

ARABIC: AN AFRICAN COMMON HERITAGE

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Abstract

From its inception, Arabic has influenced Nigerian languages. It has impacted positively on their ideas, thoughts and research. Languages like Yoruba, Hausa and Fulfulde borrowed some Arabic vocabularies which unveiled their resemblance with Semitic languages. Before the arrival of the colonialists, some Nigerian languages adopted the practice of writing their languages in Arabic script which is called 'Ajami'. Islam served as a vehicle by which Arabic reached several parts of the world. Being the language of the scripture of Islam, it has always been regarded as inherent part of the religion of Islam. Arabic, which is the mother tongue of many Africans, is taught in many schools and Universities as an important language studied by Muslims and non-Muslims without diminishing the fact that it possesses both social and spiritual significance. The links of Hausa with Arabic, as a language, and Islam, as a religion have always given room for the former to boost its linguistic structure and cultural status in Nigeria. The influence of Arabic on both Hausa and Yoruba is two-fold. Firstly, is the diffusion of Arabic loan-words into these languages, and secondly, is the development of writing system along the lines of the Arabic script long before the Latin script was introduced in Nigeria. This paper examines Arabic as a common African heritage that influenced most African languages in general and Nigerian languages in particular via a qualitative research methodology.

Keywords: Arabic, Africans, Heritage, Nigerian languages, Semitic languages.

Introduction

The major factor which is responsible for the spread of Arabic in places outside Arabian Peninsula is the religion of Islam. This is because of its linguistic affiliation with the Qur'an, hadith, commentary of the Qur'an, Islamic law etc. Arabic has a link with Islam and so interwoven with it like a Siamese twins. This intimacy is reflected in the attitudes and beliefs of both Arab and non-Arab Muslims over many centuries. They revered the Qur'an which has a great influence on their religion and socio-political life. The holy book of Islam represents the highest linguistic achievement of the Arabic language. This among other reasons facilitated the rapid development and spread of the language and also contributed in no small measure, to its transformation into a great language among other great languages of medieval and modern times. (Malik S.H.A. 1980:32).

It is widely known that every Muslim must recite the Qur'an which has Arabic as its original language in every five times daily prayer, in spite of anybody's native tongue. This had promoted Arabic to high level both as a native and a foreign language.

In the early centuries of Islam, there were tremendous developments in the study of Arabic grammar, lexicography, language-history and phonetics which were as a result of being a religion's language because of religious stimulus and aesthetic appreciation. (Malik S.H.A.1980:32).

Many researchers on the beginning of the traditional system of Arabic and Islamic learning in Nigeria credit the Northern part of the country as its forerunner (Galadanci 1982:70). The enormous activities of Sokoto Jihad writers who popularized Arabic literary culture contributed immensely to the development of Arabic and its spread beyond the borders of Hausaland (Abdul-Rahmon 2012:15). Ogunbiyi (1987:10) opines the introduction of Islam into the old Kanuri Bornu Empire in the 9th century presumes that the Kanem-Bornu Empire had cultivated Arabic and Islamic learning long before the Jihad of the 19th century. This is the opinion we strongly recognize. (Abdul-Rahmon 2012:15).

Teaching and learning Arabic in the Traditional Setting

The Yoruba Muslims and their counterparts in other parts of Nigeria adopted the traditional system which is of three stages. The first stage is

where the Qur'an is divided into 60 parts (Eesu in Yoruba or Hizb) and was learnt by heart gradually. (Abdul-Rahmon 2008:87). This is the elementary stage. After gaining proficiency at this stage, the student could go further in his study. It was at the Ilmi (advanced) stage which may be regarded as the secondary level that the student would begin to learn the meanings of the verses he had memorized. This level merged imperceptibly with the higher one, which in modern usage may be termed the post-secondary level. (Fafunwa 1974:55). It was discovered that a student at this stage would be required to choose his teacher for any particular subject based on available (Tira, Yoruba) textbook. (Abdul-Rahmon 2008). The above learning process should not be perceived as a well-designed education system whereby students move from one lower stage to a higher level based on a yearly certified examination model. This is not to say that there were no terminal points at the end of the stages. Each stage was marked by ceremony (Walimah Yoruba) and graduands would be presented with a certificate/license. The *Ijaza* (license or certificate) was construed primarily as license to practice as a teacher (Mallam) rather than as a prerequisite for promotion to a higher level (Abdul-Rahmon 2008). The subjects offered at Ilmi stage covered a wide range of traditional Arabic and Islamic learning. These included: *Sarf* (Etymology), *Nahw* (Grammar), *Mantiq* (Logic) *al-Falaq wal-Hisab* (Astrology) and (Arithmetic), *al-jabr wal Muqabalah* (Algebra), *Balagha* (Rhetorics), *Fiqh* (Jurisprudence), *Aqidah* (Theology), *Tafsir al-Qur'an* (Quranic exegesis), *Hadith* (Tradition of the Prophet) and *Sirah* (Biography of the Prophet). Nevertheless, it was not always that a teacher would attain perfection in all these subjects. (Abdul-Rahmon 2012:16).

Moreover, due to acute dearth of qualified teachers, students moved from their towns/villages to major Islamic centres such as Ibadan, Ilorin, Iseyin, Iwo, Abeokuta, Later Epe, Osogbo and sometimes Bida in search of reputable specialists in their areas of interest. The endless search for reputable teachers might take a student to many major centres. It is this endless search for textbooks and teachers that informed the Yoruba saying that 'A ke ewu ni keu' (learning Arabic continues till one turns grey-haired). (Abdul-Rahmon 2008:87). The system also allowed students to choose textbooks on each subject and then look for teachers who would be his guide. Most of the textbooks, in decorated manuscripts, were limited in quantity and were invariably personal

copies brought along by the itinerant scholars. Such works were copied by the interested students who were taken through them by the same teachers or other scholars. Many did not stop at copying; they rather added explanatory notes which became textbooks for many other students (Abdul-Rahmon 2012:17).

Later on, abridgement and versification of classical works became a venture that added colour to Arabic literary culture in this region. Well known among the authors of this genre in Yorubaland part of Africa, were Shaykh Yakub of Ikirun (Abdul-Rahmon 2008:89).

Arabic: An African Common Heritage

Africa is greatly indebted to Arabic for serving as the vehicle of a vast literature, as Africans, can proudly call our own. Many centuries before the coming of Europeans to West Africa, Arabic had brought its educational achievements as well as its rich literature to the West African environment (Malik S.H.A. 1980:32).

Researchers into the African past and its languages have asserted that the records kept in Arabic are a common heritage and so the language should be accorded due recognition since it is the most widely used indigenous tongue on the continent. Historians like Professor Kenneth Dike, hinge their opinions on Arabic being the vast treasure of African past (Dike 1965) sums it up this way:

It had been a revelation to the whole of scholarship to realize for the first time that Africa 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 discovered bear testimony. (Malik S.H.A. 1980:32).

Malik, an Arabist, refer to Arabic as a major donor language to other African languages, while others' support stem from its religious value. Arabic has enriched some indigenous African languages with hundreds of religious, political and commercial words and expressions. For example, Hausa is rich in words of Arabic origin. Not only that vocabulary items are borrowed from Arabic, Hausa as a language has

some pronominal suffixes which come from Arabic. Two of the suffixes are: *Ka* and *Ki*. In Hausa *Litafika* (Your book, masculine), *Litafiki* (Your book, feminine). These correspond to Arabic *Kitabuka* and *Kitabuki* respectively. Yoruba language has many Arabic borrowed words. For example, words like *aleebu* (defect/fault), *riba* (usury), *iwaasu* (sermons/admonition), *kadara* (destiny/fate), and *seriya* (Islamic law) are from Arabic, '*al-aib*, *Ribaa*, *wa'z*, *qadar* and *Shari'ah* respectively. Swahili is another African language upon which Arabic has great influence. This language is widely spoken in East Africa. Also, Arabic is one of the languages used by the United Nations Organization (U.N.O) and one of the three official languages of the African Union (A.U.), the rest two are French and English. (Malik S.H.A. 1980:33).

The influence of Arabic on some African languages such as Hausa, Yoruba and Swahili as a donor language, is enough for it to enjoy the status of a “ An African **Common Heritage**”. Both Swahili and Hausa are leading African – international languages and most-widely spoken indigenous languages on the continent of Africa. (Abdul – Rahmon 2012:31).

Swahili is the most popular medium in many East African countries and Hausa is the leading West African indigenous language while Arabic is the main indigenous tongue throughout the North African axis. Yoruba race speaks Yoruba language. This is a race that is highly educated and an urbanized group that constitutes the Southwest of Nigeria and other West African countries. It is no gainsaying that Arabic renders advantageous services that are obvious but it still does not enjoy the pride of place in the education sector of Southwestern states. It is inadequate to apportion blames but one must be bold enough to consider some hard facts. The issue of Arabic in Nigeria is a tangled complexity when examined from the perspective of the multi-religious states of the country. The failure of specialists in Arabic to convince all and sundry of the commonness of the language as a heritage constitutes another obstacle to its teaching and learning. The following observation by Ogunbiyi (1987:22) is apposite here when discussing the issue of the survival of Arabic in Southwestern Nigeria:

The most serious constraints to the learning of Arabic in the country are people's social and cultural attitudes to the learning of the

language. To many people in Nigeria, Arabic is synonymous to Islam and in general, none but the Muslims would be interested in learning it. Not realizing the other non-religious uses of the language... even many Muslim children in formal schools refuse to choose Arabic as one of their subjects, and if they are persuaded to learn it in their first and second years, they soon drop it due to absence of proper motivation and the scorn and derision of their mates who often ask them derisively 'Do you want to become an imam'?... there are a number of non-Muslim adult students who for various personal reasons have studied Arabic language at their post-secondary school level. The irony of their situation is that the antagonism against them comes from some conservative Muslim scholars who regard the language as an exclusive preserve of Muslims. These scholars are always suspicious of the motives of any non-Muslim studying Arabic since they do not (or perhaps they choose not to) know of other uses of the language.

The response to this assertion is of two edges, as there is prevalent ignorance on both sides of the divide. Many people are not aware that the first set of graduates of Arabic and Islamic studies from the University of Ibadan, Ibadan Nigeria was made up of Christians and the first Head of the Department of Arabic and Islamic studies, at inception in the University is a Christian i.e John Hunwick. Also the first product of the Department to bag Ph.D in Arabic is a Christian and the first graduate to make First class degree in Arabic at the University is also a Christian i.e. David Ayagere and Isaac Ogunbiyi respectively. Moreover, the first Yoruba man to become a Professor of Arabic and to be honoured with the national award of Officer of the Order of Niger (OON) for his service to Arabic language is a Christian i.e Isaac Ogunbiyi. The first Ibadan graduate to bag a Ph.D in Arabic Drama at the

University of Edinburg is a Christian and the first head of government to establish Arabic Teachers' test in the Southwest of Nigeria was a Christian. i.e. Kole Omotosho and Late Obafemi Awolowo respectively. (Abdul-Rahmon 2012:33).

Considering these achievements, Nigerian Christians have contributed immensely to the growth and development of Arabic, a university language which occupies a position that is not less in status and rank than that occupied by other international languages. It is saddening that while French language is growing in leaps and bounds due to government's favourable attention, Arabic continuously lacks the desired attention in government circles in the South. The Psychological hatred and fear that non- Muslims harbor for Arabic arise generally from the wrong notion of "exclusiveness" held by Muslims only and especially attributing Arabic scripts to forms of magic (*tira, Yoruba*) and divination. Ogunbiyi (1987:23) succinctly puts it this way:

At the moment, the Arabic script is held in awesome fear by many a non-Muslim who sees it as veritable source of magic. This notion especially perpetrated in the dreaded (tira, Yoruba) amulet is unfortunately aided and encouraged by many Muslims.

This opinion still holds till date. What has changed is the general opinion held by many Arabists in the northern part of Nigeria that the English language is an alien language that should be totally rejected including the English mode of dress. The reason for this is the defamation of Arabic language and Islamic culture by the colonial masters in Nigeria right from their inception. (Raji 2002:22). Muslims were not comfortable that the colonial masters accepted English language for employment in Nigeria while literacy in Arabic language was not reckoned with for practical uses in government and official circles. To this effect, the Emir of Katsina in Nigeria on behalf of the Northern House of Chiefs, complained bitterly on why English language should be included in the school curriculum along with European teachers in Arabic and Islamic law Schools (Raji 2002:21-22). Considering the huge damage the colonialists had done to the teaching of Arabic and Islamic studies, the fact is that English has come to stay as a lingua franca in

Nigeria and has become a must-learn for one to be functional in the official circle. It is with fluency in English language that graduates of Arabic and Islamic Studies can function well considering the philosophy and objectives of the Arts disciplines as contained in the Nigeria University Commission (NUC) Minimum Academic Standard (Abdul-Rahmon 2012:34). In that document, some of the relevant clauses are:

- (a) To develop and enhance our students' awareness of the value of their own social, cultural and spiritual environment.
- (b) To equip them to contribute meaningfully towards the attainment of national goals and the satisfaction of national needs.
- (c) To instill in them the spirit of self-reliance, self-pride and self-actualization.
- (d) To ensure that all programmes should have built-in mechanism in which National aspirations are affirmed. Such mechanisms should take cognizance of socio-political developments, the economy of the society, the fact of our pluralistic society, and the need to forge a strong and united country (NUC 1989).

It is evident from this quote that Arts disciplines such as languages and religions are not designed to train Imams and Evangelists. The Department of Arabic and Islamic studies, University of Ibadan, Nigeria has long ago championed the cause of introducing Arabic and publishing research findings in English. This is by way of encouraging non-Muslims to enroll for degrees in the twin disciplines. The reason as to make the writings available and accessible for the public without excluding any section of the community as public universities are funded from a pool of national wealth. Failure to incorporate this idea by some Yoruba-speaking states in Nigeria has resulted to flooding of the graduate Market with Arabists who could barely express themselves in English speaking official circle. They also turn to traditional Islamic setting for self-actualization. This is a setting that has already been over-subscribed by products of madrasah system – an ill-organized system. (Abdul-Rahmon 2012:35).

One's expectation is that University education would provide the needed platform for those Mallams with Arabic School background to launch into academic arena where good written and spoken English is very essential. To one's dismay, some of the universities refused to adopt the English language because of the inherited anti-imperialism complex. (Abdul-Rahmon 2012:36). Aside the transferred imperialist hatred for

Arabic, Muslims and non-Muslims who are not literate in Arabic do not have the conviction that any worthwhile academic exercise is taking place in the discipline of Arabic and Islamic studies. It appears that Arabic Scholars have locked the door to their research findings that are often written in Arabic. Those who have implored the system of writing their findings in English are being tagged as orientalist in the way they promote good spoken and written English in their training. It is on record that what we know today as Modern Arabic Literature evolved from the writings of the young Arabs who were dispatched to France, Italy and Russia to acquire degrees after the withdrawal of Napoleon Bonaparte from Egypt in the late 18th century. Their degrees were in courses other than Arabic and Islamic Studies for which Al-Azhar University is renowned. They did so as patriots in order to benefit their Arab compatriots. (Abdul-Rahmon 2012:37).

It should be noted that the popular ‘Arab Shakespeare’, Ahmad Shawqi, studied translation and later graduated in law from Montpellier, France, with near perfect proficiency in French. He, with solo-effort, was the architect of the modern trends that later changed the face of classical Arabic literature through his copious adaptation of Western literary genres to the Arabic poetry. He and some others who studied in Europe wrote in Arabic national language rather than French language they studied. (Abdul-Rahmon 2012:37).

From the above, it would be discovered that the attraction to Arabic language has been influenced not only by aesthetic and religious appreciation but also cultural considerations and by strong historical consciousness. (Malik S.H.A. 1980:33).

In many universities the world over, the usual practice is to make the Arabic unit an adjunct of Islamic Studies in a two-in-one department like the one in the University of Ibadan, Nigeria and many other places. This was the popular option until recent time when some European and American universities started to designate it as Department of Middle Eastern Studies. The vogue in the Middle East and Gulf states is to have a separate faculty for each of the two disciplines. The coherence of Arabic and Islamic Studies should not be misunderstood that non-Muslims cannot teach Islamic Studies (Ayantayo 2011:123). Such claim is erroneous. While it is a fact that a scholar can teach his religion better than non-committed one, academic pursuits in religious studies need competence rather than religious conviction. Competence in Arabic is

required for specialists in Islamic studies in spite of their faith. It has been observed that deficiency in Arabic is responsible for many misconceptions and misrepresentations of Islam as a result of mistranslations of terms as contained in the works of many Nigerian non-Muslim scholars of Islamic studies (Adelowo 1982).

Conclusion and Recommendation

Arabic, being the mother tongue of the Shuwa Arabs of Borno state, Nigeria and an international language, its relevance to Nigeria and Africa in general from the historical, cultural, religious and linguistic perspective would seem to suggest that it is not being given its right position and recognition it deserves by the language education planners in Africa and Nigeria in particular.

Arabic had served Africa as a medium of literary communication long before the British colonialists. Muslims could have accepted secular education without much ado if the British colonialists were not favourably disposed to Arabic and Islamic learning together with literacy in English. They would not have 'criminalized' secular education as it were had the Christian indoctrination not been seriously attached to it. Arabic, being a language extensively used daily for religious worship, fits well by reason of indigenous language development, for government patronage. In many full-fledged traditional schools and institutes known as Madrasah, Ma'had or Tsangayah, Arabic is the only medium of instruction where learners' competence in both written and spoken skills is considerably high. It is on account of lack of commitment by various governments that many Muslims have sustained the age-long hatred for secular education. This without any gainsaying is a development that has taken a frightening dimension in the Northern part of Nigeria in forms of Boko Haram and Al-majirai. (Abdul-Rahmon 2012:40). In view of the above, we can recommend that official addresses could be translated into Arabic as a way to demystify Arabic and deflate the exclusive negative status it enjoys among non-Muslims. Also, Arabic language could be utilized as a functional tool for mass literacy in areas where Arabic is reverently held. With the preponderance of Arabic materials in private and public circles, the usual but unnecessary fear of Arabic tira/talisman will have been dispelled and the common heritage of Arabic materials really becomes common to all Nigerians and Africans in general.

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