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## ARABIC LANGUAGE IN NIGERIA AND ITS ROLE IN NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

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### **Abstract**

*The vital roles played by languages worldwide cannot be over sighted because, it is part and parcel of man existence on the earth. Out of the languages there are some which are internationally recognized due to their immense contributions to universal development. Arabic Language as one of them contributes its quotas towards human development globally irrespective of religious, racial and geographical affiliation. The main thrust of this paper is to bring into limelight a cursory look at role of Arabic language in National Development of Nigeria. The paper starts by general introduction of the language and its categories to the esteemed readers. It also discusses existing relationship between the language and Islam and correcting the wrong belief attached to the language by the Muslims and Non-Muslims. It briefly, illustrates some of the manners in which Arabic language plays the remarkable roles. The paper concludes with some few recommendations.*

**Keywords:** Arabic language in Nigeria and its roles in National Development, Arabic and Human capital. Adnites, Northern Semitic, Southern Semitic, Ajani, Alfa.

## **Introduction**

Due to the fact that educational process can only be feasible through language be it in verbal or written form. Nigerian government accords language its due recognition as it is vividly enshrined in National policy on education.

This paper believes that, it is not an exaggeration to say that without language, there is no education and without education there is no development. Arabic as a foreign language, the language of Arabs is one of the famous semitic languages which attains international recognition cum acceptance, hence it contributes its quotas to spiritual, bistorical, political, economical, socio-cultural, diplomatic and educational development of the globe.

In Nigeria, history of Arabic education and its status is a long one. For instance, in 16 century Kano and Katsina were notable centres of learning to which students from far and near places came. Also since carly 19" century, Sokoto was regarded as a city of knowledge. All these teachings and learning's activities were done in Arabic language. Sanusi, S.A. (2006).

As time went by in 19" Century, education through the medium of the Arabic began to enjoy popularity in the central northern region of Nigeria. But unfortunately, in later part of the century (19" Century) status of the language (Arabic) dropped as a result of introduction of western education. At this juncture, a remarkable event came to memory was taking over of English language position of Arabic language as an official language and language of elites and informed ones, after which the latter was an official language in the Central North, before the advent of British colony. Jum'ah (1999).

Fortunately, in recent years, there is a sign of revival of interest in Arabic education from many angles. Presently, many enthusiastic Nigerian especially Muslims accord the language a full recognition to serve as a means of seeking a meaningful academic discipline in moderm system of education Abdul M. O. A. (1983).

## **Arabic Language**

Arabic is the language of the Arabs. It is the language of some certain tribes who take Arabian peninsular their dwelling place, from Yemen to Syria, Iraq, Tukhuum, Palestine and Sina. Utor A.G. (1957). According to Chjne A.G. (1967) Arabic belongs to the Semitic group of

languages; Akkadian (Babylonian and Assyrian) Ugaritic, Hebrew, Phoenician, Aramaic, Syria, Ethiopic, South Arabic and many Arabic dialects from the earliest times down to the present, records show that the permanent home of the Semitic language is a contiguous area that includes the fertile crescent, the Arabian peninsula and the Ethiopia.

The language is regarded as the most notable Semitic languages which are divided into two major parts:

Northern Semitic languages (Aribah)

Southern Semitic languages (Bāidah)

The Southern Semitic languages consist of: Arabic, Ancient Yemen languages and Ethiopic dialects. Tarzi FH(1959). Moreover, Arabic language itself is principally divided into two:

### **Northern Arabic Language**

### **Southern Arabic Language**

The Northern Arabic language is classical and standard Arabic, which is being spoken or used and regarded as the one in which the Holy Qur'an was revealed. This is a language of Adnites, the naturalized Arabs, the language of descendants of Ishmael son of Abraham. The southern Arabic language was former language of Yemen which was endangered and overpowered by the Northern one. Southern Arabic was not standard and was since extinct. Tarsi F. H. (1959).

Furthermore, Arabic being a dynamic language and as far as its status in our contemporary life is concerned can be further sub divided into three major types:

Classical Arabic This is the most standard one in relation to Qur'an.

### **Modern or standard Arabic**

#### **i. Spoken or different dialects of Arabic**

Classical Arabic is Arabic of medieval times, in which Qur'an was revealed, a language in which a wealth of literature (poetry and prose) of all Arabic literary periods are written. It is language of science and administration which co-exists with many Arabic and non-Arabic dialects.

Modern Arabic is the used language of most Arabic speaking countries, endorsed by all Muslim countries the language of educated and elite class which welcomes novelty and incorporates new vocabulary or arabicised word from other foreign languages.

The Arabic of different dialects belong to various geographical areas with the Arabs world, each with its unique features. The dialects have many things in common so that a native speaker off one will not find other dialects difficult to understand. Chejne A.G (1969).

Apart from the above classifications, there is another one which is media Arabic used by journalists.

## **ii. Arabic Language and Islam**

Arabic is the language of the Holy Quran, the final authority on Islamic studies. Arabic is liturgical language of Islam because the Muslims faithful use Arabic in their five daily prayers, hajj, rites etc. the existence of the Quran and prophetic traditions in Arabic, transformed it from being the exclusive language of the Arabs to a language of interest to Non-Arabs across the globe.

In fact, it is difficult or even impossible to separate Arabic from Islam, in support Of that, Allah says in “Quran Chapter 12 verse 2”:

“We have sent it down as a Quran in Arabic” Chapter41:3 reads thus: A book whose verses have been detailed an Arabic Quran for a people who know. Likewise, He says "Thus we have sent down an Arabic Quran and explained therein in detail some of the warnings (20:12). Due to importance of Qur'an to Islam. Muslims, across the globe, recite Qur'an on daily basis at least five times, use some portions of it for supplications and study it to know and comprehend the words or injunctions of Almighty Allah. Hence you see most of them struggling to learn it.

Arabic is next of kin to Islam. The former accompanies the latter wherever it goes. The more Islam spreads the more Arabic spreads as well.

Nevertheless, the fact which needs to be consolidated in this treatise is that Arabic language precedes Islam; i.e. it is extant long before the advent of Islam, in pre-Islamic period. This means that the language (Arabic) belongs to Non-Muslim and Muslim Arabs respectively from time

immemorial. Although, the language was carried from Arabian peninsula into, Persia, Egypt, Asia, Africa, Europe etc through Islam. Perhaps because of the interwoven nature of Arabic with Islam, some Muslims, particularly in Nigeria wrongly conclude that, the study of Arabic is their exclusive right and any non-Muslim who shows interest in its study is just a mere spy or an intruder. Conversely, some non-Muslims alike also mistakenly attach wrong belief to Arabic language as "A no go ea for them because its study may or can adversely affect them. Arabic, contrary to many misconceptions, is one of the most recognized international languages. In Nigeria, it holds immense significance, especially among Muslims, who learn Arabic primarily to understand the teachings and values of Islam. Any other motivations for learning the language are secondary. According to Galadanci (1993:101), "it is difficult to make a distinction between the Islamic scholars and the literati (of the nineteenth century). The scholars were also literate and vice versa. They were the leaders who managed administration and the teaching of Islamic and Arabic knowledge." There was no separation between diverse fields of specialization; everything was geared towards achieving religious goals. For the early Muslims in Nigeria, all knowledge—be it Arabic grammar, rhetoric, theology, jurisprudence, or otherwise—was a means to understand Islam better.

Arabic and Islam are mutually supportive: Islam aided the spread of Arabic, elevating it to an internationally recognized language. Without Islam, the Qur'an would not have been revealed in Arabic, nor would many Islamic disciplines have evolved. Arabic, in turn, served as the language of Islam, fully integrated into its practices and propagation.

### **Historical Penetration of Arabic in Nigeria**

The penetration of Arabic in Nigeria dates back to the 7th century through trans-Saharan trade between the Arabs and African peoples, including those in Kanem-Bornu, Kano, and Katsina. Galadanci (1993:27) noted that Arabic was already in use in the Kanem-Bornu Empire as the language of court administration by 1085 CE. This predates the introduction of other foreign languages such as:

Portuguese in 1472

Dutch and French in 1659

English in 1842 (Rail RA, 2002)

From its early introduction, many Nigerians—particularly Muslims—developed a deep interest in the learning and teaching of Arabic. It became the language of literacy, documentation, and education, especially in Northern Nigeria. Arabic was the first foreign language to serve as:

A medium of instruction

A tool for writing and documentation of history

A means of making many Nigerians bilingual

Arabic writing was also used in documenting local languages through Arabic script, known as *Ajami*. Sanusi S. A. (2012) affirms that the use of Arabic predated Western education, dispelling the myth that Africa was in total darkness before European contact.

### **Arabic's Role in African and Nigerian History**

Professor K.O. Dike, quoted in Fafunwa (1974) and Raji (2002), acknowledged Arabic's role in disproving the narrative of Africa as a “dark continent.” He remarked:

"As a historian myself, I have taken the keenest interest in this development, for it is through the aid of these Arabic documents... that the scholar will be aided in his task of unlocking the secrets of the African past... Africa, before European penetration, was in fact a continent where the light of scholarship shone brightly."

Arabic documents have thus served as invaluable resources for scholars seeking to reconstruct African history. The Sokoto Caliphate (1804–1903), under the leadership of Sheikh Uthman Dan Fodio, further elevated Arabic to the status of official language for administration, education, and scholarly communication. Many texts, both prose and poetry, were written in Arabic across various disciplines. Jum'ah (1999) notes that the language was refined and broadly utilized in that era.

According to D.M. Last (1967) in Raji (2002), the most comprehensive historical accounts of the 19th-century Sokoto administration are derived from Arabic sources:

"The fullest history of the first fifty years of the nineteenth century are those written in Arabic... Without recourse to Arabic sources in relation to oral tradition, we would lack reliable documentation."

### **Documentation and Scholarship in Arabic**

Arabic has served as a vital medium for documenting historical events, especially during the Islamic-oriented Bornu Empire, long before British colonization. Scholars, both past and present, have significantly contributed to this effort. Hodgkin, cited in Oladosu (2007), emphasized the importance of Arabic in documenting Hausa history:

"For the Hausa past before 1500, we are wholly dependent upon local chronicles composed in Arabic... of which the Kano Chronicle is the most informative."

Similarly, Professor Dike appreciated Arabic scholars' roles in assembling indigenous histories, stating that Arabic materials—rather than colonial reports—enable Nigerians to write their own history. This contribution is of great significance to the younger generation of Nigerian students.

### **Arabic Language in Contemporary Nigeria**

Despite the relative decline caused by the introduction of Western education in the late 19th century (Abdul, 1983), Arabic has witnessed a revival. Today, both Muslims and non-Muslims, including renowned Arabist Professor Isaac Ogunbiyi, study Arabic as an academic discipline of great worth. The **National Policy on Education (NPE)** recognizes Arabic as a subject to be taught from primary to tertiary levels. It is currently studied across:

Primary and secondary schools

Colleges of education

Universities and polytechnics in Nigeria

Foreign institutions in Arab countries, Malaysia, the UK, the US, Egypt, Sudan, and more

## **Arabic writing/works**

Another remarkable role played by Arabic language is writing of various standard works in Arabic language by the erudite Nigerian Arabic scholars for the Arabic readers.

This immeasurable work is noticeably carried out since the early nineteenth century till date. To be specific, era of Sokoto caliphate under the leadership of Sheikh Uthman Dan Fodio, when a lot of Islamic books on Theology, Jurisprudence, Hadith, Tafsir, Morality etc were written in Arabic. Also, Arabic literature texts on subject like Arabic Grammar, Morphology, Rhetoric and Syntax are inclusive. The names of famous writers of the books that could simply come to memory were Sheikh Uthman Dan Fodio, Sheikh Abdullahi Dan Fodio, Sheikh Muhammad Bello bn Uthman Fodio and Asmau daughter of Sheikh Uthman. Some of these books are in published and printed form while some still remain in manuscripts. After the above mentioned earliest Arabic scholars, a large number of other Arabic scholars emerged and wrote many standard books in Arabic on Islamic and Arabic studies like their predecessors, a mention of Sheikh Abubakar Gumi, Sheikh Adam Abdullahi Al- lorry, Sheikh Waziri Junaid and host of others be made here, for their paramount roles they played in upliftment of Arabic and Islamic knowledge. Presently, there are a lot of Arabic scholars relentlessly contributing their own quotas towards the growth of Arabic and humanity especially by their books.

These books entirely uphold righteousness and condemn evils, inglorious act, dastardly act, corruption, crime and so on, which have become the order of the day. When anybody among the Arabic readers reads and understands them properly, he or she will spiritually increase and keeps or clings to good deeds and shuns evils of any sort, makes peace with other fellow human beings irrespectively of tribes or religions. So therefore peace and security prevail in our land.

Apart from religious benefits of the books, the readers increase in knowledge in terms of exposure, experiences and modern civilization through Arabic books written by myriad of Arabs and non-Arabs authors.

## **Influence of Arabic on Nigerian languages.**

Arabic influence on Hausa, Fulfulde and Yoruba languages are vividly noted. Although Arabic does not endanger these languages but promotes them. These Nigerian languages borrow

extensively many words from Arabic. Abubakar (1972) reported that he have identified 1,500 Arabic adopted by Hausa and Fulfude. Also the two languages use. Arabic characters in writing known as "Ajami". Some of borrowed words from Arabic include: names of days of the week, these numerals: 20, 30, 40, 50, 60. 70, 80,90 and words like: Waazi, albasa, Lafiya, Allah are borro wed by Hausa from Arabic borrowed many words from Arabic language. Some words like bilisi, alaada, aleh alubarika were borrowed by Yoruba from Arabic.

Arabic

Yaomul - ahad

Yaomul - ithnain

Yaomut - thulathaa

Yaomul - arbi'ai

As regards to influence of Arabic on Yoruba language, Yoruba language

Yaomul - khamis

Yaomul - jum'at

Yaomul - sabti

Ishruun/Ishreen

Thalathun/Thalatheen

Arba'uun/Arba'een

Khamsuun/Khamseen

Sittun/sitten

Sab'uun/Sab'een

Thamonuun/thamoneen

Tis'uun/Tis'een

Wa'z

Al-basal

Al-'afiyah

Allahu

Arabic

Tblis

Al-'aeb

Al-barakah

Arabic Literature

Hausa

Rana - lahad

Rana - Itinin

Rana - talata

Rana - Iaraba

Rana - alamis

Rana- jumma

Rana - sati

Ishrin

Talatin

Arbain

Hamsin

Sitin

Sab'in

Tamonin

Tis'in

Waazi

Albasa

Lafiya

Allah

Yoruba

bilisi

alaada

alebu

alubarika

Meaning

Sunday

Monday

Tuesday

Wednesday

Thursday

Friday

Saturday

Twenty

Thirty

Forty

Fifty

Sixty

Seventy

Eighty

Ninety

Preaching

Onion

Health

God

Meaning

Devil

Habit or custom

Fault

Blessing

### **The Role of Nigerian Arabic Literature in Social Reformation**

Nigerian Arabic literature performs creditably well in reforming social vices in Nigeria through its three main literary genres: **poetry, prose, and drama**. In contemporary Nigeria, the significance of Nigerian literature in Arabic cannot be overstated, especially considering its consistent reformative contributions.

## **Poetry: A Tool for Moral and Religious Guidance**

Arabic poetry in Nigeria serves as a crucial medium for moral instruction and religious enlightenment. Since the primary aim of learning Arabic in Nigeria is to understand religious matters properly and behave according to Allah's legislations, poetry has become an important channel for fostering societal reformation. Various types of Arabic poetry in Nigeria include:

**Al-Madh (Eulogy/Praise)**

**Ritha' (Elegy)**

**Al-Fakhr (Pride)**

**Al-Wasf (Description/Portrayal)**

**Az-Zuhd (Asceticism)**

**Al-Hikmah (Aphorism/Wisdom)**

**Ash-Shakwah (Complaint)**

**Al-Irshad (Guidance/Counseling)**

**At-Tahaniyat (Congratulatory Poems)**

**Ash-Shukr (Gratitude)**

**Ad-Du'a wa At-Tawassulat (Prayers and Supplications)**

**As-Suluk (Conduct/Manners)**

**Ad-Dubabat (Humor/Jokes)**

These poetic forms reflect elements of religion and promote morality, piety, righteousness, kindness, peace, honesty, and humility, while fighting against corruption, indiscipline, and other societal vices.

### ***Selected Poetic Excerpts***

**Sheikh Yahya Abdulgadir** eulogized **Ameer Alhassan bn Mu'azu** during his turbaning ceremony:

"Somebody like this high-spirited and noble person deserved to handle the mantle of caliphate...

Our land will be shining and be full of goodness...

The fire of enmity will be extinguished...

Tongues desiring to cause corruption will be silenced."

**Sheikh Waziri Junaid** lamented the moral degradation:

"They have corrupted the religion and the world...

A time when right seems wrong, and wrong seems right..."

**Al-Qadi Umar Ibrahim** emphasized the demand for peace:

"Peace and security are the major things people are demanding,

We don't want war, but peace as its substitute."

### **Prose: A Vehicle for Advice and Reflection**

The prose genre in Nigerian Arabic literature also plays a significant role in societal development.

It includes:

**Sermons (Al-Khutbah)**

**Advice (Al-Wasiyyah)**

**Proverbs (Al-Amthal)**

**Wisdom (Al-Hikmah)**

**Epistles (Ar-Rasail)**

These forms provide moral guidance, social advice, and religious instruction to both the elite and the masses.

## **Drama: A Modern Medium of Awareness**

Dramatic literature in Arabic has emerged as a powerful tool for reforming, educating, entertaining, and guiding people in Nigeria.

Notable Arabic drama texts by Nigerian scholars include:

**"Al-Ameedulul Mubajjal" (The Honorable Dean)** and **"Tabaqatul 'Ulya" (The Upper Class)** by *Professor Hussain*.

**"Qad Ghaabat An-Nujum" (The Faded Stars)** by *Abdul Ganiyy Adebayo Alabi*.

These works reflect and critique societal problems, aiming for moral and ethical reconstruction.

## **Arabic and Human Capital Development**

Arabic language has contributed immensely to human capital in Nigeria. Those who acquire Arabic knowledge and earn a living through it include:

Arabic Teachers and Lecturers

Ambassadors

Commercial Arabic Writers

Arabic Typists and Artists

Alfas, Imams, Islamic Sheikhs, and itinerant preachers

These individuals serve society materially, spiritually, and morally, thereby promoting national development. (*Sanusi, S.A. 2012*)

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