



## **The Rise and Fall of Arabic Language in Northern Nigeria: Problems and Prospects**

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### **Abstract**

In an attempt to analyze of the relevance of Arabic language to the people of Northern Nigeria, which by virtue of Islam, had established itself in the region as the language of administration, literacy, education, history and legislation before the arrival of colonial masters, to Nigerian. Indeed, at one time, Arabic language was the official language of Northern Nigeria and had influence on the language and culture of its peoples. The paper that observed that with the spread of Islam in Northern Nigeria, learning of Arabic language through the acquisition of Islamic education had contributed immensely to the development of Nigerian nation at large and that its neglect would not augur well for Nigerian development. The paper, therefore, argues that Arabic has a lot to offer in the upliftment of the country, especially in the areas of religion, education, socio-economic, diplomacy and security. At the end, it affirms the significance of Arabic as a language that transcends the religious sphere and concludes on the note that Arabic should be given its prime place and be allowed to contribute its own quota to the development of not only northern Nigeria in particular Nigeria as a whole.

Keywords: Arabic Language, Culture, Security, Education, Northern Nigeria.

### **1. Introduction**

The history of Nigeria would hardly be complete without acknowledging the vital role played by the contact of Northern Nigeria with the Arab world. It is difficult to precisely say when Arabic Language came to Nigeria, but majority of researchers and scholars have agreed that the people of Nigeria, just like their counterparts in the West African sub region, came into contact with Arabic Language through commerce and trade routes. Arabic for several centuries has been used in one form or the other as official language of administration, commerce, diplomacy, intelligence, education and instruction, subsequently becoming the lingua franca among the traders in most of the towns and villages in the Northern Nigeria. This made it imperative for the people of the region to learn the Arabic language, just enough to help them conduct their trading transactions with the Arabs [1]. The entry of Arabic language into the country dated back to the 11<sup>th</sup> Century through Kanem Borno Empire and eventually Borno (North Eastern) in Nigeria became a Centre for Islamic Civilization for many years. Centuries before the advent of Europeans in Nigeria in 1903, Arabic had been used for religious, social and cultural purposes. It was in recognition of its significance that Arabic language is introduced into the Nigerian education curriculum as an academic discipline. The spread received a boost when Islamic Empires like the Sokoto Caliphate, was established in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century, under the leadership of Usman bn Fodio.

However, Arabic is today facing a lot of challenges, the least of which is its misconception by many as a religious language. This misconception is predominant among believers of other religions other than Islam (South South and South East Regions) within Nigeria. In Nigeria today, two other languages have been recognised and raised to the status of foreign languages. In addition to English, which is the nation's official language, Arabic and French are also taught in Nigerian schools as foreign languages [2].



## **2. The Reasons for the Spread of Arabic Language in Northern Nigeria.**

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 Arab traders preferred moving around so as to achieve religious purposes and benefit from the social and economic development as was mentioned by the Qur'an: )2: "قريش ( إيلافهم رحلة الشتاء والصيف ) (It is a great Grace from Allah) for the protection of the Quraish, (And with all those Allah's Grace and protection, We cause) the (Quraish) caravans to set forth safe in winter (to the south) and in summer (to the north without any fear) (Quraish:1- 2,)

The spread received a boost especially at the time when some Arab tribes, such as Barbers, Wugaras, Fulanis, Shuwas and others, migrated to the country and established Islamic Empires and Emirates like Kanem Bornu Empire, which was established in Borno in the 13th Century and eventually became a Centre for Islamic Civilization for so many decades. It is believed that Sahaabi Uqba bn Amer - may Allah be pleased with him - was a great Mujahid who opened the Western frontier Countries (West Africa, during the of Amr ibn al-Aas in Egypt) to Islam through the Kingdom of Kanem - Bornu, and then to the Hausa states. Much later under the leadership of Usman bn Fodio, the Sokoto Caliphate was established in the 17th Century which witnessed its expansion down south and the Ilorin Emirate (Northern Nigeria) was established by the son of Shaykh 'Alimi bn Jinta in the 18th Century [3]. However, some rulers and kings like the ruler of Kano Yaji dan Isamiya (1349-85 CE) accepted the religion of Islam, and help propagate the Arabic language Islamic religion. Under this circumstance, Arabic was made the official language of the kingdoms used for administration and education, language of documentation and correspondence, language of culture and civilization. Scholars were appointed judges, secretaries, counsellors and teachers [4].

Whenever scholars visited the country, students would rally round them to benefit from their fountain of knowledge. Some rulers of kingdoms and emirates do personally invite 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 [4]. 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 institutions of Arabic and Islamic learning such as Timbuktu (present Mali), Sudan, Tunisia, Egypt, Morocco, Makkah and Medina among others. With these activities, Arabic language and culture grew and developed in Northern 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. Also, scholars like Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulkarim Maghili Tlemceni (d. 909 AH), and Imam Jalal al-Din al-Suyuti (d. 911 AH) lived in Zaria, Kano and Katsina (cities in Northern Nigeria) and help in the establishment of Qur'anic schools where both Arabic language and Islamic religion were being taught [1]. Today these schools founded by these Ulamas have helped greatly in training and spreading Arabic language not only in northern Nigeria, but to the southern part of the country as well.

There are a large number of northern Nigerians scholars who took up the challenge from the Arab scholars and established schools, including traditional Quranic schools, informal schools, and regular schools [says Ali Abu Bakar 1982]. Today, the Statistics shows that numbers of Quranic schools in northern Nigeria alone, is estimated at 27,000 with students' population of about 954,422 pupils, more than 4,902 Islamic-based primary schools with a population of 316, 264 pupils, three hundred Arabic language institutions with a population of more than seventy thousand students [The Ministry of Education in



Northern Nigeria estimate]. The northern Nigerian governments have established schools to teach Arabic language and Islamic culture in compliance with the modern system in the city of Kano in 1934 and in 1963, they again set up another one in Sokoto. The formation of the school was the initiative of Muslim judges and scholars who are determined to spread the Arabic language and Islam in Nigeria. Government Arabic colleges were established by the northern Nigerian governments in Katsina, Maiduguri, Gombe, and Hadeja, in 1979 as well as three colleges in Kwara State of Northern Nigeria in 1980.

Furthermore, the development brought about the birth of numerous Islamic associations in helping the spread of Arabic language and Islamic culture. In northern Nigeria today, group likes: Jam'atu Nasrul Islam (JNI), Fityanul al-Islam, Jama'tu Ansar al-Islam, and the Jama'tu Izalatil Bid'ah wa Ikamatus Sunnah, have recorded significant contributions to the dissemination of Arabic and Islamic culture [says Al-ilorin 1985]. In 1964, Ahmadu Bello (then, premier of northern Nigeria) worked on the establishment of Jama'atu Nasral al- Islam Nasr in trying to emulate his grandfather, Usman Ibn Fodio. He tried to link this association with the Muslim World League, in Makkah; He participated on Islamic Da'awa trips in the Arab world. Following the footsteps of the northern governments that established religious organization, Jama'atu Izalatil Bida'ah wa Ikamatus Sunnah (JIBWIS) was then founded 1978 AD. There is no dispute among scholars that this group (JIBWIS) contributed tremendously in uplifting and spreading of Arabic Language and Islamic civilizations [6]. Through the teachings, preaching, organizing symposia and guidance and counselling, the organization has added in its success, building of schools, mosques and hospitals in cities, towns and villages, all in trying to propagate Islam and Arabic culture.

### **3. Reasons for the Decline of Arabic Language in Northern Nigeria**

With the coming of the Christians missionaries and the occupation of Nigeria by the British colonialists at the tail end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th 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 in the north of the country were killed, some were banished and their authority and influence were weakened. Thus, English subsequently replaced Arabic as the official language of the Northern Nigeria. 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 [5].

Galadanci, S. A, [xx] listed some of the reasons why the northern Nigeria was sceptical of western education at the beginning of European and colonialist appearance in the region to include the following:

- i) *Christian missionaries were the fore front proprietors and administrators of these western schools and therefore Christianity and Western cultures at that time were taught. That confirmed the sceptism of Muslims in the region that it was a ploy by the Europeans to change their religion and Islamic culture which they were comfortable with and not ready to accept any religion other than Islam.*
- ii) *The primary aim of the missionaries was to stop the spread of Arabic Language and by extension stop the spread and development of Islam in the Northern Nigeria. Their purpose was to propagate Christian religion by instilling western mode of education, disconnect the power cord and put obstacles and barriers to the spread of Islam.*



- iii) *The fact that the colonists had held treaties with the kings and heads of Muslims when they occupied the north means that the Muslim leaders do not allow the missionaries to enter the northern territories (Muslim majority) without with the consent of kings and satisfaction.*
- iv) *The facts that the colonists themselves do not encourage missionaries to engage in the territories of Muslims (Northern Nigeria), because they were afraid of provoking the feelings of the Muslims, as they (colonialists) did not have the potential to suppress any civil revolution in the event of such happens.*

However, all the agreements reached before with the leadership of northern Nigerian Muslims were broken by the British colonists after reinforcing their strength, forcefully eliminated the Sokoto caliphate and seized power of authority from the Muslims. This single incidence further confirms the sceptics that the British colonialists were never to be trusted and so many of their programs introduced in the Northern Nigeria were met with resistance.

The amalgamation of the two protectorates (northern and southern Nigeria) into one entity called Nigeria was created by the British colonial masters for ease of administration. This amalgamation has tremendously affected Arabic language development as the two regions differ greatly in religious and cultural differences and is seen by Muslims in the north as plot against Islam and Arabic.

Another reason is the separation of Arabic Language from Islamic Studies contributed in slowing down the development of Arabic Language in Nigeria. It is now common to find a professor of Islamic studies that do not understand Arabic Language which is adjudged as the language of Islam Religion. Many scholars feel that Islamic studies and Arabic are inseparable as one need Arabic language to deeply understand Islam.

Intellectual invasion and cold wars faced by scholars and Sheikhs in Islamic knowledge and Arabic culture. Scholars who are not fluent with English language are not valued so and so their knowledge cannot land them jobs with government, no matter how brilliant and excellent such scholar is in Arabic and Islamic knowledge.

Western culture has weakened many Islamic intellectuals as western based professions are considered relevant and Arabic or Islamic based professions. Just because English is the official Nigerian language, Arabic language professionals find it difficult to survive in the dominance. This development reflects on the new generation of students who are aspiring to major in Arabic language and Islamic studies as they are being discouraged by the Arabic language teachers/lecturers.

#### **4. Prospect for the Rise of Arabic Language**

In order to salvage this situation, some Islamic organizations like Jama'atu Izalatil Bida'ah wa Ikamatus Sunnah with branches well spread all over the northern Nigeria region, An-sarudeen Society of Nigeria, Ahmadiyah 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 uplift Arabic and Islam and to save their wards from converting to Christianity (south west Nigeria). 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. While Shaykh Sherif Saleh also established in 1957 Kuliyyatun- Nahdah al-Islamiyyah at Maiduguri, Sheyk Ahmed Lemu founded Sheik Lemu schools in Minna, Sheik Abubakar



Gumi school of Arabic studies in Kano, Alhaji Ahmadu Chanchangi established Gumi College (teaches both Islamic and western system of education) in Kaduna 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.

The post-Independence Nigeria saw Arab countries opening their Embassies and consulates in Nigeria and it became easy for the graduates of these Private Arabic Schools to gain scholarships, individually and in groups, 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. Enrolment of candidates to these Private Arabic Schools also increased in manifolds. Many graduates from Arab countries also returned to Northern 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 Northern 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 language. Such places include Kano, Sokoto Maiduguri, Bauchi, Damaturu, Minna, and Ilorin 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 programs 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 one-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 Gamboru-Ngala in Borno State of Northern Nigeria where the Shuwa Arabs are predominantly found. In addition, some Colleges of Education and other Allied Institutions in Northern 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 in our universities.

## **5. Problems Facing the Teaching of Arabic Language in Nigeria**

There are a lot of problems facing the teaching and learning of Arabic language in Northern Nigerian today. The status of acceptance of Arabic in the minds of many Northern Nigerians (Non-Muslims) cannot be over-emphasized.



- a. Lack of learning materials: There are problems on how to improve on the learning materials. Such problems include lack of unified textbooks which will be accepted by all those concerned in teaching and learning of Arabic. The textbooks being used now by many Arabic schools or institutions are imported from Arab countries e.g. An-Nahwul-Wadhih, Al-Balaaghatul-Wadhihah, Al-Mufasssal fil Adabil Arabiy, Al-Muntakhab fil Adabil Arabiy to mention but few, are all imported textbooks which were mostly developed and might have been dropped by these Arab countries. The exercises contained in these books are mostly suitable only for the Arab societies. Some nouns contained therein can only be understood by the students living in the Arab environment.
- b. Need to update Arabic curriculum: There had been an old curriculum of Arabic studies in Northern Nigeria. The teaching and learning of Arabic literature of the ancient Arabs or the pre-Islamic Arabic literature to the students is common in the institutions of learning in Northern Nigeria. This type of literature has its advantage, but equally has side effects or disadvantage in learning the language. The student must be very good enough to commit those beautiful prose and poems to his memory. As such, there is need to have a new curriculum which takes into consideration various differences in this regard. Additionally, inadequate number of qualified teachers is another problem on its own. Furthermore, even the qualified ones use out dated methods of teaching. The old traditional method of teaching Arabic is very much in existence in most of our institutions. Hardly can a language laboratory be used by Arabic teachers as most of them do not know it is in existence let alone how to use them.
- c. Non Challant Attitude of the Native Speakers: Most native speakers of Arabic are fond of “I don’t care” attitude towards the spread of Arabic. Arabs themselves are sometimes proving to speak foreign languages to foreigners on visit to their countries. Equally the embassies of Arab nations in Nigeria unlike their French counterpart are reluctant in extending assistance to teaching the language. There used to be some kind of assistance to students in form of literature and text books gifts. But after the terrorist attack on the United States on 11th September 2001, the assistance was stopped out of fear of the American led war against terrorism. This, of course, led to a drastic drop in the receipt of assistance from Arabs generally. In addition, most Arabic speakers do not encourage their children to learn, teach and propagate Arabic. There are some who learnt the language to the level of professorship, but may have no children who can wear their caps or can step into their shoes. There are also some Arabic teachers who sometimes do not like to be associated with the subject out of inferiority complex. There is the need therefore for attitudinal change among speakers of Arabic; incentives should be provided to fresh lecturers and teachers of Arabic language in Northern Nigeria.
- d. Inadequate of Publishers: It could be mentioned at this juncture that there is no enough qualified printing press in Northern Nigeria to handle Arabic printing. Those existing are very few; even typing of Arabic is more expensive than any other language e.g., while English is typed at a cheaper rate per page, Arabic typing is about three-fold the cost of typing English. There are only few people and few computers in Northern Nigeria that can carter for Arabic language because of non-patronage and encouragement.
- e. Financial Problems: There are quite a number of professionals that had authored some text books that could serve as a good syllabus for Arabic schools a crossed the levels in Northern Nigeria, but because of financial difficulties that involve publications, they could not publish them and the wealthy individuals are not willing to offer assistance.
- f. Misconception about Arabic: one of the major problems facing the study of Arabic is the misconception by some people that Arabic is a language of Islamic religion. This in return, leads to direct victimization of the language and sometimes those who teach it. While such is noticed in some governmental schools, in private schools it is not being taught except in such schools that belong to those proprietors that are interested in it. There is no doubt that Arabic language is linked to Islam especially its spread across the region and beyond. But Arabic should be seen as an



international communication medium that should be appreciated by those deserving it. Since English is not associated with Christianity on one hand, Arabic language on the other hand should not face this unwarranted charge.

- g. Government Policy: Federal Government of Nigeria in 1996 relegated of Arabic language to the third position [7], while making French as second language to English. This policy has given those that are not interested in Arabic the chance to exploit that situation to the best of their ability. Though the government claims it is to the benefit of Nigeria's border transaction, the same reasons adduced also qualify Arabic to be upgraded. Today Nigerian security personnel partake in UN peace keeping efforts, enforcement and peace negotiation, where the global services have taken the country to several Arabic speaking nations like Lebanon, Somali, Sudan, Dafur and of recent Mali. As such, Nigeria needs to productively and properly legislate on the officialization of Arabic as a language. This position, no doubt can propel governments' various organs to move positively towards the language.

It is paramount to note here that despite the number of learners and graduates of Arabic in various 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 language. This apathy no doubt is affecting the development of Arabic in Nigeria.

## **6. Conclusion**

The paper tried to examine the rise and development of Arabic language and its culture in Northern Nigeria and the entire country at large. It concurs that Arabic language came into northern Nigeria through the Arab traders and became deeply entrenched there with the help of the establishment of Islamic empires and emirates. The language was further developed by indigenous scholars who took it up from the Arab scholars. The coming of the British colonialists and Christian missionaries retarded its growth in the 20th century and later gained its strength with the establishment of private Arabic Schools and the embarkment of students on scholarship to study Arabic language abroad. The paper also noted the immense contribution of Islamic organisations like JIBWIS in rejuvenating the Arabic language in Northern Nigerian where usage of Arabic script for writing and composition of poems as well as establishment of hospitals and many more. Arabic has actually become one of the languages of social interaction and it is undeniable that Northern Nigerians have imbibed a great deal of Arabic culture. The paper further discussed the many bottlenecks towards the development of the language and that the Government of Nigeria in its policy, should give adequate recognition to Arabic language as second language after English language as the government stand to benefit from its development in terms of security, diplomacy and others. 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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