

THE ARABIC LANGUAGE: ITS RELEVANCE TO NIGERIAN DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

This is an attempt to give an expository analysis of the relevance of Arabic, which by virtue of Islam, had established itself in Nigeria as the language of administration, literacy, education, history and legislation before the arrival of colonial masters, to Nigerian development. Thus, the cut and thrust of this paper is the examination of the role of Arabic language in the development of Nigeria. Methodologies employed in this paper are historical and sociological approaches. The paper discovered that with the spread of Islam in Nigeria, learning of Arabic language through the acquisition of Islamic education commenced. It was also observed that Arabic language had contributed immensely to the development of Nigeria as a nation in the past 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, economy, socio-psychology, diplomacy and security. Finally, the paper affirms that the significance of Arabic as a language 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 Nigeria.

Keywords: Arabic language, Nigeria, Development, Economy, Security, Education, Social, Psychology

Introduction

Arabic language is the language of the Qur'an. Today, it is the most important language of the Semitic group spoken by millions of people and understood by many more. The Arabic writing system has an alphabet of twenty-eight consonants. Its writing system was introduced into Makkah not long before the revelation of the Qur'an. Arabic, as established by the usages found in the Qur'an and the Hadith, is still used for composing

books. It is also used for journalism, broadcasting, conferences and so forth. Arabic has provided most of the special vocabulary of Islam in use all over the world¹. In addition to religious vocabulary, vast numbers of Arabic words have been adopted into such African and Asian languages as Swahili, Hausa, Turkish, Malay, Urdu, Persian and Yoruba.

Historically, Arabic is the oldest foreign language in Nigeria today. The reason is that its entry into the country dated back to the seventh century of the Christian era and the first century of the Hijrah calendar. Centuries before the advent of Europeans in Nigeria, 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. In Nigeria today, three languages have been raised to the status of official languages. In addition to English, which is the nation's official language, Arabic and French are also taught in Nigerian schools as foreign languages².

However, it is disheartening that despite the fact that the Government is quite aware of the great potentialities of Arabic in Nigeria – as a language of diplomacy, international relations, national historical studies, literacy, as well as the language of the Shuwa Arabs, a tribe in Borno State of Nigeria. It has not done much to help in the development of Arabic. In other words, religious stigma attached to Arabic – as a language of Islam, has caused a great problem in the process of learning Arabic and this has denied it the extra – religious value which would have been helpful in Nigerian development. Therefore, the focus of this work is the examination of the role of Arabic language in National development. The work will, briefly, talk about the introduction of Arabic in Nigeria before explaining the major areas where Arabic can contribute to the development of Nigeria. The major difficulties facing Arabic language are also looked into.

Arabic Language in Nigeria down the Memory Lane

The influence of Arabic language among the Muslims in the world is very great because of its religious status. Arabic which its original abode was the Arabian peninsula expanded to North Africa in the seventh century AD. It is an undisputable fact that there was commercial link between North Africa and West African kingdoms like Ghana, Gao, and Timbuktu. Others were Kanem-Borno, Kano and Katsina, which altogether with some other areas in the region, later got demarcated away from *Biladu-Sudan* (now West Africa) under the name Nigeria (Niger area). After the Islamic conquest of North Africa, the Arabs were in the forefront of the merchants that traded with the people of West Africa. This commercial link between the Arabs and the people of West Africa is the foundation stone of Arabic

language in West Africa in general and in Nigeria in particular³. In other words, the spread of Arabic during the period mentioned above was, however, confined to the trading circles.

Nigeria as a nation has a multiplicity of languages, cultures and religions. There are many Arabic schools in both Northern and Southern Nigeria. The numbers of students in these schools are so many to the extent that their activities, attitudes and behaviours have a significant impact on the larger society. The emphasis on the search for knowledge by Islam accounts for the need of Arabic schools in Nigeria, for every Muslim at any point in time must have being a student of Islam. The reason is that the primary pre-occupation of Muslim is not only to digest, but to grasp the contents as well as imports of Islam and where this could be achieved is the institution of learning known as Arabic schools. These institutions, started from the Mosque of the Prophet in Madinah while his disciples followed suit by using their homes and shops for classes, which were conducted on part-time basis. The history of Arabic schools throughout the Arab world and in the non-Arab world in particular, has been the history of the spread of Islam. Hence, Nigeria cannot be an exception for the history of these schools is as old as the advent of Islam.

Since commerce needs a language of communication between the seller and the buyer, Arabic was used for communication among the traders of that time. The local traders learnt it from their Arab counterparts because Arabic was more developed than the local languages in West Africa. Moreover, the introduction of Islam and simultaneously inception of Islamic education in the territory occasioned the efflorescence of the language. In addition to this religious factor, there were also political and social factors which motivated the people to learn Arabic.

The local scholars who were knowledgeable in Arabic enjoyed some socio-political privileges in the society which ordinary people could not enjoy. This greatly motivated the people to learn Arabic. Arabic, therefore, successfully competed with local languages such as Kanuri, Fulfude, Hausa and Yoruba. In other words, Arabic language enriched these indigenous languages with hundreds of religious, political and commercial words and expressions.

Arabic had reached its peak of glory in the Northern Nigeria and was adopted as the official language after the Jihad activities of Uthman bin Fudi which began in 1804. This Jihad served as a catalyst for the spread and reformation of Islam. It also served as a booster for the spread of Islamic education and contributed to efflorescence of Arabic scholarship in Nigeria. The advent of the British in Nigeria, however, opened a new chapter in the history of Arabic language⁴. In a nutshell, Arabic became the language used in schools, religious

gatherings, courts and communication, among others. But unlike the royal patronage accorded the western education by the British, Arabic education was a matter of private affairs.

The Role of Arabic Language in National Development

The role of Arabic language in building a nation of our dream cannot be over-emphasized. The term ‘development’ means different things to different people. Therefore, there have been divergent opinions between the economists and social scientists as to what constitutes development. The emphasis that is laid on what constitutes development to Economists is not the same with that of Agriculturalists. For instance, Economists lay much emphasis on increase in per capital income, while Agriculturalists accept increase in agricultural output for measuring development⁵. In this context of this work, we adopt the definition given by W. Rodney as quoted by M. S. Bawa that: Development in any human society is a multi-dimensional process having radial implications not only on the economic, but also on the political, socio-cultural and administrative aspects of society⁶. Based on this assertion, we would examine the possible areas in which Arabic language can contribute to Nigerian development.

- **Religion:** Religion can be defined from numerous perspectives. According to G. O. Abe, it may be viewed from philosophical, cosmological, ontological, anthropological, sociological, political, ethical, scientific, physiological, psychological and archaeological perspectives. A more general definition of religion spreads over the concepts of system of faith, belief, worship and practice, which make dynamic impact on the control of human life⁷. Religion is derived from the word *religio*, which means ‘to bind’. It is that which binds man to the truth.

Moreover, a cursory look at the history of human civilization will show that religion has been the supreme force in the development of mankind to its present condition. The moral and ethical development of man to his present state, if due to any one cause, is due to religion because true and lofty morals are inspired only by faith in God. Love, concord, sympathy and kindness to one’s fellow-man have been the message of every religion.

Islam, being a complete way of life, affirms God’s sovereignty over the entire gamut of man’s life. Its teachings cover all fields of human activity, spiritual and material, individual and social, educational and cultural, economic and political, national and international⁸. In other words, religion as perfected by Islam laid the basis for the unification of humanity. Therefore, the religion, when approached from the Islamic

perspective, can bring true happiness to the human race⁹. Since Arabic is the religious language of Islam, early introduction of the Muslim children to the Arabic education helps them to understand the tenets of Islam and the words of the Qur'an as exemplified by Prophet Muhammad.

Arabic language establishes the fear of God in the minds of the pupils because the courses taught in it help the pupils to have respect for their elders, teachers, parents and God. It also helps the learners to develop good moral and ethical behaviour in the society. When members of the society imbibe good morals and translate them into positive societal norms, it greatly helps in bringing about the much desired development of a nation. In a nutshell, Arabic in conjunction with Islam has played this moral role in the past effectively and can still do the same if given the needed encouragement.

- **Education:** Education is said to be coined out of two Latin words, *educere* which means 'to nourish', 'to raise', 'to bring out', and *educare* which means 'to draw out', 'to lead out'. Education is seen by S. Adesina as a tool for the integration of the individual effectively into a society so that the individual can achieve self-realization, develop national consciousness, promote unity and strive for social, economic, political, scientific, cultural and technological process¹⁰.

Education as a social service is the responsibility of the Government which must not be shirked under any guise. It should constitute the standard upon which a Government may be assessed. Educational development is imperative and urgent. It must not only be treated as a national emergency, second only to war, but must also move with the momentum of a revolution¹¹. However, the individual being educated develops physically, mentally, emotionally, morally and socially.

Arabic as the medium of formal education in the Northern Nigeria had played the above mentioned role effectively before the introduction of English. Though Arabic scholars have emphasized the need for an improved method of teaching Arabic, it can still be argued that Northern Nigeria would have reached what Arabized North African countries attained in their educational development, if it had been allowed to continue with Arabic medium in her educational pursuit. The average Nigerian Muslims, both in the South and the North, even till today prefer acquisition of Arabic language to English. This is the reason why Arabic schools have continued to spring up and compete favourably with the English ones in terms of encouragement from parents and pupil's enrolment¹².

In a nutshell, Arabic language served as the first non-native language that brought its educational as well as its rich culture to Nigeria. The coming of Islam to this part of globe brought with it literacy and technology of writing. Nigerians use Arabic in writing their languages. With the help of Arabic characters, they were able to express their mother tongues, read and write in Arabic with ease and this has put them in a kind of intellectual tradition¹³.

- **Socio-Psychology:** Arabs were known to have reached a high level in the use of Arabic language as an art before the advent of Islam. In other words, Arabic, as a language, has highly developed literature which is evident in the life of the Arabs, right from the pre-Islamic era to the present day. At all levels of Arabic education, the students learn many Arabic poetic verses that teach social norms such as self-reliance, sincerity, bravery and generosity, among others.

Therefore, the learners of Arabic cannot avoid being influenced by the culture, sociology and psychology portrayed in such literature. Arabic had been used to write many works range from Acts of Worship, Islamic Jurisprudence, Health Education and Ethics to Sociology, Economic, Public Administration and Political Science. Such works were also taught at schools and discussed at public gathering specially organized for the enlightenment of the masses, male and female¹⁴.

- **Economy:** Arabic had also been the language of commerce for centuries. As mentioned earlier, there was commercial link between North Africa and West Africa before the advent of Islam in West Africa. This explains why the historical development of Arabic language was tied to the commercial activities. Moreover, there is a strong commercial link between Nigeria and Arab countries in Asia and Africa. Since Nigerian citizens transact business in Egypt, United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia, among others, the knowledge of Arabic and ability to speak Arabic will assist in boosting Nigerian economy.

The introduction of Arabic in Nigeria also creates a situation of positive economic life because it guaranteed a good source of income for indigenous Arabic scholars. They became employers by establishing Arabic schools and employed Arabic specialists, thereby reducing the rate of unemployment in the country¹⁵. Also, Nigeria is a strong member of Organization of Oil Exporting Countries (OPEC) – an organization established to ensure the stability of the price of the petroleum in the international market. As many of the most influential member nations are Arab countries, Arabic

language will create opportunities to enter into agreement with them and there will be better interaction between us.

- **Diplomatic Relationship:** Diplomacy can be defined as practices and institutions by which nations conduct their relations with one another¹⁶. It means that countries all over the world move closer to one another for many benefits such as economic, political, scientific or technological gains. Since Nigeria has diplomatic relations with some Arab countries such as the United Arab Emirates, Syria, Libya, Egypt and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, among others, she, therefore, needs Arabic scholars to ensure mutual understanding and exchanging of ideas between them.

Besides, Arabic is one of the official languages of the United Nations Organization (UNO) of which Nigeria is a member, others being English, French, Italian and Russian. It also constitutes the strength behind the solidarity and harmony found among the members of African Union (AU) because it is one of its three official working languages alongside with French and English¹⁷.

- **Security:** Security, according to ‘Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary’, means safety, freedom from danger or anxiety¹⁸. Security is sometimes as the whole range of measures affecting the economic and social welfare of a population, as well as protection against internal or external aggressions. In the world today, the security of nations, societies and individuals is of great concern to all, as criminals have resorted to modern scientific methods in executing their crimes against humanity.

It has been established that there are many Arabic scholars, using Arabic as their medium of expression in Nigeria today, the Governments at all levels should, therefore, take the security of their citizens serious by encouraging the learning of Arabic to help them in the security services. The Governments should employ Arabic scholars to assist in the security of Nigeria. They will be able to report any issue of security interest from Arabic schools or gathering where Arabic is the medium of expression to the Governments.

Difficulties Facing the Teaching and Learning of Arabic Language in Nigeria

Ta’līm which means imparting knowledge is the Arabic word for teaching. Other words that are synonymous with *Ta’līm* are *Ta’dīb*, *Tadrīs* and *Tarbiyyah*. According to the Qur’an, the art of teaching was first undertaken by Allah when He taught Prophet Adam about his environment. Qur’an 2: 31 tells us that Adam was taught the names of all things. As Allah did to Adam, He also taught Prophet Muhammad (Q. 96: 3-5). Other Prophets, such as Ibrahim, Nuh, Musa and ‘Isa were also taught by Allah.

It is, thus, known who the first teacher was. According to M. A. Bidmus, teaching can be defined as the process of equipping the learner with the right knowledge and skills¹⁹. Moreover, teaching is both basic and sacred. It is basic in the sense that the knowledge acquired by the aid of teaching would assist the learner towards selection of the right behaviour in the society. The sacredness of teaching derives from the fact that it was first administered by Allah with the aim of guiding His creatures aright and was later administered by His Prophets and messengers. In other words, knowledge is of two main kinds – religious and secular. In Islam, both are compulsory for a Muslim to acquire in that without one, the other cannot be enjoyed.

Arabic language especially in the Southern Nigeria faces a lot of difficulties because it has a rival educational system – Western Oriented Education – which enjoys a large amount of Government support. Some of them are:

Lackadaisical Attitudes of the Government

Despite the fact that the Federal and the States Governments are quite aware of the historical relevance of Arabic to national development, the various arms of Government in Nigeria have not done much to develop it. This arises from non-removing the misconceived religious stigma attached to the language – as a language of Islam. As a result of this, they do little or nothing to enhance the teaching and learning of Arabic language in terms of moral and financial supports as they do to English and French. In other words, whatever recognition that is given to Arabic in Nigeria is often tied to its role in Islamic religion at all levels of education²⁰.

Consequently, Arabic has not enjoyed the same degree of Government or institutional respect given to English or even French. There is a dearth of teachers in Primary, Secondary and Tertiary institutions in many parts of the country especially in the South, because the Governments did not employ teachers to handle Arabic. Some schools do not have any teacher, while some have only one. This has been a lamentable one for long.

Society's Poor Attitude

People look down on the Arabic specialists because our society is dominated by western values. This is the reason why pupils are not given adequate encouragement and support to study Arabic. Some parents believe that the study of Arabic language does not lead beyond conducting naming, wedding, burial and house warming ceremonies. They do not know that there are many Doctors and Professors of Arabic language and literature. Even some Arabic language teachers behave as if they had studied Arabic out of frustration. They maintain poor attitude towards the future career of Arabic language by believing that only

available career for it is teaching. Therefore, dedication of such teachers towards the advancement of the subject or course is regrettable. They forget that the knowledge they acquire at the Higher Institution of learning is meant to prepare them for national development. The higher education provides an objective view of human capacity to bring about positive change in an individual that will enhance productivity that the society needs.

Inadequacy of Instructional Materials

Another major difficulty facing the teaching and learning of Arabic language in Nigeria is the issue of instructional materials. The non-challant attitude of our Governments and teachers to provide these materials for effective teaching and learning of Arabic language has adverse effect on the subject. The materials such as pictures, real objects and sketches, among others are very important in teaching the meaning of some words like cup, football, banana and so forth. Tape recorders, videotapes and language laboratory are also helpful in supporting the teacher's oral instruction in Arabic pronunciation.

Lack of suitable textbooks also contributes hindrance to teaching and learning of Arabic language in Nigeria. In other words, very good textbooks are needed in learning process to facilitate quick understanding of the Arabic language because they are links between the teacher and his teaching²¹. This is the reason why the teacher has to apply intelligent in the choice and use of textbooks. Textbooks must have bearings, to a large extent, to the background and culture of learners, if they are to mean anything to them. Although, Arabic scholars have taken up this challenge of inadequacy of suitable textbooks, but the cost is on the high side and not easily available in the market as there are few Arabic and Islamic bookshops in the country especially in the South.

Conclusion

In this work, a modest approach has been made to highlight the relevance of Arabic language to Nigerian development. Religion, education, economy, socio-psychology, diplomacy and security are the areas examined. Observations revealed that the involvement of the Arabic scholars in political administration in pre-colonial Nigeria greatly assisted the rulers. In other words, the power of literacy in Arabic which the scholars were privilege to possess was needed by the rulers to develop the land and enhance the smooth running of their administrative machinery. Therefore, the impetus for the direct involvement of the Arabic in the administration seems to be its relevance to the maintenance of social justice. Arabic language was used as a vehicle of enlightenment before, during and after the Nigerian independence. It was also used to record history. It had also served as a foundation for the development as well as a tool for the spread of education.

The work also condemned the Government's non-challant attitude towards Arabic by not giving it adequate moral and financial supports. It called on the Government to encourage the teaching and learning of Arabic language in Nigeria. Its effect on the teachers and learners are also explained. Since it is part of the responsibility of the Governments at all levels to look after the general welfare of the citizenry, the work conclude on the note that, it is not only desirable but incumbent on them to ensure that no obstacle is placed in the way of Arabic language and individual wishes to study it, because it could not do any harm to adherents of other religions. The Governments should recruit more Arabic teachers in Primary, Secondary and Tertiary institutions in the country and assist in providing instructional materials that will assist in teaching and learning of Arabic. The Government should also help in providing current Arabic textbooks for the schools.

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