'Abd al-'Azīz Muhammad Kishk was a pious Muslim, who trained his children to acquire sound Islamic knowledge. His grandfather, Shaykh Muhammad, was the village Qur'ānic teacher under whom the young Kishk studied the Qur'ān and memorised it at the age of 12. He studied Arabic grammar under Shaykh Muhammad Jād. His uncle, 'Abd al-Fattāḥ was also a preacher and an Imam in one of the village *Jum'ah* mosques. It is, therefore, correct to say that Kishk comes from a family renowned for *da'wah*.

The young Kishk developed ophthalmia and consequently lost his left eye in 1939. He lost the other one 11 years later and thus became

completely blind. This was after he had sat for his first school leaving certificate examination at the *Ma'had al-Iskandariyyah al-Dīnī*, at Alexandria. He sought solutions, both local and modern, to the eye impairment without success. He later realised that “God had granted him the gift of blindness” (Kepel, 1985, p. 175). He praised God, who had taken his sight but granted him insight. He then faced the challenge of acquiring knowledge at the famous al-Azhar University for a senior secondary school certificate in Islamic Studies. His admission to the school was a turning point in his method of knowledge acquisition. He could no more read from books and boards. He, therefore, resorted to listening from his lecturers and colleagues, as the use of Braille was unknown at al-Azhar by then.

Kishk graduated with a B.A. Honours degree in Islamic Studies in 1961 with first class. He was awarded a Master's degree in psychology three years later. He then decided to expand the scope of his knowledge on his own with extensive research on the works of early scholars with a particular interest in theology, philosophy and history of the Prophet and his companions. He developed special interest in the second caliph 'Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb (Kishk, 1986, p. 7). His reference to 'Umar on the pulpit, which he tagged as “*Umarīyyah*” was to land him in prison twice.

Friday sermons

The word “*khutbah*” means public lecture, oration or sermon. Specifically, it is used in Islam for the sermons during Friday services and on the occasions of Islamic festivals of *'Īd al-Fiṭr* and *'Īd al-Aḍḥā*. Shaykh Kishk became an imam and began to deliver Friday sermons in government-funded mosques under the Ministry of *Awqāf*. Since 1964, he preached and delivered his Friday sermons in 'Ayn al-Ḥayāt Mosque at Ḥadā'iq Qubbah district in Cairo. The sermons were recorded on cassette tapes, and each lasting for approximately 90 minutes, taking up both sides of a ninety-minute cassette. Each cassette carries the number and date the sermon was delivered for reference and documentation purpose. For example, the sermon of June 23, 1978, carries the number 274 while that of December 12, 1980, carries the number 394 (Jansen, 1982).

Kishk's sermons attracted a huge crowd from near and far. Muslims listened to Kishk's sermons not only in Egypt but also in many major

cities in the Middle East and beyond. From the North African countries to West African sub-Sahara desert, the audio cassettes of this scholar can be heard from different Islamic centres. Moreover, from Khartoum to Jakarta, London to Houston, the audio cassettes sold like hotcakes. Kepel (1985) expressed the pervasiveness of Kishk's *khutbah* in Egyptian society in the following words:

It was impossible to walk the streets of Cairo without hearing his stentorian voice. Climb into a collective service-taxi and the driver is listening to one of Sheikh Kishk's recorded sermons on his cassette player. Stop for a fruit juice at a street-corner, the ear is bombarded by the sermon delivered by Sheikh Kishk the previous Friday ... Go back to your flat and you hear a voice rising from the street hammering out phrases in Koranic Arabic: the doorman, sitting on his bench day in, day out, is listening to Kishk (p. 172).

Kishk delivered his sermons in fluent classical Arabic, but in the last ten minutes or so would switch to Cairo dialect, the everyday colloquial, in his attempt to captivate his audience and bring the gist of the sermon within their grasp (Kepel, 1985). He would spend extra time after the *jum'ah* prayer to use the Egyptian dialect to explain the content of the *khutbah* or to give additional information to his audience. He even stated categorically that "*khutbah* should be presented in such a way that it should benefit the audience and not to be presented in difficult words or terminologies" (Kishk, 1986, p. 61).

It is on record that he delivered 425 Friday sermons from the time he was appointed as an Imam and up to the time of his detention in 1981. An attempt has been made by the Maktabat al-Ṣaḥāfah printers in Cairo to transcribe some sermons available on audio cassettes into booklets, which serve as our sources of reference. It should be noted that, as at the time of this write-up, more than a hundred sermons have been transcribed into 47 volumes.

A point worthy of noticing is that, apart from the reproduction of the same *khutbah* on the Prophet's ascension known as *al-isrā' wa-al mi'rāj*, which was delivered on September 8, 1970, as it occurred in volume 42 (pp. 5–14) and volume 45 (pp. 17–24), the transcribed editions were done with great accuracy.

Major themes of Kishk's *khuṭbah*

The objective of *khuṭbah*, among others, is to serve as a forum to educate and enlighten the populace about Islamic morals in general and with specific emphasis on discipline and orderliness in the society. Kishk's observation in this regard is very accurate. He opined that:

The objective of a sermon is to call people to the right path and forbid indecency. It is also used as an antidote against societal diseases, so as to maintain law and order in an Islamic environment (Kishk, 1983, pp. 35–36).

Other functions of the *khuṭbah* include public awareness and stirring public emotion, most especially against inept and tyrannical rulers. Fathi (1984) noted that “throughout the history of Islam, the Mosque has been the centre and scene of numerous uprising revolts and social movements often led by popular preachers from the pulpit” (p. 190). By and large, the Shaykh's *khuṭbah*, based on their contents, can be categorised into the following four segments.

Canonical discussion

The Friday sermon, throughout the ages, has been an avenue for religious rejuvenation. Topical issues, most especially on the *'ibādāt* and *mu'āmalāt* are expected to be given preference for the *khuṭbah* to be meaningful. Realising this truism, Shaykh Kishk extensively focused on the canonical acts of worship in his sermons, though the occasional repetition of the content of the sermons can easily be noted on topics which are canonical in nature. It is also gratifying to note that, though the topic may be identical, the style of the presentation differs from one presentation to the other as the situation demands.

The presentation on the annual pilgrimage to the holy land is a pointer in this direction. Kishk's *khuṭbah* on Hajj for five consecutive years, looks very similar and cyclical in nature. Kudos is to be given to the *Maktabat al-Ṣaḥāfah* printers for compiling different *khuṭbah* on Hajj that were delivered between 1973 to 1980 together as could be seen in volume 36 of his *khuṭbah* compilation.

What is captivating in the *khuṭbah*, however, is the unique style of discussing Hajj rites and its benefits. The Shaykh focused on the

Prophet's Pilgrimage in the 1973 Hajj exercise, narrating each step taken by the Prophet from Madīnah to Makkah while a video of the journey is being presented (Kishk, 1999, pp. 7–20).

In 1977, the style was more reflective. Kishk started the discussion on Hajj from the Cairo International Airport, calling passengers to embark on the spiritual journey (Kishk, 1999, pp. 62–83). Each step of the Hajj was presented lucidly with facts and vigour, from the Hajj rites until the departing time. He invited his audience from Jeddah back to Cairo in a unique style:

We are now in Jeddah, whosoever comes by the sea let him go to the Sea Port and Whoever comes by the Air, let him go to the Airport. You are welcome back to Cairo and back to this Mosque where we embarked on the spiritual Journey (Kishk, 1999, pp. 62–83).

The dramatic style of this presentation is highly gripping. The audience attention was shifted to the Hajj rites as if they were participants in the religious rejuvenation. The eloquence with which the sermon was delivered was equally transfixing.

This style is also noted in his discussion on both Ramadan fasting and daily act of worship (*ṣalawāt*). The entire compilation of volume 39 captured eight different sermons centred on the Ramadan fasting. Its philosophy, basic pre-requisites and etiquettes of fasting and the medicinal value of Ramadan are addressed extensively. However, a particular issue which was recurrent in the discussion on Ramadan fasting was how the period is turned into merriments and social entertainments most especially by the Egyptian radio and television stations.

Kishk lamented that the programmes shown on television were loaded with secular films, dramas and musical entertainments which were devoid of spiritual awareness and did not reflect the spiritual mood of Ramadan. He specifically put the blame of these practices on the Minister for Information, the Grand Mufti, and the Rector of the prestigious al-Azhar University (Kishk, 1999, p. 82). To him, the Rector of al-Azhar is the chief custodian of Islamic morals and ethical values; so, he should condemn such programmes.

Reflections on the stories of the prophets, Companions of the Prophet, and some pious people

A prominent feature in Kishk's *khutbah* presentation was his interest in the story of the prophets particularly Prophet Muhammad and his Companions, and the legacies of pious people. Prophet Adam, for example, was a particular focus in his sermons of February and March 1981. The eight-week long sermons occupied the fourth volume of the compilation made by *Maktabat al-Ṣaḥāfah*. It is gratifying to note most of the prophets mentioned in the Qur'ān were captured in the scholar's sermons, which are scattered in the different volumes of the transcribed sermons (Kishk, 1988, p. 12).

The exemplary personality of the Prophet Muhammad occupied the central theme in all his sermons. He carved out an identity along this line that is well acknowledged by the publisher of the sermons. He referred to his pulpit as *Madrasat Muḥammad* (Muhammad's School), which is retained as the title of the booklet. The Shaykh, an ardent follower of the *Ikhwān al-Muslimūn*, believed that the solution to the lingering Egyptian socio-political crisis is a total reversal to the message of Prophet Muhammad.

The welfare policies put in place by the successive period of the Four Rightly Guided Caliphs were often echoed on the pulpit. His particular interest in the political leadership of 'Umar is obvious. The stories were sometimes used to stir up public sentiment against those at the helm of affairs. Kishk, for example, quoted the second caliph 'Umar ibn Khaṭṭāb as saying that "If a female mule stumbles in Iraq, Allah would enquire from me (on the Day of Judgement) why I did not construct a good road for it" (Kishk, 1988, p. 112).

The reference to 'Umar on the pulpit did not go unchallenged. He was cautioned on many occasions by the security services, to which he turned a deaf ear. He usually tried to make a comparison between the leadership quality of 'Umar and what was obtainable in the government style of most of the Muslim populated countries. His aim was to stir public fury in most cases. In the quoted expression, the intention was to convince the audience that while 'Umar cared for the lower animals, the government of the day does not respect the basic fundamental human rights. 'Umar was noted for his uncompromising policy on the Islamic principle of justice.

Rejoinders on attacks against Islam

An ardent listener to the Shaykh's *khutbah* will not fail to notice that it always addressed the most current issues in the society. The second part of the *khutbah* was always used to discuss topical issues on event in the society. This unique style makes the date of the actual presentation of some of the *khutbah* very easy for researchers. His last sermon was delivered on August 28, 1981, which was numbered 425 (Kishk, 1986, p. 245).

Kishk portrayed himself as a dynamic scholar with modern views. He used to refer to Egyptian newspapers, international journals and magazines on current issues on the pulpit. Sometimes he would turn the pulpit into a forum for a rejoinder to some writers and cartoonists who mocked Islam, Prophet Muhammad and Muslims in general. The reference on the pulpit to a news item in *Al Ahrar* Newspaper, which attracted Kishk's attention is a pointer in this regard. He posited:

I am infuriated by a news item in the *Al Ahrar* Newspaper of last Monday, July 14, 1980. The news item stated that the attempt to establish the Islamic banking system in Egypt had been halted by a court order. How can the establishment of such a bank constitute any problem in a country inhabited by 40 million Muslims and 2.5 million Christians (Kishk, 1999, pp. 83–4).

Though Kishk did not inform his audience about what led to the court case, the reference to this case on the pulpit is a pointer to the dynamic steps introduced by the scholar in his sermon presentations. Similarly, he once observed that:

On February 13, 1981, a magazine published in London carried a ridiculous and outrageous article. The magazine known as *Economist* mixed poison and honey together. The intention of the magazine is to destroy the Muslim Community in Egypt and Sudan (Kishk, 1988, pp. 120).

The above reaction portrays Kishk's dynamism. He also, at a session of his sermon, took the Egyptian Ministry of Education to task. He criticised the ministry for not making the Islamic religious education compulsory at all levels. He drew reference from the State of Israel where he alleged that the Jewish education is made compulsory at all levels (Kishk, 1988, p. 144). At another occasion, the scholar contended

that the position of the Rector of the prestigious al-Azhar University should be independent, free from the imposition from the government. He called for the establishment of a council of ‘*Ulama*’ who would supervise the election of the rector for the institution, so as to be able to be independent of the state (Kishk, 2010, p. 121).

Middle East politics

Kishk’s growing influence was felt beyond Egypt, and he was obviously aware of this. As such, he turned his pulpit into an international religious-political space where both national and international issues were discussed according to the mainstream Islamic views. On an occasion, Kishk (1986, p. 233) took up the former Libyan head of state, Colonel Muammar Gaddafi to task. Gaddafi, a self-acclaimed socialist, had on a number of occasions expressed his disregard for the Prophetic Traditions. Kishk descended on him in a highly provocative sermon, which led to anti-government demonstrations in Tripoli. The Libyan leader had to sponsor religious stickers under the auspices of the Tripoli-based *Jam’iyyat al-Da’wah al-Islāmiyyah* stating clearly that “we worship Allah and we stick to the Traditions of the Prophet.”

In another reference to Gaddafi’s numerous outbursts, Kishk alleged that the Libyan leader requested from the Egyptian Government to transfer the corpse of President Jamal Abdul Nasir to Tripoli to be transformed into a tourist attraction centre, which could be comparable to the tomb of the Prophet. He went on to predict that Gaddafi’s reference to the Prophet will be a source of sorrow to him as he would be disgraced out of office and his corpse will be buried in an unknown destination. He also accused both former Presidents Jaafar Nimeiri of Sudan and Hafez al-Assad of Syria for their preference of secularism to the Islamic system of polity.

Moreover, in a clear reference to the oil producing states in the Arabian Gulf, Kishk postulates that if the oil producing states pay their *zakāh* due of their products, it will be very difficult to find a ravenous Muslim begging for sustenance within the Muslim circle. Kishk firmly believed that the percentage that is due from *zakāh* product on oil is enough to solve many problems within the Muslim countries. He submits:

Zakāh due on oil stuff is a fifth of the product. There is an oil producing country that produces ten million barrels a day.

The *zakāh* tax on it is two million barrels in a year. If the two million barrels is distributed among the poor Muslims, I swear by Allah, no one will feel hungry in the Muslim community (Kishk, 1987, p. 105).

Shaykh Kishk disapproved of the Egyptian regime's Islamic legitimacy, yet he did not condone violence to overthrow the government and indeed he denounced the assassination of President Sadat. He believed in *jihād* against the unjust and un-Islamic rulers of the Middle East. The best *jihād* he believed in was, however, "a word straightforward", *kalimat 'al-'adl*, addressed to an unjust ruler. His sermon was meant to achieve that objective.

The state continued to tolerate Kishk's confrontational preaching on the pulpit. In September 1981, Shaykh Kishk was arrested on the orders of President Anwar Sadat (d. 1981) for seditious activities. The arrest led to violent demonstration by his supporters, which forced the President to explain publicly that the President of Sudan had made a personal complaint that Kishk's *khutbah* had adverse effects on his government in Sudan (Kishk, 1986, p. 256). He was released after Sadat's assassination on January 27, 1982 and barred from preaching or expressing his views in public functions. He, however, concentrated on writing until his death in 1996.

Conclusion

Shaykh Kishk used *khutbah* to address all sorts of problems of contemporary life, from questions related to daily social and political issues, to the issues related to the end of the world, death, and eschatology. Far from parroting the *khutbas* as received from medieval time, which are now mostly out of touch with contemporary life or incomprehensible to the audience, Kishk addressed topical issues in his *khutbah*. He made a serious effort, and succeeded to a great extent, to reach his audience at their level by talking to them in the language they understood and the style they appreciated. While the majority of listeners who came to perform Friday prayer and listen to his sermon live were the poor urban masses, the impact of the sermon itself was overreaching, affecting the rulers and the ruled, the secular and the religious, and the Muslims and the Christians of Egyptian society. Thus, the sermon was received as, Jansen noted: "either with excited assent, with worried disapproval, or with grinning unbelief" (Jansen, 1982, p. 57).

Kishk did have rivals or imitators who equally preached popular Islamic teaching. None of them, as Kepel observed, “commands his phenomenal capacity for improvisation, and his acerbic humour in criticising infidel regimes, military dictatorship, the peace treaty with Israel, or the complicity of al-Azhar” (1985, pp. 172–173). To many of his adherents, Kishk was a voice for the voiceless, “a sort of Muslim Robin Hood for whom ‘commanding the good and forbidding the evil’ was not just a matter of style, but a law of life itself” (Kepel, pp. 174–175).

This paper affirms the position of Shaykh Kishk, that the content of the *khuṭbah* should be dynamic, relevant to the daily problems of Muslims. The *khuṭbah* can be effectively used to erase ignorance, apathy and other socio-political problems as demonstrated by Shaykh Kishk.

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