

Preservation and Conservation Efforts of Ajami Manuscript in Northern Nigeria

By

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Abstract

This study examines the efforts of preservation and conservation of Ajami Manuscript. It reports the role of Ajami not only as an ethnic or national but also a regional system of writing for information and communication. The study underscores the assumption that Ajami is no longer a preserve of the Muslim Hausa speaking people of the Hausaland. It is indeed one of the systems of graphic for use in education and information communication purposes. Hausa was committed to writing as far back as the 13th Century when Islam was established in the Hausaland. During this time Arabic letters were adopted in writing Hausa, and the system was referred to as AJAMI. A lot of literature has been written with this system. Up till now, AJAMI is being used in Hausa especially by Islamic scholars. However, Ajami is now endangered; it runs the risk of being threatened for extinction as an "outdated" medium of education and information communication. The attenuating intrusion and influences of Western Colonialism, civilization and education are seen as contributing factors of detraction. Specifically therefore, this study aims to reflect the urgent need for preservation and conservation of Ajami Manuscript; most especially in the present dispensation of information and communication technology, with the hope that it would be prospective and valuable as evidence of written records for historical reference. Hence the necessity to provide functional techniques of preservation and conservation of the Ajami Manuscript.

Introduction

Generally speaking, writing is one of the most common means of communication, education and dissemination of information in every human society. For any society to be able to handle the use of language effectively, to write manuscript, it has to be literate. Adamu (2009) reveals that Hausa society was not literate before the advent of Islam in Hausaland. It learned to be literate so that it can handle emerging manuscript. Literacy was thus introduced into the Hausaland. Subsequently, adopting the Arabic characters in Hausa writing emerged. It is known as Ajami. The Muslim traders, Merchants and Clerics were the fore runners of literacy in Hausaland. The new skill spread in the various communities as the religion of Islam spread. Therefore as many Hausa people and other Nigerians become literate in Arabic Language, they would have the ability to use – Arabic letters and write their manuscripts in indigenous languages such as Hausa, Fulfulde, Kanuri, Nupe and Yoruba.

According to Adamu (2009) an Ajami Manuscript refers to a kind of hand written (message) in which the characters are Arabic and the language is specifically Hausa. Abdulmumin (2009) is of the opinion that Ajami is basically an innovation of the early Hausa Muslim scholars in which Arabic letters are adopted to express and communicate Hausa in written form for the purpose of education, communication and information. Having acquired the knowledge of Arabic language and the skills of writing, the Hausa scholars and other scholars

especially in the Kanem Borno began to produce Arabic/Ajami Manuscripts.

Production of Ajami Manuscripts in Hausaland

The production of Ajami Manuscripts in Hausaland began between the last quarter of the 15th Century and in the 16th Century, Adamu (2009: 8). It started with the works of two foreign scholars who came to Hausaland and settled, (Kano, 1978). The first was a Moroccan scholar Abdul-Rahman who lived and died in Katsina in 1520. By the 17th Century Arabic/Ajami Manuscripts which were written by indigenous Hausa and Fulani scholars began to manifest (Kani, 1978: 23). Several famous Hausa scholars wrote many books, commentaries poems, and other literary works; among these scholars were Muhammad Al-Katshanawi, known as Ibn Al-Sabbagh but better known all over Hausaland by the name *Waliyi Danmarina*. It is reported that he wrote a number of books and commentaries, but only three of his works are said to have survived. Sultan Muhammad Bello had described him in his book *Infraqalmaysouri* as a corridor of knowledge. He was a critic and a poet. He died in Katsina in 1655. Another scholar of reputation was Danmarina's students called Abu Abdullah B. Masani who was better known in Hausaland as *Waliyi Dan Masani*. He was a scholar based in Katsina. Some of his works are still extant, (Balarabe, 1986: 24).

In the second half of the 18th Century, a flood gate for the production of Arabic/Ajami – Manuscripts in Hausaland was opened and for the next one and half centuries the territory experienced an

avalanche of Arabic/Ajami Manuscripts produced by numerous scholars whose number cannot yet be determined. The field research to recover the manuscripts of that period is not yet completed, (Adamu, 2009: 10). It is however, important to acknowledge here that Hamman (2009: 17) has reported two ongoing preservation efforts undertaken by the Arewa House. First, to procure and preserve the collections of the late Qadi of Adamawa, ModibboAhmaduFufore who lived and died in Yola (1957) Adamawa State. The second is on the collection of the Sheikh Ahmad Arabi of Jos, former grand Khadi of Benue – Plateau State who lived and died in Jos (1973). Part of the report reads as follows: apart from Manuscripts in classified Arabic, Sheikh Arabi's collection includes a lot of Hausa and Fulfulde Ajami materials. Some were written by him, while others were written on him, (Hamman, 2009). There is no denying the fact that the literary works of the ShehuUsumanuDanfodiyo and his family was a watershed in the history of the Arabic/Ajami Manuscripts in Hausaland. Danfodiyo was of Fulani ethnic origin but was quite fluent in Hausa -- language because his family had lived in Hausaland for centuries. Before the end of his life in 1817, he wrote not less than 154 works. These titles were listed by SakaBalogun and reproduced by Balarabe Ahmad. Adamu (2009: 11) summarized the production of Arabic/Ajami by ShehuUsumanu Danfodiyo and his family as follows:

"ShehuDanfodiyo was not just a jihad leader he was, perhaps equally importantly, the head of the most prolific family of writers in Nigeria if not in the whole of West Africa. His brother Abdullahi was credited with 131 Arabic Manuscripts of various descriptions, Sultan Muhammad Bello, Shehu's son, has written no less than 145 books and Pamphlets. Other children of the Shehu, Male and Female, have also written books and poems on various Subjects. Even Shehu's grand children were not left out of the gigantic intellectual movement. Besides, there were numerous in-laws of the family of different generations who have also written Arabic Manuscripts. The language of communication they used were Arabic, Hausa (Ajami) and Fulfulde".

One fact of history which lingers in the minds of historians and will, continue to linger, is that there are many Arabic/Ajami Manuscripts written by both ShehuUsumanuDanfodiyo extended family

and several other scholars, in different parts of Hausaland, Borno, Adamawa, Nupe and Yorubaland; which have not yet been recovered. This makes it impossible to give the number of Arabic/Ajami Manuscripts which the scholars have written. Of course, there is no doubting the fact that there are several Arabic/Ajami Manuscripts which are with various custodians in Nigeria. Therefore, there is the need now to procure those manuscripts that have not been procured from the custody of existing individual scholars and/or the family of those who passed away; and preserve and conserve them for the benefit of the present generation, and indeed future generation.

Again, the activities of early Hausa Muslim Scholars who have used Hausa Ajami to educate, communicate and inform their audience, down to the literary works of ShehuUsumanu Danfodiyo and his family, who were not of Hausa ethnic origin, had vindicated the significance of Hausa Ajami not only as an ethnic or national but rather as a regional language of education, communication, information and propagation. Thus, their works particularly in Hausa Ajami has further internationalized the use of an indigenous language for the purpose of education and communication.

The implication of these antecedents means several colonial administrators that were sent to Northern Nigeria from Britain must have to learn and understand Hausa language and of course the Hausa Ajami. Hausa Ajami had become the official means of communication between the emirs, and the colonial rulers; for judiciary; and, for education. The significance of Hausa Ajami continued for many years before the introduction of Hausa Boko under the colonial administration of Governor Lugard in the 1900s which subsequently overshadowed the use of Hausa Ajami. Abdulmumin (2009) observed that although the use of Hausa Boko has now officially replaced the utilization of Hausa Ajami, the use of Ajami has continued to flourish and Ajami, is simply still alive.

Preservation and Conservation of Ajami Manuscripts

According to Alegebeleye (2009: 2) advocates for the protection of cultural resources, used the term "preservation" and "conservation" interchangeably. Today, preservation is an umbrella term for many policies and options of action including conservation treatment. In other words, conservation is a subset of preservation. Preservation is therefore the acquisition, organization and distribution of resources to prevent deterioration or renew the usability of

selected group of materials. For any society to take pride in its past so that it could be able to utilize the resources and materials of the past, which are referred to as the legacy of the people, it must be able to preserve and conserve the legacy of the past. Preservation and conservation of culture and resources will automatically serve as inspiration for the development of the present and subsequent benefit for future development. Hamid (1983: 1), has summarized that: "Nations, who take pride in their past try to preserve, revive the works and achievements of their earlier generation which turn into legacy. This legacy remains a source of pride and honour as well as the means of inspiration and guidance for future planning".

In view of the foregoing, it is important to recognize the significance of the Ajami manuscripts as left behind by the Hausa Muslim scholars from the 17th Century to the 20th Century. According to Hamid (1983: 1) the legacy of the Hausa Muslim Scholars Stands unique among all other legacies. The writings left by the Hausa Muslim scholars have been awakening the conscience of the people and inspiring reformers the world over. It is on record that these scholars have written volumes of works on various subjects in Ajami. Indeed, the relevance of Ajami manuscripts in the preservation and conservation of the Hausa Cultural heritage could not be overemphasized. Bunza (2009: 15) observed that: Ajami is the most reliable document of the Hausaland. He points that: "Survival of Ajami means survival of our cultural heritage in its originality. Thus, to reconstruct our past in its original form, we must create a special project for Ajami manuscripts and materials. Ajami is the most reliable document of our heritage which was unadulterated in its origin and input. Arising from the above observation, the issues bordering on the preservation and conservation of the Ajami manuscripts are very important, so that it will continue to survive alongside with other cultural heritage in its original form. In short, there is the urgent need for functional commitment to save the Nigeria Hausa Ajami Manuscripts.

Techniques of Preservation and Conservation of Ajami Manuscripts

Alegbeleye (2008: 6) reported a number of eye witness accounts of the unsatisfactory condition of Arabic/Ajami repositories in Northern and Southern Nigeria. Similarly, Adamu (2009: 14) has articulated the name of places both inside and outside Nigeria where Arabic and Ajami Manuscripts are being kept and he added that these manuscripts were a collection of private and public holdings. In Nigeria, some of the places he cited

are: the Jos Museum in Jos, Arewa House in Kaduna, the National Archives, Kaduna and Lugard Hall Library Kaduna; other places outside Nigeria include among others Timbuktu (in Mali), Tripoli (in Libya) Cairo (in Egypt), London, Germany and Paris. An interesting revelation in Adamu's presentation is how he has expressed his ardent hope of preservation and conservation of Ajami manuscripts as follows: "It is the ardent hope of the present writer that Arewa House in Kaduna will one day be facilitated to use the modern technology available and bring the valuable holdings of all these various repositories under one roof land in an edited form". It is therefore noteworthy to mention here that the ongoing preservation efforts by Arewa House to procure and transfer the remnant of Arabic/Ajami manuscripts from two families one in Yola and the other in Jos to the Arewa House Archives is commendable. However, Adamu (2009:4) seems to lament on the slow pace of recovery effort of Arabic/Ajami manuscripts which was started in the 1960s only to be abandoned in the 1980s. Thus, the ongoing efforts of recovery by Arewa House represent the renewal of interest in preservation and conservation of Arabic/Ajami manuscripts as a cultural heritage in Nigeria.

Some of the latest development efforts on preservation and conservation of manuscripts generally, are some information and field work on situational condition of the Timbuktu manuscripts, in the Republic of Mali by Jappie (2014). Jappie, is a professor of African History at University of Cape Town, Republic of South Africa. He is currently working on the history of the collection of manuscripts in Timbuktu. He has made many trips to Timbuktu to conduct fieldwork. He was in Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, Nigeria, on the 5th February, 2014, where he gave a talk on "The Use of Manuscripts as Important Source Materials for Research". He reported the significant role of manuscripts as primary data with which to write and re-write the history of mankind in his various efforts to develop his environment. He revealed that various information on diverse human endeavours in such areas as history, culture, education, science and technology, poetry, language, literature and communication skills are contained there in the manuscripts. He appealed to the scholars and students in our various institutions of learning, most especially the universities in African countries to avail themselves to the manuscripts in their respective environments. He argued that the use of manuscripts as important source materials for research could not be overemphasized. He is of the opinion that if the Europeans could use the manuscripts to produce

materials for the dissemination of knowledge why not the Africans themselves! He observed that is time scholars and students should relent efforts on the use of secondary data for the production of knowledge. Rather, they should pay attention to the use of manuscripts to obtain primary information for advancement of education and knowledge.

He emphasized that scholars and students could not afford to despair in the conduct of fieldwork in order to have access to the manuscripts which are still lingering with their custodians in various African communities. Again, those manuscripts which are available in some libraries, archives and other departments and centres could be accessed through fieldwork or global media of Information and Communication Technology (ICT).

Various comments and observations, supported view of the presentation and emphasized the further utilization of the various manuscripts for the production and advancement of knowledge. In view of the foregoing, the following suggestions should be considered as some kind of functional commitment to the preservation and conservation of Ajami Manuscripts.

1. Continued efforts by Arewa House and other similar research centres and institutes in Nigeria, as well as interested individual scholars to procure, recover and transfer the existing Ajami manuscripts from the holdings of the families of great Hausa scholars and that of the disciples of ShehuUsumanuDanfodiyo who were flag-bearers should be intensified. Most of the disciples were scholars who had propagated and communicated the intellectual ideas of the 1804 Jihad Movement in Arabic/Ajami Manuscripts.
2. Research fellows should establish a good rapport between themselves and the custodians of Private libraries in a manner that would amicably persuade the custodians to agree to transfer their collections to public centres and institutes.
3. Research fellows should disabuse custodians of any fear of dispossession of private property which are cherished as legacy of ancestors. Rather, emphasis should be made on how to avoid, accident and natural disaster such as fire outbreak, flood, building collapse etc.
4. In the event of reluctance or refusal to transfer or surrender the holding of such manuscripts by the private custodians, it is suggested here that offers of special training should be extended to such holders on how to preserve and conserve the manuscripts at least in the interest of preserving the manuscripts and their protection. Such custodians should be made to attend workshop. This suggestion conforms with the workshop conducted by Biddle (2010) under the auspices of Arewa House.
5. To collaborate with foreign experts and professional conservators, curators and other organization both national and international in order to convene a workshop to train the local personnel of the private and public repositories in Nigeria. This is most especially required so that these personnel would be introduced and exposed to the current knowledge, as well as technical skills of preservation and conservation of Manuscripts. It is essentially necessary to acknowledge here that Arewa House is already championing the course of collaboration for the advancement of knowledge of preservation and conservation of Arabic/Ajami Manuscripts in Nigeria.
6. The provision of equipment, materials and chemical that could be used to preserve the existing Manuscripts and prevent them from further attack of acid should be pursued with vigour. As reported by Batiste (2007) and Biddle (2008) a large number of the Arabic/Ajami Manuscript are acidic while others are in fact brittle. Alegbeleye (2009: 9) had also recommended that the solution to acidic paper is deacidification. Deacidification is a technique that neutralizes the acidity in paper and adds a buffer to prevent future acidic attack. It is however, an expensive undertaking.
7. Suggestion here is that adequate funding is also necessary. As long as there is need for the preservation and conservation of Arabic/Ajami manuscripts, no amount of money is too much or expensive to spend in order to preserve cultural property heritage. Therefore, funds should be sourced from anywhere possible to finance the actualization of the efforts. Adequate funding should be used to pay the remuneration of the personnel; purchase and supply of material and chemical, as well as to maintain equipment and other supporting services.
8. The provision of functional conservation laboratories as well as trained personnel and/or conservators that would effectively and efficiently manned the laboratories, equipment, material and the chemical that would be contained therein for the preservation of the Arabic/Ajami manuscripts should be provided. The establishment of the laboratories should be done in accordance with international standards.

9. It is the considered view of this paper that without adequate and effective supervision the process for the realization of the goals and objectives of the preservation and conservation of Arabic/Ajami manuscripts in Nigeria will take a long time to be achieved. However, the flair and zeal of the activities of relevant institutions such as Arewa House and Ford Foundation Office of West Africa which are vigorously pursuing the process of preserving Arabic/Ajami Manuscripts as cultural heritage in Nigeria is commendable.

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to report the significance of Arabic/Ajami manuscripts in Nigeria by presenting its historical perspective. The production of these manuscripts by the early Hausa scholars as well as the use of Hausa Ajami in the promotion and communication of the ideas of the Sokoto Caliphate by the leaders of the 1804 Islamic Reform was also highlighted. The issue of preservation has equally been a central focus, and had been discussed with reference to preservation and conservation of Arabic/Ajami manuscripts in Nigeria. It is only hoped that the suggestions so far made here, will stimulate further discourse in realization of the functional preservation and conservation of Arabic/Ajami manuscripts in Nigeria.

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