

Problems and prospects of preservation and conservation of Arabic and Ajami Manuscripts in Northern Nigeria

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Abstract

The Arabic and Ajami manuscripts are one of the Nigeria's literary and cultural heritage. The manuscripts certainly facilitate greater understanding on the past, present and future of Nigeria's literary and scholarly tradition. The manuscripts, particularly, those written by Sokoto Jihad triumvirate i.e. Sheikh Usman bin Danfodiyo, Abdullahi bin Fodiyo and Muhammad Bello dwelt on religion, politics, economic, medicine etc. However, despite the immense importance of the manuscripts, a number of problems are bedeviling the efforts of preserving them. In view of this, the article discusses the nature of paper and ink formation and some of the problems confronting its preservation. It also examines the colonial insensitivity towards Islam/Arabic language. Equally, it points out the Northern Nigeria's environmental condition as one of the major challenges in the preservation and conservation processes. The last segment discusses future prospect of the conservation and preservation activities of Arabic and Ajami manuscripts in the Northern Nigeria.

Keywords: Arabic manuscripts; Ajami manuscripts; Preservation; conservation; Northern Nigeria manuscripts; ink formation.

1. Introduction

Muslim merchants and perhaps the peripatetic scholars were the first to introduce Arabic

Islamic manuscripts in Nigeria. They came to Nigeria essentially for commercial and propagation of Islam. It is assumed that the earliest manuscripts brought into Nigeria were the Glorious Qur'an, *Muwatta Malik*, *al-shafa of Qadi Iyad*, *Mukamat al-hariri* e.t.c. (Galadanci 2007: xx). It is a flawless argument to stress that the emergence of Arabic Islamic manuscripts is as old as the introduction of Islam in Northern Nigeria. Although the spread and development of Arabic Islamic manuscripts exerted a renewed impetus by the 19th century Sokoto Jihad triumvirate; Sheikh Usman Danfodiyo, his brother Abdullahi bin Fodiyo as well as his son Sultan Muhammadu Bello. Never the less, the Jihad leaders were prolific writers, who wrote hundreds of books in various fields of human endeavors. For instance, Abdullahi bin Fodiyo wrote more than two hundred books (Mafara 2005: 7) and Sultan Muhammadu Bello wrote two hundred books and pamphlets (Muhammed 1993: 49). Equally, it was reported that Muhammadu Bello read more than twenty thousand books (Mohammed 1993: 34). In fact, it is worthy of note that members of Shehu's immediate family and some of his disciples wrote a number of famous books in different fields of knowledge.

Ajami is an Arabic word denoting the use of Arabic scripts to write non-Arabic language. In Nigeria for over a century *Ajami* attained or exerted high premium essentially because it was used as an instrument for communication, particularly within the ambit of administrative and commercial activities in the pre and post-colonial Nigeria. However, in Nigeria, the first available *Ajami* writing system was said to emerge in the Kanem-Bornu Caliphate of the Saifawa rulers where it was applied to write the Kanuri language. It was in Borno that this writing system was first

called *Ajami*. The vast usage of *Ajami* gathered its momentum during 18th and 19th centuries, when the Sokoto jihad leaders used *Ajami* to translate a number of books from Arabic to Hausa and Fulfulde (Hashimi 2010: 175). They equally wrote numerous Islamic books particularly poems in Hausa and Fulfulde using *Ajami* as a medium. It is pertinent to mention here that thousands of Arabic and *Ajami* extant manuscripts are found in different libraries and institutions in Nigeria, as well as with private individuals. However, there are a number of daunting problems associated with conservation and preservation of the manuscripts. Based on this premise, the paper examines the conceptual description of manuscripts and *Ajami*. It also discusses the impact of manuscript paper and ink formation in Northern Nigeria on the preservation and conservation processes of the manuscripts. It further identifies colonial bondage and position on Arabic/*Ajami* manuscripts, environmental condition and the lack of professional and technical expertise as some of the factors affecting preservation and conservation of Arabic/*Ajami* manuscripts in Northern Nigeria. The last segment of the paper highlights the future prospect of conservation and preservation of Arabic/*Ajami* manuscripts in Northern Nigeria.

1.1 What is Manuscript?

The word manuscript was derived from the Medieval Latin *Manuscriptum*, a word first recorded in 1594 as a latinisation of earlier Germanic words used in the Middle Ages. A manuscript is written information that has been manually created by one or more persons in form of a hand-written letter, as opposed to being printed or produced (Fazazy 2012: 3). The word manuscript was traditionally abbreviated as MS for singular and MSs for plural. In other words it could refer to any information that is hand-recorded. For example, inscriptions on hard materials. In book and music publishing, a

manuscript is an original copy of a work written by an author or composer, even if it has been typed (Gwandu 2010: xxvi). In the ancient times, books were in manuscript form. It was produced in form of scroll or books (codex) and produced on vellum and other parchment, on papyrus and other materials. While in the Muslim west, all books were in manuscripts until the introduction of printing in the middle of fifteenth century. In Nigeria, most of the Islamic books were in manuscript form until around 1950s, when books were printed by the Northern Regional Literacy Agency (Gwandu 2010: xxviii).

1.2 What is *Ajami*?

Basically, *Ajami* means any form of writing using Arabic scripts to write other language. The word *Ajami* is an Arabic word it means non-Arabic. *Ajami* was employed to express thought and ideas in other language using Arabic scripts. Equally, it is a process of linguistic domestication of Arabic letters (Hashimi 2010: 173). *Ajami* writing is a generic term commonly used to refer to non-Arabic languages written with Arabic scripts. The word *Ajami* was derived from Arabic root, which means a foreign person, who is a non-Arab or non-Arabic speaker. *Ajami* also means Iranian/Persian in the Mashriqi (eastern) dialects of Arabic (Malik 2012: 1),

A number of factors combined to shape the daunting problems associated with preservation and conservation of Arabic/*Ajami* manuscripts in Northern Nigeria. It is palpable to stress that the problems are multi-dimensional; some of them are as follows:

2. The Nature of Arabic/*Ajami* Manuscripts Paper

Nigeria's Arabic/*Ajami* manuscripts were written on paper. From the late sixteenth century onwards papers have been used in

producing Arabic/*Ajami* manuscripts in Nigeria. Most of the Nigeria's Islamic manuscripts were produced between the period of 18th and 20th centuries. Papers manufactured during that time went through chemical pulping (soda pulp, sulfate pulp and sulfite pulps). The chemical pulping processes are either acidic or alkaline in nature (Encyclopedia Americana vol. 21: 380). This suggests that the papers had a large deposit of acid in it which favored intense migration of acid from one folio of manuscripts to the other. The chemical composition of the paper of 18th to 20th centuries rendered substantial number of Arabic/*Ajami* manuscripts in Northern Nigeria to be heavily characterized by structural damages such as brittleness, which is also largely caused by the inherent acidity of the papers. This further resulted in snapping, cracking or breaking upon handling the manuscripts.

It should be noted that the acidic nature of the papers which most of the Arabic/*Ajami* manuscripts were produced posed serious problems essentially in the processes of preservation and conservation of the Northern Nigeria's manuscripts. As pointed out earlier brittleness, snapping, cracking and fragility are some of the common threats of Arabic/*Ajami* manuscripts in Northern Nigeria.

3. Ink Formation

A variety of ingredients or chemicals were used in the formation of the ink in Northern Nigeria. Substantial numbers of the chemicals were used with a view to preserving the writing for a number of centuries without either fading or erosion. The ingredients include gum Arabic and cassava powder which were added to the usual charcoal ink so that the writing can last for a very long period of time. Similarly, some trees and leaves were used in ink processing. Such trees and leaves include *bagaruma* (acacia militia), *doruma* (parkia biglobosa), *baba* (indigofera), and *shuni*

(lonchocarpus laxiflorus). Equally, anti-rust herbs were also added such as *aguma* (Euphorbia balsamifera), *gamba* (Andropogon gayanas) *makuba* (Parkia biglobosa) (Bunza 2007: 156). Northern Nigeria's Arabic/*Ajami* manuscripts were written with black ink, a simple mixture of finely ground charcoal, gum Arabic and water and is therefore water soluble (Biddle 2008: 3). Moreover, red and yellow inks were also found in most of the manuscripts.

The microscopic examination of the substances used to produce these inks revealed presence of iron oxide in the red ink. Black and brown ink, manganese oxide or hydroxide additives were also detected (Biddle 2011: 9). Astute observation shows that over twelve thousand Northern Nigeria manuscripts/folios reveal a wide range of ink from glossy dense black to very pale light brown, orange red to pale pink, while majority of the ink corrode the paper substrate (Biddle 2011: 8).

Suffice it to mention that the chemical formation of the inks used for production of the manuscripts in Northern Nigeria were composed of substances containing some elements of iron oxide, manganese oxide or hydroxide additive. This vividly denotes the corrosive nature of the inks used by scribes for producing Arabic/*Ajami* manuscripts in Northern Nigeria. As a result of this, there are cases of ink corrosion on some manuscripts, though very rare. For instance, one example of ink corrosion in Northern Nigeria's manuscript is the case of *Chukkunga* Qur'an; a Modibbo Qur'an in Yola, has severe case of ink corrosion. In addition to this, during our (the researcher) training in 2013 at Arewa House, Kaduna we worked on one important book "*Ashafa*" in Modibbo Furfore collection, the book also has serious ink corrosion. It is therefore stressed that the corrosive nature of the inks constitutes a major problem on preservation and conservation of

Arabic/*Ajami* manuscripts in Northern Nigeria.

4. Colonial Bondage

Initially colonial administration had a sinister perception on Arabic as well as Islam. They considered religion as a major hindrance to their administration. As a result of this, they discouraged the use and perhaps the spread of Arabic language in Nigeria, particularly the Northern part of the country. The colonial Arabic/Islami-phobia could have been caused by a number of factors; one of the factors is the initial resistance of the Northern Muslim to enroll their children in the English medium schools, which they perceived as a way of assimilation to the European Christian culture and way of life (Malik 2012: 14). In fact, the then aim of western education was "education via Christianity". It is pertinent to stress that the strong resistance of the Northern Muslims to western education resulted in colonial administration's resistance to the spread and preservation of Arabic/*Ajami* manuscripts in Nigeria.

Although formal archival activities on the collection and preservation of Arabic manuscripts started during colonial administration, the project could not get the desired attention by the colonial government due to their insensitivity to Arabic. This could vividly be buttressed by pointing out that as far back as 1902, the Secretary to High Commissioner, Fredrick Lugard, revealed that the then colonial administration intended to use Romanized Hausa rather than Arabic/*Ajami* for administrative correspondences (Abdulmumin 2010: 3). Similarly, Hans Visser, the then Director of Education ensured that *Ajami* was not taught in government schools. He articulated his argument in his position paper written in March 1910, where he stated "by encouraging the study of Arabic alphabet the government would be actually assisting in the propagation of the Muhammadan religion" (Adamu

2007:104). This is how the colonial government technically edged out the use of Arabic/*Ajami* in the Northern Nigeria.

It is important to point out that even in the aftermath of colonial administration, the Arabic/*Ajami* conspiracy continued within and outside government circle. Over the years there was *Ajami* on Nigeria's currency long before the introduction of Naira and Kobo (Nigerian Currency). When Naira and Kobo was introduced the *Ajami* inscription was also printed on the currency note. The *Ajami* was there just for explanation and information guidance. The removal of *Ajami* from the Nigerian currency on the new currency note, which was launched on 28th February, 2007, conspicuously translated the deep-rooted anti-Arabic/*Ajami* by the Nigerian government.

The aforementioned government insensitivity to Arabic/*Ajami*, right from the colonial administration is enough to argue that Nigeria government did not give the desired attention to the efforts on the preservation and conservation of the extant Arabic/*Ajami* manuscripts, which certainly contained rich and all important literary and cultural heritage of the country. This is a serious daunting challenge on the preservation of conservation processes in Nigeria and Northern Nigeria in particular.

5. The Northern Nigeria's Environmental Condition

For the manuscripts to be preserved for a quite long period of time there is greater need for a conducive and stable environmental condition. The control of weather and climate is also paramount for preservation and conservation of Arabic /*Ajami* manuscripts. Northern Nigeria is in the Sudano-Sahelian Savanah Zone with alternating wet and dry seasons. Rainfall in the region is less than 100cm per year. Between the months of May and October is considered to be a rainy

season with rainfall very high between July and August.

Most of the extant Arabic/*Ajami* manuscripts in Nigeria are found in the following centers:

- Kaduna – National Archives of Nigeria (NAK), Arewa House (AH).
- Zaria – Kashim Ibrahim Library, Northern History Research Scheme, Ahmadu Bello University (NHRS).
- Kano – Kano History and Culture Bureau (Gidan DanHausa), Gidan Makama Museum, Bayero University Library-document section
- Salame – Al-Torodi Collection (private).
- Sokoto – Waziri Junaidu Collection (private), Center for Islamic Studies, Usmanu Danfodiyo University, Sokoto, Waziri Junaidu History and Culture Bureau, Sokoto.
- Katsina – Katsina History and Culture Bureau.
- Maiduguri – Borno Museum (National Museum, Maiduguri), Center for Trans-Sahara Studies, University of Maiduguri.
- Yola- Fombina Palace Museum (National Museum, Yola).
- Jos – National Museum Jos (Biddle 2012: 2).

A part from private collections that are scattered all over Nigeria, thousands of enormous extant Arabic /*Ajami* manuscripts are found in the centers mentioned above. Unfavorable weather and climate conditions coupled with the incessant humidity are the dominant condition that characterized all the centers. Equally, fallen ceiling was common. Batiste (2007: 9), in his report on a survey tour on Northern Nigeria's condition of Arabic manuscripts pointed out that environmental condition had been a major problem in preserving Arabic manuscripts, which include, the lack of air conditioners, dehumidifiers, security and fire protection system. In fact, due to the poor

environmental condition of Arabic/*Ajami* manuscripts repositories in Northern Nigeria the manuscripts are predominantly characterized by discoloration, surface damage, surface soiling and sometimes planar damage. This poses serious problems in preservation of Arabic/*Ajami* manuscripts.

6. Lack of Professional and Technical Expertise

One of the major problems of preserving Arabic/*Ajami* manuscripts in Northern Nigeria is the lack of professional and technical expertise. Currently, there is no single expert on paper conservation in Nigeria. Those managing the Arabic/*Ajami* manuscripts repositories lacked the required skills to adequately and efficiently handle the centers in the country. This usually resulted in a loss of enormous extant manuscripts that are of immense benefit to Nigerian scholars and world at large. The absence of the technical expertise to manage the Nigerian Arabic/*Ajami* manuscripts hindered accessibility of the manuscripts and also major problem on preservation and conservation of Arabic/*Ajami* manuscripts in Northern Nigeria.

7. Future Prospects

Formal archival activities in Nigeria, particularly as it relate to collection and preservation of Arabic Islamic manuscripts started in the 1950s. A number of scholars made a giant stride on collection and cataloguing of the manuscripts. The works of Hunwick and Murray Last were limited to collection and cataloguing, other preservation aspects were not addressed. August 2008, was considered a memorable landmark, when U.S. State Department Speakers Grant sponsored a renowned American conservator, Michaelle Biddle, who conducted a practical hands-on-training, a weeklong basic paper conservation

courses titled, "Conservation in a Box". The course was conducted at Usmanu Danfodiyo University, Sokoto, and the other one was at National Archive, Kaduna. Eight students attended the course in each of the center. The participants were drawn from institutions and private collection. Participants were given full kits of conservation tools because very few of them could be found in Nigeria. The course was both theoretical and practical. Manuscripts were brought from private collection in Sokoto and National Archive, Kaduna. Topics covered were: general concepts on preservation and conservation; causes of manuscript deterioration; building maintenance and monitoring etc.

The second phase of the training was financed by Midibbo Furfore's family under the leadership of Alhaji Saidu Ahmad. Michaelle Biddle was also invited from U.S. to conduct the training in Yola, Nigeria. Nine people participated in the two-week intensive training. This provided another impetus for further insight on preservation and conservation of Arabic/*Ajami* manuscripts in Northern Nigeria. Similarly, in 2009, the Islamic Manuscripts Association provided funds for stabilizing and housing the great *Chukkunga* Qur'an. This project equally provided further preservation and conservation experience for a number of staff in the National Commission of Museum and Monument (NCMM), Yola. With the aid of a Ford Foundation Grant, the third course for practical hands-on paper conservation was also conducted with librarians, curators and support staff drawn from various libraries and archive centers in Northern Nigeria.

The fourth phase of the training took place in 2013, at Arewa House, Kaduna, Nigeria. The training was funded through the efforts of Dr. Hamid Bobboyi, Director, Center for Regional Integration and Development. Participants were drawn from; Usmanu Dafodiyo University Library, Sokoto; Waziri Junaidu History and Culture Bureau, Sokoto;

Arewa House Kaduna; National Archive Kaduna; National Commission for Museum and Monument, Yola; and Center for Trans-Sahara Studies, University of Maiduguri. A number of manuscripts in varying conditions were brought particularly during practical sessions. Topics covered during the training include:

- Distinguishing lithographic printings from manuscripts.
- Types of manuscript paper and inks used.
- Removal of white glue, cello tape, staples, and biro marks.
- Watermarks detection and description.
- Maintenance and security.
- Cataloguing issue, e.t.c.

The training was conducted by Michaelle Biddle, Collections Conservator and Head of Preservation Services, Wesleyan University, U.S.A. At the end of course, basic conservation tools were also given to the participants.

A number of conferences and seminars were organized essentially to bring to the fore the imperative of preserving Arabic/*Ajami* manuscripts in Nigeria. Notable among the conferences are the; 2007 and 2010 Conferences. The Conferences were organized by Arewa House, Kaduna. Papers presented during the conferences among other things; preservation and conservation of Arabic/*Ajami* manuscripts, the scope and significance of the manuscripts, the current state of Arabic/*Ajami* manuscripts in Nigeria, etc.

10. Recommendations

Based on the above discussions, the paper proffers the following recommendations:

- Those attended any of the workshops mentioned above should endeavor to train

others on the new techniques of preservation and conservation of Arabic/*Ajami* manuscripts.

- The Nigerian government, individuals as well as civil and private organizations must work as a team and support the preservation and conservation of the Arabic/*Ajami* manuscripts in the country.
- Considering the lack of technical and professional expertise on paper preservation and conservation, more librarians, curators/archivists should be sponsored for training on preservation and conservation of Arabic/*Ajami* manuscripts.

11. Conclusion

Arabic/*Ajami* manuscripts are one of the extant enormous Nigeria's literary and cultural heritage. The manuscripts are rich reservoir of knowledge covering all aspect of human endeavors. The Northern Nigeria's Arabic and *Ajami* manuscripts, despite their immense contributions to the world of knowledge, a number of daunting problems hindered the efforts of preservation and conservation of the manuscripts. As highlighted in the paper, all the manuscripts in Northern Nigeria are on paper form and written with black ink. This constitutes a major challenge in the preservation of the manuscripts. Colonial insensitivity to Islam/Arabic language is also central to the problems. Northern Nigeria's environmental conditions equally took center stage of the problems. In spite of these nagging problems, there is a promising future prospects, largely due to the efforts made by the Arewa House, Kaduna and U.S. Embassy in organizing workshops/training and conferences with a view to training indigenous curators who could professionally carry out preservation and conservation activities of the Northern Nigeria's extant Arabic and *Ajami* manuscripts.

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