

Evolution of Arabic Literature in Nigeria: Case Study of Tafa'sir

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Abstract

The article opines about the resemblance of Arabic language in Nigerian society. Since the expansion of Islam to Africa, Arabic language has become the second major spoken language in Muslim African countries. Thus, whenever we talk about Arabic language in Nigeria, it was a major language of Muslim kingdoms in Nigeria mainly in the north-east regions, where Muslims are in majority. The article clearly highlights how in the recent times there have been growing reservations on Arabic as one of Nigeria's major language. Moreover, the assailants are also raising questions on the Arabic language written on the Nigerian currency and they frequently debate about its resemblance to Nigerian history.

On the other hand, the fact cannot be denied that Nigeria is a secular country mainly encompassing Christians and Muslims living in the country for centuries. The Muslims are mostly Arab influence and regards the Arabic language as sacred while the Christians are mainly Roman Catholics, which are solely inspired from the western traditions. The article clearly indicates that how the individual reservations on mainstreaming of Arabic language is further emboldening the social strata of Nigerian society. In contrast, the article clearly elucidates that Arabic language cannot be dispatched from the history of West Africa especially in case of Nigeria; it is socially and politically deep-rooted in its history. Likewise, if we

look deeper into classical modern era travelogues and history books, they are written in Arabic and this shows that the level of assimilation of Arabic into the Nigerian society. The article clearly establishes the grounds for the roots of Arabic language in the Nigerian history and society.

Key words: Tafa'sir , Arabic, Roman Catholic, Islam

Introduction

Nigeria is the most populous country of Africa and the tenth most populous in the World, with an estimated population of 85 million, which is one-fifth of the total population of the continent.¹ In area, it is the 13th largest country of Africa; spread over a million square kilometers or so. It has long history, a rich cultural heritage and is generously endowed with natural resources including petroleum, which help it to achieve the third largest GDP in Africa, after South Africa and Egypt, though per capita it is fairly low. Nigeria's size and oil wealth and the political maturity of its leaders have placed it naturally in the forefront of the nation of West Africa.²

In the 7th century, many states with centralized government arose here, the best known among them being Kanem in the north east of Lake Chad. They were ruled by the Sefawa dynasty and had many vassal states with whose ruler they intermarried for political expediency. Their prosperity depended on trade with North Africa.

In the 14th century they were displaced by one of their vassal, the Bulala, and move to Bornu in the south-West of Lake Chad. Mixing with the local so people, they become the Kanuri tribe with the language and culture of their own.³

In the middle of 18th century again there was a revival. The Fulani people, the great cattle herders of West Africa, had started coming into Hausa land in a middle of 15th century and in the 18th century they led a great Islamic reformist and jihad (holy war) movement which brought them to power all over West Africa. The first manifestation of this movement was in the jihad launched by Alfa Ba in 1725 in Fouta Djallon (present Guinea) and led the success by his son Ibrahim Alfa in 1775 in the setting up of an Islamic state.⁴

Next, another Fulani leader, Suleiman BAL, launched a jihad in the Fouta Toro hills of present-day Senegal which achieved success in 1776. The most spectacular such movement was however, that led by

Shehu Usumanu Dan Fodio who was conquer all the Hausa kingdom northern Nigeria between 1804 and 1810. He inspired such Fulani jihad was like that led by Shehu Hamadu who was able to set up an Islamic state with its capital at Masina on the upper Niger in what is now Mali. Another, such as Shehu Adama who extended his authority over the entire Benue-Logone basin and Adama plateau in Cameroon (which bears his name) and ruled from 1809 to 1847.⁵

All this Fulani religious revival movement in northern Nigeria clashed with the European colonial power advancing into Africa in the 19th century, and were overpowered, one by one, early in the 20th century.

There has been of late, a subtle but orchestrated attempt to discredit Arabic Language in Nigeria. The Nobel laureate Wole Soyinka in a lecture, fired the first salvo at the law school in Lagos on Friday October 16; 1998 during the visit to Nigeria, he said it is incidental that the other language on our national currency is Arabic, if any part of the nation feels that our official language must be Arabic then let us debate the issue at a national conference rather than sneaking into various currency denominations of our nation.⁶ And if at the national conference a part of the country feels that these monetary exchange pledges that are part of parcel of our commercial existence must be articulated in Kiswahili, Esperanto or Amharic, then let us debate the issue but it is intolerable that one section, with its cultural leaning should impose these designs on the rest. Femi Falana, a Lagos based lawyer at the time Vice-Chairman of joint Action committee of Nigeria in his reaction to the issuance of a new N100 note denomination and the Arabic inscription on the Nigeria threw caution to the winds and threatened if anybody makes of putting the mistake of putting a sectional emblem on it or put some foreign language that is not the national language some of us have the right to make a bonfire of such strange money because it won't be said to be a Nigerian currency with gratitude to God, the new naira notes were issued and the country was set ablaze. Falana considers the Arabic language a foreign language in Nigeria its educational and cultural role as well as its importance and relevance to the country.⁷

Arabic Language in Nigeria

The geographical entity known today as Nigeria was formerly a collection of kingdoms, nation states and emirates. In 1914 the Southern part of the country and North then known as Southern and

Northern protectorates were joined together by Lord Lugard to form Nigeria. Many of these empires and kingdoms played eminent roles in the history of West Africa any discussion of the role of Arabic language in any of these regions automatically means the role of Arabic in the West African sub-region.

The presence of Arabic language in the west Africa has been associated with the trade and commerce long before the coming of the Almoravid movement there had been always been Muslim communities in large centers of the west Africa. Kanem was the first area in modern day Nigeria to come in contact with Arabic language.

Kanem Bornu Umme Jilmi (1085-97 CE) one of the rulers of the Kanem converted to Islam. He read the Qur'an, and *Risala*, a legal work according to Maliki School. The first example of the local use of Arabic language comes from his time. These are the *Mahrams*, or letters patent and grants of privilege given by various *Mais* (kings) to learned or noble families and their descendants. Sir Richmond Palmer translated a number into English.

Al -Qalqashadi (d. 821/1419) in his *Subh al-Asha*, an encyclopedia of instructions of bureaucrats gives the text of a long letter from the rule of Bornu, Uthman b. Idris to the Mamluk Sulthan, Barquq. The letter, which arrived in Egypt in 1391-2 CE, was actually seen by Al-Qalqashadi, it was written in the current flowery idiom of Arabic language and literary style.⁸

From this time onwards Arabic was established as a language of learning and correspondence although very little of what was written in those early times has survived by the sixteenth century Arabic started to be used for the documentation of historical event in Bornu. The two extinct works of the chief imam of Bornu Ahmad b. Fartuwa, show the extent to which Arabic had become the language of learning and communication in the sixteenth century. Bornu had the advanced knowledge of Arabic literature especially *Hadith* law and history that the scholarly men possessed at that time.⁹

In many other parts of West Africa, the only historical records we possess prior to those of the nineteenth century European travelers are written in Arabic by religious scholar's royal chroniclers travelers merchants and the like.¹⁰

It was through this language that it was possible to hold together large states for long periods for it provides the medium for

writing dispatches and orders for summoning military aid for disseminating propaganda and for issuing administrative directives to provincial governors and administrator.

Hausaland

Islam reached Hausaland in the second half of the fourteenth century through the efforts of Dyula (Wangarawa) traders. About a century later during the reign of Yakubu (c.1452-63) the first wave of the Gwari immigrants arrived in Hausaland bringing with them Arabic books on theology and language prior to this in the name of books only Quran works on the traditions of the Prophet (peace be upon him) and on law had been known in Hausaland during the same time the trading relations began between Hausaland and Gonja in central Ghana. Arabic was used for the first time for practical purposes during the reign of Muhammad Rumfa (c.1463-99 CE) the successor to Yakubu.¹¹

A scholar from Timbuktu Muhammad b. Abd al-Karim al-Maghili arrived in Hausaland. He taught and preached a Katsina and Kanro. At the request of Muhammad Rumfa he wrote in Arabic a treatise on Islamic government in which he discussed issues like advising the sultan on how a Muslim ruler should organize the administration of his kingdom the lawful sources of revenue and the proper ways in which the revenue could be spent.¹²

With the emergence of Islamic Reformer Sheikh Uthman Dan Fodio (D.1817 C. E) in Hausaland, Islam took on a firm footing in the Northern part of the country. It became the state religion. The Fulani Jihadists were not only war generals but also prolific writers, many works were written (in Arabic) by the leader of the movement Shaykh Uthman Dan Fodio, by his brother Abdullahi b. Fudi, who was regarded as the savior of the movement by Sultan Muhammad Bello, son of Shaykh Uthman Dan Fodio and other scholars and teachers.¹³

Yorubaland

Arabic language goes hand in hand when Islam reached the Southern part of Nigeria particularly Yoruba land the presence of Arabic language was also established. The penetration of Arabic in language in Yoruba is not confined to the area of scholarship rather it is employed in routine aspect of societal life.

The establishment of Arabic schools in many parts of Yoruba land for the teaching of Arabic language enjoys a large following among the populace. It is interesting to see that far from dying away with the

spread of the Arabic schools are on the rise in Yoruba land. The proceedings of the *Shari'ah* court establish at Ede, Osun state at Afghani in (1913 C.E) by Obibu Olagunju he first Muslim Timi of Ede were recorded in Arabic by the first alikali (Qadi) whose name was sindiku.¹⁴

Oba Okunola Abbas Aleshiloye (1930-46) the first olubadan of Ibadan the present capital of Oyo state and the most powerful military state of Yoruba in the 19th century include an account of rebellion of the oba chief. There also existed correspondence in Arabic between the Sultan of Sokoto and Iwo community.¹⁵

However, Arabic language was yet to reach its peak in the south when the colonialists arrived and consequently stalled its growth.

Decline in the use of Arabic Language

Decline in the use of Arabic Language started with the coming of the British Colonizers. The growth of the language introduced new administrative structures and Western education. In the North, the last strongholds of the Fulani theocratic state, Kano and Sokoto fell to the British in 1903. Although the British colonial administration first adopted a system of "Indirect Rule" that initially preserved the pre 1903 administrative structure, the loss of political power by Islamic rules and the emergence of Western system of education, with all its drawbacks put an end to the extensive use of Arabic.

The British began to evolve a language policy that would gradually replace Arabic. First, the *Qur'anic* schools were gradually starved of fund and official recognition.¹⁶ Second, although Hausa was named the official language in the North in 1947; while English in 1954 when the Macpherson constitution named English as the official language of Government and administration for the entire country.

Arabic Language as a National Heritage

Arabic language is a language in which not only Nigerian but African history was recorded. This was before the European colonial invasion. There are many works written in Arabic by Nigerians. Many of these manuscripts are now kept in libraries, archives and in a private collection. A renowned historian, Prof. K.O Dike, a former Vice chancellor of the University of the Ibadan, articulates this point thus:

"As a historian, myself, I have taken the keenest interest in this development, for it is through the aid of these Arabic

*documents, and those written in African Language in the Arabic Script, that the scholar will be aided in his task of unlocking the secrets of the African past. It has been a revelation to the whole world of scholarship to realize for the first time that Africans before the European penetration, so far from being a dark continent, was in fact a continent where the light of scholarship shone brightly, as the Arabic works now being discover bear testimony"*¹⁷

Arabic Language is part and parcel of the Nigerian Nation's heritage as can be seen in the many Arabic inscriptions on walls, cars, doors, currency notes, and newspapers. Many correspondences between Nigeria and the outside world are carried out in Arabic, particularly before the coming of the Europeans.

Many Nigerian Muslims can read the Arabic script, although sometimes without understanding the meaning. Some Nigerian languages such as Hausa, Fulude and Kanuri were written in the Arabic script before the introduction of the Latin script.¹⁸

Arabic language has enriched Nigerian languages such as Hausa and Yoruba, words like Alubarika (al-Barakah) Alafia (al-'Afiyah) alebu(al-'Ayb) are borrowed from Arabic.¹⁹

Arabic Language as in Indigenous Language in Nigeria

The Shuwa people in Bornu state speak a variation or dialect of Arabic as their mother tongue. Since the Shuwa Arabs are bona-fide citizens of the geographical entity called Nigeria, it cannot be refuted that their language (Arabic) is an indigenous Nigerian Language.

The late Professor El-Garh, University of Ibadan stresses this point in this way: The first non-native language which brought its educational achievement as well as its rich literature to the Nigerian and West African environment many centuries before a single Nigerian or West African citizens ever spoke a word of English or French indeed one wonders whether Arabic is a non-native language in Nigeria or West Africa since a considerable segment of the native population of present day Nigeria namely the Shuwa Arabs speak Arabic as their mother tongue. Furthermore, a considerable number of large communities in some West African countries have no other mother tongue but a collar of Arabic.²⁰

Non-Muslim Arabs in Nigeria

Arabic language in Nigeria is not confined to the Muslims alone, we have its users and scholars from other religions and all regions of the country. A few notable scholars include names such as H.R Palmers, a British colonial administrator who translated Arabic sources of Bronu Empire. His works include a History of the First Twelve years of the Reign of Mai Idris Alooma of Bronu, Lagos, 1926 and Sudanese Memories (1928).²¹

D. H Biver and Mervyn Hiskett also contributed to Arabic literature of Nigeria. They wrote a joint article, "The Arabic Literature of Nigeria till 1804: A Provisional Account", published in the Bulletin of the school of African and Oriental Studies (B.S.O.A.S) 1962, xxv, 1.pp., 104-148. Hiskett also edited the translation of Tazyin al-Waraqat of Abdullahi ibn Muhammad (1963, Ibadan University Press).²²

Another Non-Muslim scholar of Arabic language who contributed immensely to the development of language in Nigeria is Professor John Hunwick. He assisted in building a programme for the study of Arabic language at the University of Ibadan. He also assisted in establishing the Arabic documentation centre of the Institute of African Studies, University of Ibadan, for the collection, preservation and collation of Nigerian Arabic manuscripts. Among the non-Muslims Scholars who graduated from the programme set up by Hunwick are Dr. Rowland Adeye, Dr. Kole Omotosho, Messers. Bode Ogundunisin, and J.O Oguntunase.²³

Dr. Wilmot Blyden was instrumental to the setting up of the Government Muslim school in Lagos. He was appointed agent of native affairs in October 1895 ostensibly to work with the Lagos Muslims. Dr. Wilmot Blyden was a great admirer of Islam and its culture. He was also proficient in Arabic language. He had organized Western Education for Muslims in Sierra Leone before coming to Lagos.²⁴

Stefan Reichmuth, a German, also contributed to Arabic studies in Nigeria.

Among Nigerian Christian scholars of Arabic language, Prof. Isaac Adejoju Ogunbiyi is a renowned authority.²⁵ He had written extensively on general Arabic literature and linguistics, but his forte is Arabic works of Nigerian Origin.²⁶

Arabic Language as an International Language

Arabic is the sixth official language of the United Nations coming after French, Chinese, Spanish, and Russian languages. This status was awarded to Arabic by the General Assembly in 1973.²⁷

Arabic is also an official language of Organizations of African Unity, the Non-Aligned Movement²⁸ Confederation of African Football Federation of International Football Association among a host of other international bodies. Thus, the use of Arabic language on our country note is just like the use of English or French.²⁹

Conclusion

The Nigerian political problem should not always be seen in the form of the Muslim North versus Christian South and as a consequence taking everything Islamic (Arabic language inclusive) as a demonstration of Northern hegemony. Islam is not only the religion of the majority in the Northern Nigeria but also a substantial percentage in the South particularly the southwest. It is a misnomer to refer to the Nigeria's geo-political structure as Muslim North vs. Christian South. Arabic language is an International language. Indeed, a considerable proportion of the propagators and cultivators of Arabic language in contemporary scholarship are non-Arabs and non-Muslims. Arabic is part of Nigerian heritage and as Ogunbiyi puts it al-din Lillahwath-ThurathLiljami.' To God belongs religion but heritage belongs to all.

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