



## Colonial Impact on the Socio-Communicative Functions of Arabic Language in Nigeria: An Overview

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### Abstract

Before the advent of the colonialist in Nigeria, Arabic language was used as the official language of communication and of daily intercourse. Historical records also confirmed that for about three centuries between 17<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries Arabic documents remained the only source of information for European writers on western and central Sudan. A large number of these scholarly works were written by native West African authors in Arabic language, or in their native languages using Arabic scripts. However, the scramble for West African countries by the Europeans in the 19<sup>th</sup> century brought about the occupation of the areas by the imperialists. This led to change in socio-cultural life of the people of the regions including the Muslims, which in turn has a spillover effect on the communicative functions of Arabic language. Thus, this paper intends to trace a brief history of Arabic in Nigeria, its functions as the language of communication and its subsequent subversion by the European colonialist. Special attention is giving to the present status of Arabic language in Nigeria and the subsequent implications.

**Key words:** Colonial impact; Arabic Language; West African; Nigeria

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### INTRODUCTION: ADVENT OF ARABIC LANGUAGE IN NIGERIA

Historically, Arabic language and Islamic religion came to this part of the world known as Nigeria today through the North African States of Egypt, part of the Sudan, Tunisia, Morocco, etc. (Sirajudeen, 2003). This process was heralded through commercial contacts that connected these states and the south of Sahara as far back as before 11<sup>th</sup> century. It is not easy, however to state precisely when this commercial contacts began between the Arab world and their counterparts in the south of Sahara (Kanem Borno And some Hausa lands). But opinions are unanimous on the fact that Islam came to these parts of the globe (Kanem Borno and Kano Hausa states) between 11<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries respectively. Therefore, the history of Arabic language is not far from this because the Arab traders who were sometimes the preachers of Islam introduced their language to their trade counterparts and converts for easy communication.

It is believed that with the expansion of Islam, Arabic also spread and eventually became the official language of government and correspondence in some of the defunct kingdoms as far back as 13<sup>th</sup> century. It is also very important to mention that in the south western part of Nigeria such as Ibadan a lot of Arabic heritage were discovered most of which were letters from the traditional rulers and *Ulama'* (scholars) to their counterparts in other places in Yoruba land of Nigeria (Ogunbiyi, 2005). This is a clear testimony that Arabic has also served as the language of communication in this part of the country.

Arabic scholarship in Nigeria, however, started in Borno and other Hausa States and from there spread to other places like Yoruba land where its learning was given a sense of belonging because the Muslims converts then and up till today- considered Arabic learning as an integral aspect of their religion-Islam. The reason being that some ritual acts in the religion must be observed in Arabic

language, among these acts are call to prayers (*Al-Adhan*), the recitations of Qur'an in prayers which are key aspects of Islam.

The system of learning Arabic and Islam in Nigeria then was through traditional system as stated by Galadanci (1993, p.150), the system where the schools were established by Muslim scholars, who vary in their educational qualifications. Some of who may be graduates of Qur'anic schools and others with a higher degree of Islamic and Arabic knowledge. Without specific curriculum, knowledge then was whole some and not compartmentalized. Muslim scholars were champions of value –laden knowledge. A learned Muslim scholar for instance, was a jurist, expert in medicine, astronomy, astrology, philosophy, science etc. Graduates of these schools were teachers and most of the times preachers of Islam (Alfa & Abubakar, 2012).

Hence, Muslims learning Arabic then was primarily for proper understanding of their religion. It was equally observed that in Nigeria Arabic was studied to serve Islam. This explains why greater percentages of Arabic works of Nigerian Authorship were concentrated on Islamic subjects. And in cases where other subjects were discussed Islamic terminologies were often used. Example of the situations could be observed from literary works of scholars like Abdullah b. Fudi, Uthman b. Fudi and other great writers of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

The community of the Nigerian Islamic revivalists of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was established on Islamic principles subjected to the canons of Islamic Law, which necessitated thorough knowledge before application. Hence, the scholars wrote many texts on Islamic tradition of reforms, as regards politics, ethnography, sociology, education, economy and urbanization, historiography, law, jurisprudence as well as administrative organization. All these subjects were in Arabic. They also produced numerous titles in prose and poetry on subjects that cut across disciplinary boundaries such as history and medicine, apart from the traditional religious themes of Islamic jurisprudence, Qur'anic exegesis and different aspects of the Arabic language itself, including its grammar (Ogunbiyi, Opcit, pp.1-30.).

Before the defeat of the Sokoto Caliphate and the colonization of the Northern region, there existed a very viable culture of learning and scholarship. The founder and leader of the Sokoto Caliphate, Usman dan Fodio and his brother, Abdullahi dan Fodio, and son, Muhammad Bello, were great scholars who had written hundreds of books on the subjects mentioned above. The scholarly contributions of the founding fathers undoubtedly helped the Caliphate to be an important centre for Islamic and Arabic education. Arabic learning in Nigeria in this spirit has exclusive process which has tremendously shaped the destiny of the scholars' emotion and thoughts as manifested in their literary productions

## ARABIC LANGUAGE AND SOCIO-COMMUNICATION IN NIGERIA BEFORE COLONIALISM

The term social refers to a characteristic of living organisms as applied to populations of humans and other animals. It always refers to the interaction of organisms with other organisms and to their collective co-existence, irrespective of whether they are aware of it or not, and irrespective of whether the interaction is voluntary or involuntary (Morrison, 2009).

Communication, on the other hand, is the exchange and flow of information and ideas from one person to another; it involves a sender transmitting an idea, information, or feeling to a receiver (U.S. Army, 1983). Communication (from Latin "*communis*", meaning *to share*) is the activity of conveying information through the exchange of thoughts, messages, or information, as by speech, visuals, signals, writing, or behavior. When it come to normal human communication, we can find two main parts of communication channels. One is verbal communication and the other is non verbal communication. If we think of communication based on style and purpose, however, it can be categorized into two, formal and informal communication. Considering the two main parts of channels of communication, verbal communication is also divided into two parts, oral and written communication. Oral communication takes place when two or more parties communicate verbally with words. The other type is written communication. This can happen through normal letter writing or any other form of documented writing. Letters can, however, be formal or informal (Bizymoms, 2013).

Looking at the aforementioned definition and other elements of communication, Arabic language has served as the language of communication before the arrival of the colonial masters to Nigeria, as mentioned before. Since the Jihad of Sheikh Uthman bin Fudi of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Arabic has become widespread and means of communication in West Africa. Previously it had been the written language of the educated elite and of the government for nearly 500 years.

For the fact that Arabic predated any other foreign languages in Nigeria in particular and Africa in general, the language was used officially in administration with which chancery prose, official letters, other materials were documented. Indeed, it then served as the earliest exclusive means of vast record keeping, literature as well as historical record in many centuries before the coming of the Europeans to Nigeria. It remained the first imported language used as the official language of education and of daily intercourse (oral communication) in West Africa and it has contributed a great deal to the reconstruction of the African history. A renowned scholar of history, Professor Dike, commented on the role Arabic had played in Nigerian history thus;

The Arabic scholars of the present, drawing upon the writings of the Arabic scholars of the past, will be able to bring before us the events and happenings of the past ages of Nigeria, and so help us to write a history we may rightly call our own (Ogunbiyi, Op cit, pp.1-30).

He added;

As a historian myself, I have taken the keenest interest in this development for it is through the aid of these Arabic documents, and these written in Arabic languages in the Arabic script that the scholar will be aided in his task of unlocking the secrets of African past. It has been a revelation to the whole world of scholarship to realize for the first time that Africa before European penetration, so far from being a "dark continent" was in fact a continent of where the light of scholarship shone brilliantly, as the Arabic work now being discovered bear testimony (Raji, 2002).

From the statement above it could be deduced that the history of Nigeria would be incomplete without the contribution of the Muslim scholars and their knowledge of Arabic language. This implies that no one can glean the understanding of the true history of Nigeria without the understanding of the original source language which is Arabic.

It was the first language used in recording historical events as it was used during the old Empires such as Ghana, Songhai, Borno etc (Ogunbiyi, Op cit, pp.1-30). This is further corroborated by the early Nigerian Historians that Nigeria is greatly indebted to Arabic for its tremendous role played to disprove the notion that Africa was a "dark continent"- without history. Historians further affirmed that West African history would be incomplete without reference to those Arabic scripts by the Arab scholars as stressed above by Professor Dike. (Smith, 1989, pp.142-143) also stressed that:

All government in western Sudan (that is, including those territories that later formed part of Nigeria) used Arabic for correspondence, and the indication is that written documents played a large part of their administration.

According to Hunwick (1970), Almaghili's letter (in Arabic) to Sultan Ibrahim of Katsina is dated 1492, and in archives of Istanbul (Turkey) a letter from the Ottoman Sultan there to the ruler of Borno, in Kanem Born Empire dated 16<sup>th</sup> century. In Sokoto, according to Malami (1989) Sarkin Musulumi, Hassan and the Emir of Gwandu Haliru wrote to Fedrick Lord Lugard, acknowledging him of a visit accorded them to England by the Colonial Officers, all in Arabic language. In the same vein, it was mentioned by Ogunbiyi, as quoted above that in the south western part of Nigeria such as Ibadan a lot of Arabic heritage were discovered most of which were letters from the traditional rulers and *Ulama'* (scholars) to their counterparts in other places in Yoruba land of Nigeria. Other works of the Jihadists that cover the Northern Nigeria and some parts of south western Nigeria were all testimony of the service of Arabic language in Nigerian long before the advent of the Europeans. Works on biography such as Muhammad Bello's *infaaql maysuur*

contains biographical materials on scholars before the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Sheikh Abdullah b. Fudi on the other hand has texts like *Tazyinul waraqat* in which he discussed the brief history of the revivalist movement, the intellectual and military as well as the political concept of the author (Ogunbiyi, Op cit pp.1-30).

On the intellectual plane Sokoto Jihad succeeded partly because of an effective method of planning in the use of this language as a vehicle of communication. Arabic has in no small measure helped in the growth of local languages such as Hausa, Kanuri, Kiswahili, and Fulfulde. It also became one of the local languages of part of today's Borno State of Nigeria spoken by over two million indigenes of Nigerians.

In the South western Nigeria, particularly among the Yoruba Muslim scholars Arabic became the medium of literary communication and flourished well alongside the precedence of Islam before the advent of the colonialist. In Ibadan, for example, Arabic served as a secondary means of verbal communication after the efflorescence of its literary activities in early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

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## BRITISH COLONIAL RULERS AND THE ISSUE OF ARABIC

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If one looks at the activities of the Colonial Rulers in Nigeria from the surface, especially the Northern part, he would have no option than to be lured into praising them for their positive contributions to the development of Arabic language. Some researchers have done so because of the establishment of the school of Arabic studies, Kano and the introduction of centers of learning such as the universities wherefrom Arabic flourished and a lot of scholarly works are produced. But the fact remains that, prior to the conquest of the Fulani Sokoto Caliphate by the British in 1903 and the subsequent establishment and consolidation of colonial rule, an Islamic educational system, which had Arabic as the language of instruction already existed. A renowned historian on the Sokoto Caliphate, Murray Last (2005), acknowledges the existence of a thriving and broad-based Islamic educational system that also incorporated the teaching of European languages and new sciences in its core curricula. The Caliphate recruited teachers, educational advisors and planners from Egypt, Tripoli and Ottoman Turkey, to help in teaching and reforming the Islamic system of education. This enduring legacy of Arabo-Islamic education from the Sokoto Caliphate continued before and after the advent of colonialism. Scholars established Qur'anic schools and for so many centuries up to the colonial period, Islamic schooling was the formal educational system in northern Nigeria (Lemu, 2002). In the Northern Protectorates, when Lord Lugard came to take over as the Governor of northern Nigeria in 1914, he found over 25,000 Qur'anic schools with a total enrolment of 218,618 pupils (Fafunwa, 1991,

pp.100-101). These Qur'anic schools known as *Tsangaya* and their students called *Almajirai* from the Arabic word, *Almuhājir* or an immigrant, later enrolled in more advanced theological schools, or *madrasahs* where they studied Islamic Jurisprudence, Theology, History, Philosophy, Arabic Grammar and the Sciences (Umar, 2013).

Under the British colonial administration, the system of Qur'anic schools was maintained in order to avoid destroying the social fabric of the Islamic North. While the children of the aristocracy were educated in the elite schools, the majority of the rural population was able to send their children to Qur'anic schools. Lugard, in the first instance, not only acknowledged their existence, but also accorded them official status by paying monthly stipends to the teachers. However, things began to change after the consolidation of British colonial rule in northern Nigeria, with the introduction of colonial education.

The British era, however, witnessed a decline in the fortune of Arabic language as the Colonial rulers and the Missionaries decided to confront the two entrance doors of the Arabic language, the Emirates of Northern Nigeria administered by the Caliphate of Borno and Sokoto which were first attacked and conquered by the British. Infact, the strength of Arabic in these part of the world was because of the relationship that existed between them and Egypt to the extent that a hostel was said to be established in Cairo for Borno students, especially in Al-Azhar University between 1242 and 1252 (Raji, Op cit. p.18). With the conquest of the Northern Nigeria, some of the Emirs who posed stiff resistance to the situation were either killed or deposed. These Emirs were replaced by people who were prepared to be puppets or who the European rulers thought would compromise and serve under the colonial rule (Mustapha, 2001).

The British Rulers, however, later deposed and exiled some of the Emirs who replaced their fellow Muslims in the first instance. With this situation, the role of Northern Emirs changed from the custodian of Arabic and Islamic legacies which had earned them privilege; honour, integrity and influence, manipulated and swept into oblivion by the colonial masters (Raji, Op cit p.19).

As a cover-up, the British established the Northern Provinces law school in 1934 which later metamorphosed into school of Arabic studies, Kano. This school was established when the religio-political propaganda against the interest of the British in Northern Nigeria became imminent. It was, besides teaching the Islamic law which was apparent, to serve the interest of the European and to contain the inflow of "subversive" elements, ideas and cultures into the region from Sudan, Egypt, and the Maghrib (Abubakar, op. cit.). They, therefore, put a barrier between the region and the relationship that existed between them and the Arab world of Sudan, Egypt, Maghrib and Ottoman Turkey. The introduction of English language and its literature into the school of Arabic studies Kano as well as employment of some British lecturers

like Mr. C.E.J. Whitting, and Mr. M. Hisket to help in the design and implementation of the curriculum mark the beginning of a campaign and propaganda to discredit Al-Azhar University, Egypt. As rightly pointed at, Al-Azhar University used to be a great centre of learning for the scholars of the region. The propaganda was launched and sponsored by Mr. Whitting who called on the Government to make a tour of Educational institution to Egypt and Maghrib. Mr. Whitting was mandated to do the job and submit a report. His assessment report in 1947 reads thus:

It will be folly to give any Government support to sending any of our student to Al-Azhar or other of the Egyptian institutions of Higher Education. They only come in contact with the crudest and extremist forces of Nationalism and 'anti-British propaganda, and so much working time is lost through disturbances, students' strikes and the like, that many courses have only a nominal value. The Sudan were reaping the bitter political harvest of having used the Egyptian facilities for her education, and the retiring Director of Education told him that Bahrain had withdrawn its pupils from Egypt for the above reasons (Abubakar, op. cit.).

The Colonialists became instrumental to the stagnation of Arabic because it was denied of the privilege of full administrative support which it has enjoyed throughout the preceding century. Although the British colonial authority adopted a system of indirect rule that initially preserved the pre-1903 administrative structure for purposes of local administration, the loss of political paramouncy by the Muslim rulers in the caliphate and the introduction of western education marked the beginning of the decline in multifaceted functions of Arabic earlier identified. The decline was further reinforced in 1914 when the northern and southern protectorates were merged to form what is now known as Nigeria. With the objective of evolving a language policy that will gradually replace Arabic with English. The educational policy not only shifted from religious to secular, but also structured in such a way as to favour Western education. Traditional Islamic education in the form of the Qur'anic school system became marginalized and teachers who taught in the traditional Islamic method were either disregarded or forced to adopt the new system. There were other obstacles, too, one of which was finance. The Qur'anic Arabic schools were left on their own with very little or no support from the government. They relied on the support of parents which was normally meager as well as on charity which rarely came. Qur'anic school teachers resorted to sending their pupils to beg for food and money. This tarnished the image of the schools and undermined the integrity of the teachers as well as their pupils up till today. However, despite the limited means of finance, the Qur'anic schools thrived because the teachers of such schools were dedicated. Not only did they consider their mission as a divine injunction, they were also convinced that their efforts would be worthy of being rewarded in the hereafter. Both strong faith and goodwill helped to sustain the Qur'anic school system. There was no doubt

that these schools served a useful purpose especially from the social, educational and religious perspectives during the period of transition from traditional Islamic education to dual educational system introduced by the British. One of recorded achievements of these Qur'anic schools, as mentioned above, was that they had an enrolment of approximately a quarter of a million pupils. In addition, Umar 2012 stressed that:

These Qur'anic schools had produced a literary class known as "Mallamai," learned in Arabic and the teachings of *Qur'an* and commentaries, from whose ranks the officers of the Native Administration, the judges of the Native Courts and the exponents of the creed of Islam were drawn. They are a very influential class, some of them very well read in Arabic literature and law, and deeply imbued with the love of learning

Galadanci observed the situation of Arabic during this period in the following words:

The colonial authorities realized the importance of the Arabic language in the north as the language of administration and the language of culture and thus tried everything within their power to replace it with their own language. They therefore made English the official language so that government offices and registries the Sharia courts would use English instead of Arabic.

Even the local languages such as Hausa and Fulfulde which were already being written in Arabic script known as *Ajami* scripts, were now being taught in formal schools in Latin scripts. The same situation was found in the southwest in the formal schools established by Muslim Organizations in response to the challenge posed by Christian schools. Their orientation was largely dictated by the fact that the opportunities for employment in the colonial civil service, in commerce and industry were only open to those literate in English language (Ogunbiyi, pp.1-30).

## PRESENT STATUS OF ARABIC LANGUAGE IN NIGERIA

Arabic language has faced a lot of challenges in Nigeria over time despite the tremendous services it has rendered as a communication tool in Africa before the Colonialist. The teaching and learning of which ought to be given the topmost priority it deserve especially because of the historical and religious significant but the reverse has always been the case. This is because of political antecedent of the colonialist that had made English the official languages of education, administration, politics and diplomacy in Nigeria.

In recent time, the government policy on language in Nigerian educational sector has made it further complicated. This is for the fact that the policy continues to relegate Arabic to the background as French is given priority to be studied as "second official language".

Government appreciates the importance of language as a means promoting social interaction and national cohesion, and

preserving cultures. Thus every child shall learn the language of the immediate environment. Furthermore, in the interest of national unity it is expedient that every child shall be required to learn one of the three languages: Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba. For smooth interaction with our neighbours, it is desirable for every Nigerian to speak French. Accordingly, French shall be the second official language in Nigeria and it shall be compulsory in schools.

Looking at the aforementioned policy, Arabic language has no place with the Government. Therefore, no provision is made to develop the language. However, in the National Policy on Education published in 1977 (revised 1981, 1988 etc) and the government's views on implementation of committee's Blueprint on the document, Arabic is given explicit mention only in relation to its link with Islam. At the primary school level, the Blueprint states that "where Arabic is the medium of instruction in Religion and moral instructions, it will continue to be used (Akinaso & Ogunbiyi, 1990).

From the above, Arabic is only relevant when it comes to "Islamic Religion and moral instruction.

## CONCLUSION

The transition from traditional and Arabo-Islamic educational and administrative system from under the Sokoto Caliphate to the modern and secular British system of governance in Nigeria had a tremendous impact on the issue of Arabic language. The British colonial policy of indirect assistance to the Christian missionary at the expense of Islamic education has left an indelible mark on the later until the present time. In summary, of all the non-Nigerian languages, none has more claims to our attention and recognition than the Arabic language. That Arabic is unparalleled by any other language in its role as a communication tool and as a written medium in which much of the Nigerian and African history is recorded; the past thus preserved in this medium is a common national heritage and not a sectional or religious one. That Arabic language is ignorantly misconceived most of the times for Islamic studies by many Nigerians, including the educated elite. These misconceptions as well as religious bias are what had led Arabic to its present state of negligent in the country where some scholars of Arabic feel inferior to their counterparts in other fields.

If these misgivings are not corrected and the glory of Arabic restored- to some extent, the future generation might consider it irrelevant to be studied as a school subject. Therefore, causing more harm to Islam in Nigeria. Conferences and workshops can be organised regularly by scholars and Islamic organizations to improve the present status of Arabic language. This can be achieved through agitations to Government and issuing of communiqué to revise the present status of Arabic in Government schools, at least to feature as one of the elective subjects if not compulsory.

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