

Perception of Yoruba Muslims on Arabic as a Factor in Social Integration in South-Western Nigeria

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Abstract: The present study is an empirical endeavour on the perception of Yoruba Muslims on Arabic as a factor in social integration in South-western Nigeria. Many centuries of Islam's presence in the region has shown the major roles played by the language, not just as a vehicle for the dissemination of Islamic messages but also as a means of self-actualization by forming the first literate elite in pre-colonial Nigeria. Muslims in this region have been witnessing a continuous decline in the enrolment of students into the modern Arabic Schools for some years now. This situation provides a ground for an inquiry on whether there is a possible link between the future career prospect for the language and the dearth in the enrolment of candidates into those schools. Two hundred samples were drawn from four of the six local governments that comprise the zone for data collection and were analysed in simple percentage. Findings show that although many factors account for the decline in pupils enrolment in those schools, the fear of making success out of their career as Arabists is loud. The researchers recommend among others that (i) the present curriculum of those schools should be reviewed to allow for integration of Western Education into Arabic Education System, and (ii) the learning environment of the modern Arabic Schools should be made more conducive to learning so as to make them attractive to students and competitive with the Western-oriented schools.

Keywords: perception, Yoruba, Muslims, Arabic, acquisition, career, south western, nigeria

I. INTRODUCTION

In Nigeria as in some other parts of the world, the recognition accorded Arabic language has a root in its roles as a vehicle through which the messages of Islam were disseminated as well as the latter's language of liturgy. As the language of the scripture of Islam therefore, Arabic has always been regarded as an integral part of Islamic learning [1]. This explains why the elementary Arabic schools in Nigeria are called Qur'anic school where both Arabic and Islamic learning are taught simultaneously. It is also in view of this that, when a pupil started to learn the Arabic alphabet he does so with the intention to read the Qur'an [2]. For the above reasons, the present discourse makes no compartmentalization between the twin-disciplines of Arabic and Islamic studies and our reference to Arabic therefore is applicable to both of them. Before further discussion on the present study, it suffices to clarify few concepts and briefly introduce the area where the study takes place. By definition, social integration is seen as 'the ability of a person learned in Arabic and or Islamic Studies to be involved in all facets of the Nigerian social life'[3]. Rhetorically, Abdul Rahmon queried whether it is possible for Arabists to make careers in politics, civil and public service as well as in military and education as is the case of those who acquire English. South-western Nigeria on the other hand is an area predominantly inhabited by the Yoruba indigenes who could be divided into a number of sub-ethnic groups like the Oyo, the Egba, the Egbado (now Yewa), the Ijebu, the Ekiti, the Ondo, the Ikale and so on [4]. Apart from the Oyo, all the other sub-ethnic groups have dialects within the Yoruba language all of which are mutually intelligible and are variants of the standard form

II. QUR'ANIC SCHOOLS AT THE EARLIER STAGE: PURPOSE AND METHOD

As was and still the case in every part of the Muslim world, the primary purpose of teaching and learning Qur'an among the Yoruba of South-western Nigeria, is to make adherents of the religion well grounded in the knowledge of their religion in order to aid their effective worship of God. Teaching was at that time informal as 'Mallam' (Arabic corrupted word for teacher) of a typical Qur'anic school engaged his pupils in learning as the latter squat before him in a semi-circle under a tree, or in his parlour, verandah or porch [5]. Board wooden 'slates', upon which different verses of the Qur'an were written were the main instructional materials while a long cane served as a means of punishing erring pupils. At the early stage of learning, repetition and rote were the main method that involved choral recitations. The method is aptly described by in the following statement

The teacher recites to his pupils the verse to be learnt and they repeat it after him. He does this for several times until he is satisfied that they have mastered the correct pronunciation. Then they memorized it. The verse is then linked with the previously memorized verses and in this way the pupil gradually learns by heart whole chapters of the Qur'an. A chapter at a time is written on his wooden board (slate) which has been scrubbed smooth with the aid of some coarse leaves and then painted with a white clay-like substance. The talaq (ink) which the teacher uses to write the chapter of the wala (or slate) is extracted from a certain leaves which are boiled until they give off their dye [6].

The pattern remained the same in what may be regarded as the 'secondary' and post-secondary levels of the system with the exception that its curriculum was much broader and deeper and the pupil begins to learn the meaning of the Qur'an verses and such other texts as the hadith which he has earlier on committed to memory. Further to this at the post-secondary level was the extensive study of the grammar aspect of Arabic using the method commonly referred to by linguists as the grammar method, as against the direct practical method that emphasizes the presentation in context of new grammatical patterns and vocabulary [7]. In spite of the informal method of teaching as described above, the scope of Arabic learning widened so much that it became a means of self-actualization by forming the first literate elite in pre-colonial Nigeria [8]. This is evident in historical factors emphasized by Dike (1963) and cultural reasons as explained in the works of Abubakar (1972) and Al-Ilory (1991).

III. REFORM EFFORTS

The advent of the British colonial masters and the introduction of western education by the white missionaries created a major challenge for the Islamic system of education and the need to make it relevant under the new dispensation became obvious. Many of the products of the western-oriented schools were being absorbed into the civil service and the popularity of Arabic which had hitherto held sway even in West Africa gradually began to wane. Muslim scholars in Nigeria saw the need for a change in the status of Arabic and its twin-discipline. This was to make it compete favourably well with western education as a passport for white collar job under the colonial administration. Towards making this realisable, efforts were first made for the introduction of 'secular' subjects into the existing Arabic education setting as was the case of the Northern Provinces Law School, later known as School for Arabic studies where English and Arithmetic were incorporated into the school curriculum [9]. This school which aimed at training teachers in those subject areas had major problems in the production of few number of scholars and the fact that most of the products lose, along the line, the grasp of Arabic in favour of English [10]. Another effort was the clamour for the development and integration of Arabic and Islamic Studies into the mainstream of the conventional primary, secondary and tertiary institutions. Like the first type, this also has its shortcomings which include lack of qualified personnel to teach the subject, defective curriculum and limited periods allocated to its study in the school time table as well as the elective nature of the subject itself.

The third effort – and unarguably the most significant – was the reform in the existing Qur'anic schools which obviously was seen as the only viable option for intensive learning of Arabic. In Yoruba land of South-western Nigeria, Shaykh Adam Abdullah al-Ilory and later Shaykh Kamalideen Al-Adabiy blazed the trail in this regard by reorganizing their schools to run *ibtida'iyah* (elementary), *'Idadiyyah* (junior secondary) and *tawjihiyah* (senior secondary) programmes respectively [11]. This type, popularly known as 'modern Arabic School' was a total departure from the former traditional Qur'anic schools in many respects. One of these was the replacement of mats with desk and chairs; textbooks with slate (Alo) among others while pupils/students who are now divided into classes gained promotion through the conduct of examination. Another difference was the design of comprehensive curriculum for full circle Arabic learning in which a student either passes through all the three stages of the programmes or terminates it where his capacity permits. Moreover, the period of learning for pupils/students was for the first time officially pegged to between eight and ten years unlike before when the teacher determined the period when an individual pupil/student is sound enough to gain his freedom.

Efforts of the two eminent scholars mentioned above have helped in the transformation of Arabic into an enviable position particularly among Yoruba Muslims of South-western Nigeria. Many of their products have reached the pinnacle of their careers as academics, astute administrators, judges and translators. Despite these efforts however, development in Arabic education shows that there is a serious challenge facing Arabic education particularly in terms of enrolment. This disturbing situation provokes a thought as to whether there is a link between the dearth in students' enrolments into Arabic schools and the Yoruba Muslims' perception of Arabic as a career prospect for their children.

IV. METHODOLOGY

The study adopts the descriptive research of survey type while samples were drawn from selected Muslims of South-western Nigeria using random sampling technique. Four out of the six states that comprise South-western Nigeria were selected for study. Their selection was based on the rate of their commitment to Islam through organising and attendance at important Islamic programmes as well as a host of other activities. The states are, Oyo, Osun, Ogun and Lagos. A total of one thousand (1000) samples were drawn altogether at two hundred and fifty per state. A self-developed questionnaire was designed and called: 'Questionnaire Guide on the Muslim Perception of Arabic as a factor in social integration (QGMPAFSI). It comprises of two parts. The first part consists of the demographic survey of the respondents which includes their age, sex and qualifications. The second part of the Questionnaire contained the question item proper. In this part, seven items were presented for the response of the respondents. Data were gathered through the distribution of Questionnaire copies to selected samples. The distributions were made during Jum'at services on Fridays and Asalatu prayer sessions on Sundays. Altogether, 1000 copies were distributed and efforts were made to recover 896 of them. This was made possible as a result of the on –the-sport coordination of the exercise. Data collected were analysed using the simple percentage method.

V. RESULTS

Table 1: Distribution of Respondents by Age

S/N	RESPONDENTS AGE RANGE	TOTAL NUMBER	PERCENTAGE
1	18-29 years,	40	17
2	30-39 years	46	19.6
3	40-49 years	70	29.8
4	50 years and above	79	32.8

The diagram above shows that the 17% of the respondents fell between the age range of 18-29 years, 19.6% were between 30-39 years while those between 40-49 years constituted 29.8% of the total respondents. Lastly 33.6% of the respondents were of the age 50 years upward.

Table 2: Distribution of Respondents by Sex

S/N	SEX	TOTAL NUMBER	PERCENTAGE
1	Male	104	43.4
2	Female	131	56.6

The diagram shows that the male respondents were 43.4% while the female respondents were 56.6%

Table 3: Distribution of Respondents by Qualification.

S/N	QUALIFICATIONS	TOTAL NUMBER	PERCENTAGE
1	N.C.E/Degree	73	31.1
2	Others	161	68.9

As shown above 31.1% possesses either N.C.E or Degree Certificate while others had other numerous qualifications.

Table 4: Questionnaire items

S/N	ITEMS	SA	A	D	SD	REMARKS
1	Generally speaking, learning of Arabic is strictly for the spiritual and moral development of the Muslims	134 (57.0)	101 (43.0)			Agreed
2	In view of the above, I prefer that my child learn Arabic as a means of knowing more about Islamic religion to learning it as a future career.	96 (40.9)	34 (14.5)	54 (23)	51 (21.7)	Agreed
3	I share the believe that mastering Arabic only leads to becoming either Imam, Local Alfa and or teachers and nothing else.	55 (23.4)	74 (31.5)	74 (31.5)	32 (13.6)	Agreed
4	Arabic Schools in South-western Nigeria are not well structured to attract willing candidate to study Arabic.	51 (21.7)	40 (17)	47 (20)	96 (40.9)	Disagreed
5	Lack of future prospect for Arabic learners account for decline in the enrolment of Muslim children in Modern Arabic Schools	40 (17)	85 (36.2)	60 (25.5)	50 (21.3)	Agreed
6	The present method of teaching at local Qur'anic schools needs to be reviewed to make Arabic learning more attractive to willing candidates.	39 (16.6)	73 (31.1)	77 (32.7)	46 (19.5)	Disagreed
7	I believed Arabic is wide enough to attract more job in other fields if the Modern Arabic schools are well organized	62 (26.4)	86 (36.6)	39 (16.6)	48 (20.4)	Agreed

VI. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Findings in this study showed that learning of Arabic to Muslim children is strictly for Islamic spiritual and moral growth and as a result, the Yoruba Muslims were of the view that they preferred that their children learn Arabic as a means of knowing more about Islamic religion to learning it as a future career. They also asserted that mastering Arabic only leads to becoming either an Imam, a local Alfa or a teacher and nothing else. Findings however revealed the disagreement of the respondents that Arabic Schools in South-western Nigeria was not well structured to attract willing candidates to study. Further findings indicated that the Muslim respondents agree that lack of future prospects for Arabic learning account for few Muslim children's attendance at Arabic schools. In another result they argued that the present method of teaching at local Qur'anic school does not need to be reviewed to make Arabic learning more attractive to willing candidates. They however believed that Arabic is wide enough to attract more jobs if the Arabic schools are well organized.

VII. DISCUSSIONS

Findings on the first item showed that all the respondents agreed with the statement that learning of Arabic to Muslim children is strictly for Islamic spiritual and moral growth. The central position of spirituality and morality to all religions confirms this assertion. In Islam, this is more important because all the spiritual and moral values in the Qur'an are in Arabic and the language of liturgy is compulsorily Arabic. It is also for the same reason that there had not been clear-cut difference between both the religion and its language of instruction. Not until the recent past when the active involvement of the Orientalists in the study of the twin-disciplines led to classifications that are dictated by career opportunities; the Arabist was also the Islamist, the philosopher and theologian [12]. The position of the Muslims on this item therefore is normal. The Yoruba Muslims were also of the view that they preferred that their children learn Arabic as a means of

knowing more about Islamic religion to learning it as a future career. This result could not have been otherwise for two reasons. The first is the excessive theocentric perception of Arabic from both the Muslims and the non-Muslims alike. The Muslims including majority of the local scholars among them see Arabic as a language that is exclusively meant for Islamic worship while the psychological hatred and fear from the non-Muslims arose from this attitude. This situation is definitely bound to occur in a country where religious rivalry is rampant among followers of various faiths. Among the Muslims, it is common to see till today, many scholars who mystify Arabic by portraying its learning as a difficult task. The theocentric perception is therefore why the Muslims regarded Arabic more as a language of religion than a language that can bring them any tangible economic or social benefit. The truth however is that there are evidences of so many Yoruba Muslim scholars who had successfully pursued their career in Arabic and found themselves at the helms of affairs in public service. Relevance of their qualifications was not without meeting the basic academic requirements of the western-oriented schools to aid their Arabic/Islamic knowledge which helped them pursue their career into the university level. Further finding also indicated that mastery of Arabic only leads to becoming either an Imam, or a local 'Mallam' (teacher). This position is still a reflection of the age-long Yoruba Muslims' practice when the vocation of graduate scholars from the Modern Arabic Schools did not go beyond these three. Findings however revealed the disagreement of the respondents that Arabic Schools in South-western Nigeria was not well structured to attract willing candidates to study. The result could not have been otherwise. A visit to many of these schools in the area of study shows some few deficiencies both in physical structure and pedagogical method of teaching. With the exception of two or three schools visited, the buildings of many of the schools were not tidy. There were inadequate space for recreation and this made the environment not conducive enough for learning. In the aspect of teaching, the methods used in those schools were not modern as is the case in conventional/western schools.

Further findings indicated that lack of future prospects for Arabic learning account for few Muslim children's attendance at Arabic schools. Although, few factors account for the dearth in the enrolment of pupils into the Modern Arabic schools, the reality that the few who made their career through these schools found it difficult to get integrated into Nigerian public life did not encourage mass attendance at the schools. In fact, most of those who made it to public service always exhibited inferiority complex on account of their inability to blend into secular life. According to Abdul-Rahmon, 'all indices available show a lost battle as Arabic is fast disappearing in secondary schools in the south-Western states which reflects the weak position of Islamic Studies in the region [13]. In another result they argued that the present method of teaching at Modern Arabic school does not need to be reviewed to make Arabic learning more attractive to willing candidates. Only 47.7% of the respondents believed that this should be done. This is highly surprising. It indicates that the respondents may not know the implication of maintaining the status quo for an educational system that seriously needs total reform. The final item sought to know whether Arabic is wide enough to attract more jobs if Modern Arabic schools are well organized. The response was surprising as it negates earlier submission of the Muslims South-western Nigeria who opined that Arabic does not have prospects. The reality that one can specialise in various fields of Arabic like translation, grammar, literature and others means that the scope of Arabic is wider than its present status as a language for passing religious instructions and for worship. Ogunbiyi confirms this assertion when he states that, 'That Arabic Language is unparalleled by any other language in its roles as a written medium in which of the Nigerian, nay, the African past is recorded, that the past thus preserved in this written medium is a national common heritage, not a sectoral one [14]'.

VIII. CONCLUSION

This paper is an exposition on the Yoruba Muslims' perception of Arabic as a factor in social integration in South-western Nigeria. The work helps at calling the attention of stakeholders in this field to the potentialities of Arabic at carving a niche for those who acquire it among the elite courses that are required in the Nigerian civil and public service. It will therefore assists in the efforts at refocusing the vision and mission of the Modern Arabic schools in South-western Nigeria to accommodate the western curriculum into its learning in order to fast-track the social integration of those who acquire it. The main part of this study revealed that Yoruba Muslims of South-western Nigeria saw Arabic more as a language of Islam for worship and as the primary source for the dissemination of its messages rather than a separate discipline that could be learnt and chosen as a career. They argue that Modern Arabic school were not well-structured to attract willing candidates to study Arabic. Finally, they were of the opinion that Arabic is wide enough to attract more jobs if Modern Arabic schools are well organized.

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