

# Arabic Language and Culture in Nigeria: The Journey so Far

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**Abstract.** Nigeria is a country in West Africa, in Sub-Saharan Africa, far from the Arab countries yet got in contact with Arabic language. Indeed, the Arabic language became Nigerian's official language at a point in time and influences some of her local languages. This paper attempts to study the influence of Arabic culture, particularly Arabic language, in Nigeria by tracing its growth and development and to examine the factors responsible for its survival in a difficult terrain. The paper is divided into four parts. The first part discusses the advent of Arabic language in Nigeria; the Second part dwells on Arabic Education in Nigeria; while the third part focuses on the influence of Arabic language on some Nigerian indigenous languages and vice versa. The fourth part examines Arabic Literature in Nigeria. While the conclusion contains the summary of the paper and some recommendations.

**Keywords:** Arabic Language, Culture, Nigeria.

## 1. Introduction: The Advent of Arabic in Nigeria

It is difficult to precisely say when Arabic Language came into Nigeria, but it was the consensus of the researchers and scholars that the people of Nigeria, like their counterparts in West Africa, came in contact with Arabic Language through trade and trade routes. Trade and commerce require a language of communication and Arabic language served that purpose, subsequently becoming the lingua franca among the traders in most of the towns and villages in the Northern Nigeria and beyond where the Arabs carried out their trading activities. {1} This made it imperative for the people of this area to learn the language, at least enough of it that would help them to conduct their trading transactions. In addition to trade and commerce, the Arabs also introduced Islam. The Arabs related well with the local people and showed good virtues, which encouraged their hosts to accept their teachings and convert to Islam. Their new religion demanded that they should have a certain degree of Arabic knowledge to be able to carry out its fundamentals and acts of worships. The Arabic language and Islam thus came with learned Muslim merchants who embarked on the spread of the language and the religion.

The spread received a boost when some Arab tribes, such as Barbaras, Wugaras, Fulanis, Shuwas and others, migrated to the country and established Islamic Empires and Emirates like KanemBorno Empire, which was established in Borno in the 13<sup>th</sup> Century and eventually became a Centre for Islamic Civilization for many years. Others are Sokoto Caliphate which started in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century, with the leadership of Shaykh Usman bn Fodio and Ilorin Emirate established by the sons of Shaykh 'Alimi bn Junta in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century. In addition to this, some traditional rulers adopted Islam, like the ruler of Kano Yajidan Isamiya (1349-85 CE) and Timi of Ede in Yorubaland, South-Western Nigeria, among others. Under this atmosphere, Arabic became the official language of the Emirates and the kingdoms, including being the language of administration and education, language of documentation and correspondence language of culture and civilization. Scholars became motivated. Some of such scholars were judges, secretaries, counselors and teachers. {3} Some individual scholars and groups also visited Nigeria on their way to and from Hajj. Whenever a scholar visited the country students would rally round him to benefit from his fountain of knowledge. Some rulers of kingdoms and emirates also invited Arabic scholars for admonition and consultation. Such erudite scholars included "Abdul Karim al-Maghili from Tilmisan in modern Algeria, Jalalud-Din as-Suyuti from Egypt and 'Aidah Ahmad at-Tazakti. Others were Ahmad 'Aqit, grandfather of Ahmad Baba at-Timbukti as well as Ahmad Baba himself<sup>4</sup>. With the coming of these scholars, indigenous students were encouraged to perform Holy Pilgrimage at Makkah and Madinah and that afforded them the opportunity of visiting and studying in notable institution of Arabic and Islamic learning in such places as

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Timbuktu, Sudan, Egypt, Makkah and Medina among others. With these activities, Arabic language and culture grew and developed in Nigeria. All these were before the advent of the Colonialism and the resultant Christian missionary activities which tried unsuccessfully to uproot and annihilate Arabic influences from the country.

## 2. Arabic Education in Nigeria

The system of Arabic education in Nigeria before the advent of colonialism was informal. There were neither regular classes nor curriculum of study; students converged at the houses of their teachers or at the mosques to receive knowledge from the morning till evening. Every student had to wait for his turn to receive learning and there was no limit to the year of graduation. While some students stuck to a particular teacher, others moved from one teacher to another, the sole objective being to understand Islam and Arabic language. {5} Through this process, they were able to excel and they perfectly understood the language and adequately utilized it for communication, educational instruction, correspondence and documentation of proceedings, history, research and transactions in addition to religious purposes. Above all, they were able to utilize it for composing literary works like poetry of different themes and prose of numerous forms, most especially during the period known as Jihad Period or Fulani Period (17<sup>th</sup> – 19<sup>th</sup> Centuries CE), which was adjudged as the Golden Era of Arabic literature in Nigeria. {6}

However, with the coming of the Christians missionaries and the occupation of Nigeria by the British colonialists at the tail end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Arabic language and culture in Nigeria suffered a significant setback. The colonialist used coercion and other manipulative strategies to get rid of Arabic, Islam and their stakeholders. As a result, some notable Emirs and rulers were killed, some were banished and their authority and influence were weakened. Thus English subsequently replaced Arabic as the official language of the country. The colonial government and their missionary allies introduced a Formal Education System, at all levels, established modern schools, which received adequate patronage and funding from the Government and created fabulous and lucrative job opportunities for their graduates. Though, Muslims for fear of evangelization seriously repelled this development initially as some of them refused to send their wards to Western Schools, a large number of Muslim children, eventually, abandoned their Arabic Islamic schools and, at times, abandoned their religion to join the new system and faith, most especially in the southern part of the country. {7}

In order to salvage this situation, some Islamic organization like An-sarudeen Society of Nigeria, Ahmadiyyah Muslim Movement and Nawarudeen Society of Nigeria, among others, took up the challenge of establishing formal Western schools, with Islamic orientation at least, in order to save their wards from converting to Christianity. At the same time, interest in the teaching and learning of Arabic as done traditionally began to wane. Eventually, from 1937, Formal Private Arabic and Islamic Schools and Colleges were established starting from the School of *Shari'a*, which was established in Kano by the Northern Rulers, and was renamed Madrasatul-‘ulumil-‘Arabiyyah (School of Arabic Studies) in 1947. In 1952, Shaykh Adam Abdullahi al-Ilory established Arabic and Islamic Training Centre, popularly known as “Markaz” at Abeokuta and moved it to Agege, Lagos in 1954. In 1955, Shaykh Khidir Salahuddin Apaokagi of Ilorin also established alma’dul ‘Arabial-‘Adabi in Owo, Ondo State. Shaykh Murtadah Abdussalam also established Al-Ma’dul- ArabiAnnajjiri in Ibadan, Oyo State. While Shaykh Sherif Salih also established in 1957 Kuliyyatun- Nahdah al-Islamiyyah at Maiduguri among several others. These private Arabic schools laid a solid foundation for Arabic education in Nigeria, and they changed its system from informal to formal, inviting teachers from Arab countries like Egypt, Sudan, Saudi Arabia and others. They also imported Arabic text books from these countries. Later some of them, like Shaykh Adam Abdullah al-Ilory, started writing and producing text books that suit the taste and environment of the students of this country {8}. They organized the levels of learning to primary, Junior Secondary and Senior Secondary. Some of them have now graduated to Diploma level. They also created a conducive atmosphere and activities which made the practice of Speaking and writing of Arabic easy for students such as inter and intra institutional Debate, staging of Drama, literary competitions and practice of journalism in Arabic. {9} The result was amazing because they were able to produce the manpower needed by the country to take up the responsibility of teaching the next generations, Imams for the Muslim communities which are on the increase by the day,

preachers who understands the rudiments of Islamic propagation and effective ways of spreading the teachings of Islam and its culture, Arabic authors and philosophers who provide ideological leadership for their people and literary figures.

Meanwhile, after the Independence of Nigeria in 1960, the Arab countries opened their Embassies and consulates in Nigeria and it became easy for the graduates of these Private Arabic Schools to gain scholarships, individually and in team, to study in the Arab countries up to the highest levels before returning to the country. In addition, modern literatures and textbooks were brought in large quantity to the country. Enrollment of candidates to these Private Arabic Schools also increased in manifolds. Many graduates from Arab countries also returned to Nigeria to take up appointments in their former Schools, with some of them establishing their own Arabic Institutions. A few of them who were opportune to have western education along with their Arabic Studies, joined government establishments to teach and disseminate Arabic and Islamic education. This led to the evolution of new generation of indigenous Arabic scholars who are well versed and highly skilled in Arabic education. Today in Nigeria, there are towns, in addition to the Shuwa Arabs community, where people converse among themselves and conduct their ceremonies in pure and standard Arabic. These towns include Kano, Sokoto Maiduguri, Ilorin, Iwo, Ibadan and Lagos among others.

In addition to this, Departments of Arabic and Islamic Studies were established in Nigerian Universities, starting from the University of Ibadan in 1962. These universities initially organized a one year Certificate Course for the products of Private Arabic Schools in order to remedy their deficiency in the English Language. This programme has been upgraded into diploma programmes at the universities or at those institutions or colleges affiliated with these universities. It used to be part of the undergraduate programme that a student must undergo a year study in one of the Universities in Arab countries in order to improve his quality of the language and acquire as well as experience Arabic culture directly. This has since been replaced with a year programme at Arabic Village created by the Government of Nigeria for this purpose. The village is situated at Ngala in Borno State of Nigeria where the Shuwa Arabs are based. Like most institutions of higher learning in Nigeria, this Village is also bedeviled with poor funding by the government. In addition, some Colleges of Education and other Allied Institutions in Nigeria now offer Arabic and have separate Departments or Units for it. The objective of teaching Arabic has transcended the religious one. Arabic is being taught now as a foreign and international Language.

It is paramount to note here that despite the number of learners and graduates of Arabic Private Schools and the role they are playing in feeding our tertiary educational institutions and in the provision of manpower to the development of the Nigerian Society, governments at all levels are yet to accord Arabic Education adequate recognition and motivation in terms of funding and grants comparable to what is given to the English Language or even French. This apathy no doubt is affecting the development of Arabic in Nigeria.

### **3. The Influence of Arabic Language on Nigerian Languages and Society**

The Arabic language since inception in Nigeria has impacted positively on Nigerians and their languages and cultures. It has also influenced their thoughts, ideas and research in the way it influences languages like Persian, Turkish and Urdu. Specifically, Hausa and Fulfulde borrowed a great deal of Arabic vocabularies and their internal linguistic structure reveals their affinity with Semitic languages. Yoruba and Nupe on the other hand are among the languages which manifest appreciable linguistics convergence with Arabic. This, coupled with some instances of cultural similarities, informed their claim of the genetic relationship of their languages with Arabic {10} though the internal structures of the last two languages prove otherwise.

Before the advent of Colonialism and up till now in some cases, some Nigeria languages, most especially the above mentioned ones, adopted the practice of writing their languages in Arabic script, which is known as 'ajami'. Effort has been made by scholars to standardize 'ajami script. In addition, some Nigerian languages apart from using Arabic script to compose poems, equally allow the use of Arabic Prosody and Rhymes techniques to archive that. Due to the scope of this study, one example from a Yoruba poet from Ilorin will suffice, He said:

كادبا لدعـبا القـادر \*\* عبا تو لغو تسى شغو درا  
{11} عشغو عشو عو جاملى \*\* عشو علمي وجـا كافرا

In Roman Script:

Kadupe lodo Oba Al-Qadiri \*\* Oba to logo to sisogodara

Osogo O sawa Awaje Mole \*\* O sawon E lomi won je Kafira

Meaning in English:

We thank God Al-Qadiri (The Omnipotent)\*\* Who predestinates and perfects His predestination

He has predestined that we should be Muslims\*\* He made others to be Infidels

By extension, Nigeria people especially Muslims also imbibe the Arab culture in terms of the type of food they eat, the cloth they wear, the house they build and their ways of life.

Arabic has also benefited from Nigerian languages in terms of translating idioms, short stories, novels, and folktales play and poems into Arabic, which added to Arabic literature being one of the richest in the world

#### **4. Arabic Literature in Nigeria**

Arabic Literature thrives in Nigeria. It started by imitating the Arabs in their prose and poetry and in the 17<sup>th</sup> century it reached its peak for the century left compendiums of Arabic poetry of high standard of quality and beauty devoid of grammatical errors. The literature experienced a kind of deterioration during the beginning of the British rule and appreciated shortly before the end of it. The period between the Independence of Nigeria and now witnessed a return to glory and blossom for Arabic literature in Nigeria which put Nigerian Arabic literary figures in the same pedestal with their counterparts in the Arab and Islamic world with their works. [12]

#### **5. Conclusion**

This paper has briefly examined the growth and development of Arabic language and its culture in Nigeria and It submitted that the language came into the country through the Arab traders and became deeply entrenched there with the help of the establishment of Islamic empires and emirates. Arabic further developed by itinerant scholars who passed through the country on their way to perform Hajj in Makkah. The advent of the British colonialists and Christianity slowed down its growth in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and later it gained strength with the establishment of Private Arabic Schools and the embarkation of students on scholarship to study abroad. It was also noted that Arabic influence indigenous Nigerian languages in terms of word and expression loaning, usage of Arabic script for writing and composition of poems. Arabic has actually become one of the languages of social interaction and that Nigerians have imbibed a great deal of Arabic culture is undeniable.

The paper recommends that the Government of Nigeria should give adequate recognition to Arabic language and Private Arabic Schools, which serve as a “feeder” to government Institutions, and provide manpower for societal reformation. It also calls on the Arabs countries to collaborate with Arabic institutions in Nigeria to really promote the language and raise it to the enviable position of one of the International languages in the world.

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