

THE IMPORTANCE OF ARABIC AND ISLAMIC STUDIES TO THE SPIRITUAL, MORAL, ECONOMIC AND SOCIO-POLITICAL DEVELOPMENT OF NIGERIA

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Abstract

Arabic and Islamic Studies are important subjects that helped in the economic, moral, social, political and spiritual development of the Nigerian society for many centuries. However, the subjects are not given their deserved attention in the current educational system in the country due to many reasons. This study examined the roles played by Arabic and Islamic Studies in the overall development of Nigeria and the best way they can be utilised for this purpose. The study adopted a qualitative strategy of data collection and analysis. The secondary source used for data generation included books, journal articles, reports and other related sources. The data generated were discussed and interpreted using thematic analytical interpretations. The study discovered that the subjects of Arabic and Islamic Studies contributed immensely to the moral, spiritual, economic, political and social development of Nigeria for many decades and it is still playing these roles positively despite the numerous challenges that they are facing.

The study recommends among others that there is a need for the government to initiate a total overhaul of the curriculum, change situational and motivational conditions of the teachers of Arabic and Islamic Studies at all levels and encourage the need for a better community approach towards enlightening the public on the vital need for the subjects in our society.

Keywords: Arabic, Development, Islamic Studies, Society, Teaching.

Introduction

Education is the backbone of every society. The economic, political, social, cultural and spiritual development of any society and organisation rely heavily on the quality and role that the educationists or teachers play in the society. Knowledge is transmitted from generation to generation through a medium of language, symbols, ideas, processes and systems of learning. Arabic is one of the greatest languages in the world or perhaps, the greatest in the world owing to its wisdom, grammar, sequence, coherence, logics, metaphysics, philosophy and style.¹ There is no doubt that the supremacy and the universality of the Arabic language couple with its simplicity in learning and the passion with which it is presented in the transmission of message qualified it as the chosen language for the universal message of Islam to mankind. Islamic religion is the complete light and guide to mankind in all perspective and ramifications. All the political settings, economic structures, moral aspects, spiritual guidance, social system and cultural linkages are well-articulated and carefully catered for in the religion of Islam.³

For centuries, scholars have realised that Arabic as a language and Islam as a religion have contributed substantially to world civilization, culture and education.⁴ It was Islam that revived the human pursuit of science and it was through the Arab, not the Roman that the modern world achieved light and power through science.⁵ In the ninth and tenth centuries, the Muslims compiled great lexicons and developed philological learning in Islam. At least a century before the western world thought of establishing higher centres of learning, the Muslims world had established such institutions in some cities such as Basra, Kufa, Baghdad, Cairo and Cordova. These began as religious schools located in Mosques, and later developed into universities. Arabic as a

language contributed to an understanding of the early history and civilization of West Africa.⁶

Teaching of important subjects like Arabic and Islamic Studies is a herculean task that is not easy due to its role and relevance in shaping the entire life of the *Ummah*. There is no doubt that teachers that are saddled with this responsibility are special people selected by God and prepared by the society to deliver a heavy task that is placed upon them.⁷ Several Prophetic Hadiths point to the exceptional rank of teachers to the extent of equating them with the heirs of the prophets on earth. Arabic and Islamic Studies play a great role in the spiritual, moral, economic and socio-political development of our society in different perspectives. This study is an effort to succinctly identify some of these roles and discuss them briefly. In doing so, it is pertinent to examine the nature and concept of the term Arabic language and Islamic Studies within the context of this presentation.

The study adopted a qualitative approach to data generation and analysis. Secondary source of data was relied upon because of the nature of the topic and its complexity. Thus, secondary sources were explored which included the use of textbooks, journals, internet sources and reference to existing literature to enable for the contribution and filling the research gap in knowledge. The data generated from the secondary sources were presented and discussed using thematic analytical interpretations where sub-themes were identified and discussed accordingly.

Conceptual Clarification

Arabic

The term Arabic refers to the language of Arabs. It belongs to Semitic groups of languages; other living languages in this group are modern Hebrew, Amharic and other spoken languages of Ethiopia.⁶ Arabic is the second largest most widely used alphabetic writing system in the world after the Latin alphabet which is the first.⁸ Arabic has spread into many languages in the world. The Arabic script has been adapted to such diverse languages including Persian, Turkish, Spanish, Swahili and even Hausa language in Northern Nigeria.⁹

Modern man can hardly contemplate communal life without the instrument of language. Performance, especially spoken language, defines

personality. For the teacher, his credibility is almost entirely anchored on his competence in communicating ideas and stimulating learning through his use of language. Articulate and well-spoken teachers also invariably win the hearts and respect of their students and pupils and they inspired others to love the language and to learn it with easiness and proficiency.¹⁰

Today, Arabic is a universally recognised language occupying a position, which is unparalleled with international languages such as English, French or German. It has been adopted by the African Union (AU), Oil Producing and Exporting Countries (OPEC) and United Nations (UN). Arabic is also the official language of Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), Confederation of African Football (CAF) and Federation of International Football Association (FIFA). It is also adopted by other international organisations for political, economic and cultural dealings.¹⁰ The Glorious Qur'ān was revealed in Arabic language and Prophet Muhammad conveyed the full message of Islam in Arabic language. That has made the language unique and exceptional among the Muslim *Ummah*. In Nigeria, a greater population of the country had been using Arabic as a means of communication and learning for hundreds of years before the emergence of colonial exploitation.¹¹ The language is still playing a great role in learning process in Nigeria. There are numerous Arabic teachers in Nigeria and the subject is taught at every level of learning in the country's educational curriculum beginning from primary, secondary, NCE, Diploma, Degree and post-Degree levels.¹²

Islamic Studies

Islamic Studies, which is the study of Islamic religion, has contributed immensely in the development of mankind and modern civilisation. It was Islam that reinvigorated the moral and spiritual organisation of mankind, revived the pursuit of science in the world, rekindled commercial activities, resuscitated the thirst and quest for knowledge and organised mankind in the best of ways the world civilisation has never witnessed in their history to date.¹³ The history of Islamic Studies and its teachings in the non-Arab world has been the history of the spread of Islam. This is one of the reasons why the elementary Islamic schools in Nigeria are called the Qur'ānic schools, and both Arabic and Islam are taught simultaneously. The teaching and learning of the Qur'ān and Arabic language in Northern Nigeria started when the

teachers in the early stage depended on charity for their living. During the early days of Qur'ānic schools in Northern Nigeria, they were found in or outside the mosque premises as it was obtainable in the old Al- Azhar University in Cairo. Today, thousands of these schools are found in both the Northern and Southern Nigeria in the mosques, outside the mosques, at private residences and in places specially built for this purpose.¹⁴

The emergence of Western education in Nigeria during colonisation led to the introduction of a system of education which led to modernisation of the Arabic and Islamic schools in some areas in the country. The government adopted a curriculum system of education which integrated the Arabic and Islamic Studies with the Western system of education and that has been detrimental to the twin subjects of Arabic and Islamic Studies because, as observed by Abubakar, much emphasis is given to the sciences and social sciences in the curriculum than Arabic and Islamic Studies.¹⁵

Background of the Teaching of Arabic and Islamic Studies in Nigeria

The history of the teaching of Arabic throughout the Islamic world, particularly in the non-Arab world, has been the history of the spread of Islam. This is one of the reasons why the elementary Arabic schools in Nigeria were called Qur'ānic schools, and both Arabic and Islam were taught simultaneously. Thus, two types of Qur'ānic schools developed in Nigeria are tablet-school and higher school. The first school is meant for beginners while the higher school embraces all aspects of Arabic and Islamic Studies.¹⁶

The teaching and learning of the Qur'ān and the Arabic language started in Northern Nigeria where the teachers in the early stage depended for their living on charity. The noble principle, which was successfully applied in the early stage of the development of Arabic and Islamic education, reduced the status of a teacher to that of a mere beggar; he came to occupy socially a rather low status. He had to wander from place to place looking for charitable Muslims to patronise him and give him food and shelter. Whenever his efforts were not sufficient to procure the basic necessities of life, he had to send his pupils from door to door for charity to sustain himself and the pupils living with him.¹⁷

At the early stage of Qur'ānic schools in Nigeria, they were usually found in or outside the mosque as it was done in the early Muslim

universities like Al-Azhar University in Cairo. Today, thousands of these schools are to be found in Northern and Southern Nigeria, while they are located either in mosques, private houses or premises specially built for this purpose.¹⁸

The foundation of Arabic and Islamic education in Nigeria has a long history. Islam was brought to Hausaland in the early fourteenth century by traders and scholars from Mali and other places of West Africa. During the reign of Yaqub (1452 C.E.-1463 C.E.), some Fulani scholars migrated to Kano, bringing with them books on Islamic theology and jurisprudence. It was during this period that Muslim scholars from Timbuktu came to Kano to teach and preach Islam. Al-Maghili, a famous scholar, later went to Katsina which also became a centre of Arabic and Islamic learning during the fifteenth century. Many scholars emerged from this centre.¹⁹ They organised themselves into a sort of guild, and a master would grant a recognised certificate (*ijāzah*) by members of that society to those students who studied under him. This system continued until the coming of the British colonial masters to Nigeria.²⁰ It was this Arabic and Islamic education which gave cultural prestige to Islam. The introduction of the National Board for Arabic and Islamic Studies (NBAIS) in 1960 by Sir Ahmadu Bello in Sokoto was targeted at providing a standard curriculum for teaching the subjects, training, development of the subjects, their preservation and expansion. The Board was later transferred to Ahmadu Bello University Zaria (ABU) in 1969 to have an effective ground for pursuing its aim and objectives.²¹ The National Council on Education in 2011 recognised and adopted NBAIS officially as a National Examination and Regulatory Body covering over 900 schools on the regulation of the subjects of Arabic and Islamic Studies.²²

The Challenges Facing Teachers of Arabic and Islamic Studies

Despite the enormous importance of Arabic and Islamic Studies in all-encompassing means of lives in Nigeria. There are numerous challenges that the teachers of the subjects face and which hinder them from achieving their goal of societal development. Some of these challenges are presented below:

Lack of Unified Syllabus

The syllabus in operation varies from one Arabic school to another. That is, there is no co-ordination between one school and another, especially in the Southwestern Nigeria. Until recently, the National Board of Arabic and Islamic Studies (NBAIS), was brought to the South -West in order to unite interested Arabic schools with their counterparts in Northern Nigeria, that will enable them to adopt a common examination and certificate called Senior Certificate of Arabic and Islamic Studies for admission into tertiary institutions as it is done in the Northern part of the country.²³

Textbooks and Language Barriers

The unavailability and inadequacy of up-to date and well explicit textbooks of Arabic and Islamic Studies based on the Nigerian environment mode of learning in some schools create a great deficiency in the students' academic and moral performances.²⁴ Furthermore, the contents of some Islamic Studies books in Nigeria failed to cater for the academic, religious and moral aspirations of students who initially had no Islamic educational background.²⁵ These students often face problems in understanding the topics and contents of textbooks which are not explanatory enough and are far from being easily understood. In addition, language being a sole vehicle through which communication occurs also possesses a serious threat to Junior Secondary School students. It is an undeniable fact that Islam as a religion is divinely built in term of worship, teachings and supplications on Arabic language and even the Glorious Quran was revealed and continued to be recited mainly in Arabic. Therefore, most of the lessons in *Salāt* (Prayers) and other devotional acts are done with Arabic language and as such this causes a huge gap between the learned teachers who are vast in Arabic and his innocent students who lack the understanding of the language

Inadequacy of Qualified Teachers

Basic elementary knowledge of Arabic ought to be a prerequisite for anyone who wishes to specialise in the teaching and continuous usage of Arabic language. Arabic requires this and something more: motivation. To teach or learn a language outside its native environment requires motivation and devotion. There is a dearth of qualified teachers in quantity vis-à-vis primary, secondary and tertiary institutions in many parts of the country.

Besides, a great number of the few available ones lack a sound background in Arabic proficiency.²⁶

Negligence of the Government

In the Inspectorate Division of the Federal Ministry of Education, there is an Inspector for every subject except Arabic. This is a sign of indifference on the part of the Government. The effective teaching will be guaranteed when the subject is adequately supervised from Inspectorate Division of the Ministry.²⁸ This is because the policymakers and designers of the educational curriculum do not feel that the subject of Arabic is that important to be accorded its much-deserved attention like English Language and other subjects. The concomitant aftermath of this negligence is demotivation of the Arabic teachers and absence of a closer supervision which discouraged many of them from putting in their best in teaching the subject.

Their Role in the Moral, Spiritual, Economic and Sociopolitical Development of our Society

Arabic and Islamic Studies have been, of course, playing the best role in the overall societal development in all aspects more than any other field of learning or subjects of human endeavour.²⁹ This is because the use of Arabic language enables for the understanding of the legal issues in economic, political, social and cultural aspects of the daily life of Muslims in Nigeria who constitutes a significant number of the country's population and even some non-Muslims. These roles include moral upbringing, spiritual preservation, economic development, political sustenance and social settings in addition to cultural preservation. These roles are discussed below.

Moral

Morality in Islam centres on the theory of what is allowed and what is forbidden (*al-halāl wal-harām*) in accordance with Islamic law (*Sharī'ah*), the primary sources of which are the Qur'ān and Hadith. Islamic laws which envisage moral are given by God as laid down in the scripture, which thereby, become a moral manual.³⁰ In Islam, the Qur'ān is the moral manual that contains comprehensive dos and don'ts. Its moral instructions are believed to be universal without a boundary of time or space. It is believed that religion, especially Islam, cannot be completely detached from morality.

Religion claims to be mother of morality and that is why Islam claims to be a complete way of life. Ayuba,³¹ summarizes the basic beliefs and principles of morality in Islam thus: "God is the creator and source of all goodness, truth and beauty. Man is a responsible, dignified and honorable agent of his creator. God has put everything in the heaven and earth in the service of mankind. By His mercy and wisdom, God does not expect the impossible from man or hold him accountable for anything beyond his power. Nor does God forbid man to enjoy the good things of life. In the sight of God, it is the intention behind a certain action or behaviour that makes it morally good or bad, and not its outcome."³²

Moderation, practicality, and balance are the guarantees of high integrity and sound morality. All things are permissible in principle except what is singled out as obligatory, which must be observed, and what is singled out as forbidden, which must be avoided. Man's ultimate responsibility is to God and his highest goal is the pleasure of his Creator. Morality is summed up in the verse below in the Glorious Qur'an:

Righteousness (morality) is not that you turn your faces towards the east and the west but (true) righteousness (morality) is in one who believes in Allah and the last Day and the Angels and the Books and the Prophets and who gives the wealth in spite of love for it to relatives and orphans and the needy and the wayfarer and those who ask (for help) and who establish prayer and gives Alms and those who fulfill their promise when they promised, and (those who) are patient in pain and hardship and in time of violence, such are the (people) of truth, and they are Allah fearing (Q.2 verse 177)

Islam, which was understood by learning of 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.³³ 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 have played this moral role in the past effectively and can still do the same if given the needed encouragement. One beauty of all the above-

mentioned moral teachings of Islam is the fact that they are instructed and delivered using the medium of Arabic language. In this regard, Arabic is complementary and can take credit in the moral suasion of the *Ummah* since it is the medium of communication and facilitation.³⁴ Arabic has been presently transformed not only in learning of Islam but also as an official language of the African Union, United Nations and for advertisement of goods and services and labelling of products globally which further stresses its relevance in an overall political and socioeconomic development of Nigeria and beyond.

Spiritual

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 international. 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 race. 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.³⁵

Islamic code of conduct is of two facets, positive and negative. Positive codes of conduct are deeds expected of Muslims. According to Umar,³⁶ they include truthfulness, goodness to parents, patience, generosity, forgiveness, loyalty, justice, good relationship with others, equality, cleanliness, orderliness, sincerity, punctuality, responsibility, time consciousness, decency, humility, kindness, obedience, brotherhood etc. While the negative ones forbidden for Muslims are greediness, stubbornness, drinking intoxicants, theft, prostitution, fornication and adultery, rudeness, injustice, arrogance etc. In view of the above, stemming the rising tide of moral decadence as it is today in Nigeria, could be achieved through effective Islamic education that would put in place qualified and modeled teachers who can serve as moral chancellor and motivators. This is lacking because of low motivation and negligence of the Arabic especially in the Muslim dominated states. The Prophet describes the best man as

someone who studied the Qur'ān and teaches it (Bukhari 1378). Muslims are regarded as the best group of people in life because they teach people to know Allah and do righteousness (Qur'ān 3: 110). Moral teaching can be achieved through the medium of instruction that is pure, original and full of logic and wisdom which is Arabic. Therefore, Arabic plays a great role in the spiritual well-being of our society.

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.³⁷

The introduction of Arabic to 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 country. 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 among world nations.³⁸

Islamic Studies helped immensely in the economic development of our society in all aspects. Islam formulates a particular relationship between Allah, man, society, and the Divine Law. This relationship directly affects the workings of the economic system and implies an integrated approach to human development. The basic objectives of Islamic Economics are individual freedom to reap what he sows, distributive justice or education for all, economic growth and jobs creation. The *Sharī'ah* contains prescriptions, proscriptions, recommendations, suggestions, general principles, and

guidelines that may be considered the basis for an overall economic theory. It is important to remember, however, that such a theory must be part of the holistic vision of Islam and the integration of all aspects of human endeavour and interaction.³⁹

The Prophet, in another Hadīth, said that nine-tenths of all *rizk* (the bounty of Allah which includes income) is derived from commerce. That, to a large extent, explains the drive of Muslims over the centuries to meet their economic needs through commerce, industry, agriculture and various forms of free enterprise. Profits are very much a part of such activities, provided they are lawfully obtained (*ḥalāl*). However, profits cannot overshadow the duties of brotherhood, solidarity, charity and they are, of course, subject to *zakāt*. This can be achieved through the intensive teachings of the subject matter of Islamic Studies, which has the sole responsibility of delivering the message to the believers.

Political

Diplomacy can be defined as practices by which nations conduct their relations with one another. It means that countries all over the world move closer to one another for many benefits such as economic, political, scientific or technological. 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 exchange 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 English.⁴⁰

Islamic Studies provides the pure teachings and politics of the Prophet. The leadership style of the Prophet, justice and equality were followed by the teachings of the pious Caliphs. Islamic politics is the best of all politics considering the written constitution designed by the Prophet in Madinah which envisaged justice and fairness for both the Muslims and non-Muslims.⁴¹ Democracy, which is the concept of *Shura* originated from Islam

with pure divine allegiance and can be perceived and understood politically through the teachings of the Qur'ān as contained in Chapter 42 verses 1-42 and Chapter 3 verse 159. Through the teachings of Islam, the Ummah is instructed by scholars on their political obligations and their role in choosing and supporting just leaders and the need for obedience to the oppressive rulers to avoid revolutionary actions that will lead to the destruction of lives and properties on the ground that there will be atonement and justice for the righteous and the wicked on the day of judgement.⁴² This phenomenon has succeeded in the maintenance of peace and security in the Muslim world for long. Even the current uprisings in the Arab world are as a result of the neglect of this aspect of Islamic teaching.

Social

Security is sometimes seen 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 resulted to modern scientific methods in executing their crimes against humanity. Security is an aspect of social life of mankind.⁴³

It has been established that there are many Arabic and Islamic Studies 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.⁴⁴ This is relevant because a good understanding of an Arabic language by government agents and agencies will help in detecting a radical movement or an insurrection aided by the use of Arabic like some insurgency groups in Nigeria who misinterpret the Arabic contents for their selfish motive of causing violence.

Conclusion and Recommendations

In conclusion, Arabic and Islamic Studies have indispensable and irreplaceable roles that they are playing in the society, and these roles help in no small measure in moral, spiritual, economic, political and social development of the society. The position and status of the teachers and scholars in the fields of Arabic and Islamic Studies should be elevated to the highest ranks with a commensurate motivation to enable them feel

important enough to continue to do the needful. On their own part, they should also take the moral responsibility of selflessness and dedication towards committing themselves in discharging their task accordingly. People should support them in all aspects and the government should revisit the accolade with which it gives preference to some subjects ahead of the Arabic and Islamic Studies particularly in the North.

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