

Arabic language use in Ghana: Retrospect and prospects

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Abstract

Since the introduction of the Arabic language in Ghana in the fifteenth century, it has witnessed significant growth shaped by various historical and contemporary developments. This study highlights the factors that have characterised its development and usage over time. Through a qualitative desk research approach, in which data collected were analysed using thematic analysis, this study explores the dynamics that have influenced the growth of Arabic. It also examines current trends in Arabic education within the country. The findings of this study show that Arabic scholarship is well-established in Ghana. The current initiative of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NaCCA) to standardise the curriculum will facilitate its integration into more schools, ensuring continuity in its teaching and learning. This study underscores that Arabic is likely to become a prevalent subject at the pre-tertiary and tertiary levels, as it has emerged as an instrument of political engagement during election campaigns, where politicians leverage its religious significance to establish a connection with the Muslim community and garner their support. These developments

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highlight the broader socio-political implications of Arabic education in Ghana, influencing educational, community, and national dynamics.

Keywords: Arabic Education, Arabic Language, Curriculum, Ghana, Language Use, Politics of Arabic

Introduction

Ghana is a sub-Saharan West African country with a population exceeding 30.8 million (Ghana Statistical Service, 2021). It was formerly referred to as the Gold Coast, but was changed to Ghana when it attained independence on March 6, 1957. The exact number of languages spoken in Ghana remains uncertain. According to Dakubu (1988), there are between 45 and 50 Ghanaian languages, whereas Bamgbose (1991) mentions 57 languages. Also, Ethnologue mentions that Ghana is home to 73 living indigenous languages (Eberhard, Simons, & Fennig, 2024). These discrepancies arise primarily from variations in language categorisation because some languages are linguistically related. Dakubu (1988) explains that “there are instances where speech forms, which could be regarded as dialects of one language on purely linguistic criteria, are more conveniently treated as separate languages, because that is how the speakers feel about them’ (p. 10). Of these indigenous languages, which are all part of different branches of the Niger-Congo language family (i.e., Kwa, Gur, and Mande), 11 are officially approved for teaching and learning purposes in schools. These include Akuapem Twi, Asante Twi, Dagaare, Dagbane, Dangme, Ewe, Ga, Gonja, Kasem, Mfantse, and Nzema (Avunyra, 2019). Of these, Akan (Ashanti, Akuapem, and Mfantse) is the most widely spoken and studied in the country (Obeng, 1997). On the other hand, English is the official language of the country and is used in official circles and the education system. It is also a lingua franca among Ghanaians. Some Ghanaian families also use English in their homes, and as a result, it is becoming the home language for many urban and peri-urban households (Afrifa et al., 2019).

Arabic is another language widespread among the Ghanaian Muslim community. It has had a significant historical and cultural influence, particularly among Ghanaian Muslims. It was introduced to the Sahel region of Western Sudan mainly through trade networks from North Africa in the 11th century (Ngom, 2017). However, the use of Arabic in modern-day Ghana spread during the 18th century (Hunwick, 2004). It was regarded as the language of the educated African. In fact, “throughout the interior of West Africa, the educated man was the person who could read and write Arabic, and his knowledge, slight as it may have been the case, gave him high status even among non-Muslims” (Hunwick, 1977, as cited in Sey, 2003, p. 8). Some of these “educated” men include Sheikh Umar of Kete Krachi (b. 1856), Al-Hajj Muhammad Marhaba of Accra (b. 1896), and Mallam Muhammad Belly, also known as Mallam Bello (b. 1920), from Tetemu in the Eastern Region of Ghana (Hunwick, 2003).

Similarly, Arabic has become an integral part of the identity of the Muslim population in the country, primarily because it is the language of the Quran, and Muslims consider it a duty to learn the rudiments of Arabic to properly recite the holy book and gain a deeper appreciation of the Islamic sciences. Moreover, Islamic liturgical practices such as daily ritual prayers must be conducted in Arabic, which further reinforces its importance. Historically, reliance on Arabic was even stronger, as nearly all Islamic texts were available in Arabic. Again, a significant number of Ghanaians who have pursued higher education in Arabic-speaking countries use Arabic for communication as well as for religious purposes (Adamu & Sadat, 2020). Yusuf and Dumbe (2022) argue that the use of Arabic in various aspects of Muslims’ lives forms part of their religious identity.

This paper explores the dynamics and growth of Arabic in Ghanaian society. It specifically examines how historical and sociolinguistic factors have influenced the usage and expansion

of Arabic within Ghanaian Muslim communities and the broader society. This study poses two primary research questions:

1. How has the spread of Arabic historically influenced its role within Ghanaian Muslim communities and society at large?
2. What are the current trends in Arabic education, and how might they impact its future in Ghana?

Previous studies on the historical sketch of Arabic in Ghana

Arabic is the language of Islam and the medium through which Muslim scholars taught various disciplines, such as religion, philosophy, medicine, astronomy, and other Islamic sciences. It remains the language of Islamic education, even though translation is widespread. The Umayyad invasion of North Africa in 705 brought Islam to the region. Consequently, Arabic became the main language of the inhabitants who were Berbers (Education Development Center, 2007). However, Arabic made its way into the ancient kingdom of Ghana and the population of the Sahel through trans-Saharan trade. Arab traders, mainly from the Sahara region and the trans-Saharan trade routes connecting North and West Africa, played a significant role in this regard. The Dyula (called Wangara in Ghana), who have had trade and cross-cultural relations with the Arabs, also played a significant role in the spread of the language in present-day Ghana and some countries such as Nigeria and the Ivory Coast in the West Africa region (Rayan, 1998).

The Wangara were known for their long-distance trade and Islamic scholarship. According to Wilks (1963), their movement into present-day Ghana to engage in the gold trade of the Volta Basin appears to have begun in the late 14th century. They founded the town of Begho, situated on the northern edge of the Akan forest, and were the first to introduce literacy in Arabic and Islamic learning in the region. Ansah (1986) also maintained that Hausa scholars, who also came primarily as kola traders, were instrumental in bringing the Arabic literary tradition to Dagbon (in the Northern Region of Ghana) during the reign

of Naa Zangina, who ruled from around 1700 to 1715. In 1877, David Asante, a clergyman of the Basel Mission, reported the presence of numerous private and public schools where children recited Arabic and learned to read and write (Johnson, n.d., as cited in Iddrisu, 2005). Wilks (1963), however, speculates that Arabic literacy and scholarship existed in Ghana well before the mid-eighteenth century but only became firmly established at that time. He noted the following in his discussion of the growth of Arabic learning:

Of the early phases of Islamic learning in Ghana—of the spread of literacy in Arabic, of the development of the study of the Islamic sciences, and of the evolution of local authorship—nothing is as yet known. There is, however, clear evidence that the tradition was already firmly established by the mid-eighteenth century. (p. 412)

Further evidence is found in Levtzion and Pouwels (2012), who explain that by the early 15th century, the Wangara had established trade with the Akans and spread Islam and Arabic in local communities in Kumasi and other areas such as Salaga in the North. They further note that the rulers of Gonja were perhaps the first to accept Islam within the Voltaic region around the 17th century, including modern-day Ghana. Following this, other shaykhs from Timbuktu, such as Abu Bakr Kunate, travelled south to Mamprugu and other states for religious proselytisation. Imamates were founded by Ismail Kamaghate in Gonja, Sulayman Bagayogo in Dagomba, and Ya‘ muru Tarawiri in Wa.

Some of the early authorships in Arabic include the *Kitab al-Ghunja*, ‘The book of Gonja,’ compiled in the mid-eighteenth century by Sidi Umar b. Suma and Umar Kunandi b. Umar (Wilks, 1963; 2000; Silverman and Owusu-Ansah, 1989). The book contains, among other things, information about the growth of Islam in the Northern Territories (Gonja,

Mamprugu and Dagbon) of Ghana, as well as their contact with the Asante kingdom. For instance, the writer chronicled the death of Asantehene Opoku Ware in 1750, explaining the nature of the power he wielded over his people and highlighting certain challenging aspects of his reign. Muhammad Kamaghate (popularly known as Karamo Togma), a great-grandson of Imam Sidi Umar and a confidant of Asantehene Osei Tutu Kwame, was also commissioned by the latter to compile the chronicle of the Asante kings, obviously in Arabic. Hunwick (2003), however, mentions that no copy of the book exists today.

Wilks (2000) also posits that Osei Tutu Kwame's chancery contains correspondences in the relationship between the Asante kingdom and Gonja *ulamā*. These letters provide further evidence of Arabic literacy tradition. In fact, many bureaucratic recordings in the Asante royal court, including commercial transactions, were written by Muslim scribes. Wilks (1966) writes that the head of the Ashanti bureaucracy, *Gyaasewahene*, employed a Muslim secretary to record political events, court proceedings, and their relationship with the northern territory. Significantly, Monrad, a Danish pastor who resided in Accra at the beginning of the 19th century, also described Muslims as literate in Arabic (as cited in Wilks, 2000, p. 159).

Furthermore, Silverman and Owusu-Ansah (1989) mentioned that the Oriental Section of the Royal Library in Copenhagen holds a manuscript titled *Arabic manuscripts from the Guinea Coast*, written between 1795 and 1823. The manuscript contains numerous correspondences between Muslims in Kumasi and their brethren in the northern territories, as well as various magical formulae for the making of amulets. Hunwick (2003) noted that it also contains correspondences between Gonja Imams, notably Imam Malik of Buipe, who later became Imam of Gonja and Asantehene Osei Tutu Kwame.

Other writings from the early 19th century include *Qissat Salgha wa-tarikh Ghunjat*, 'The story of Salaga and the history of Gonja' by Mahmud b. Abd Allah, and the writings of al-Hajj

Umar b. Abi Bakr Kete Krachi, who migrated to Salaga in 1847 from Hausaland. Most al-Hajj Umar Kete Krachi's writings are historical in nature and contain social comments written in both Arabic and Hausa. Examples are the poem of *Ṭal' al-munāfa 'a fī tadhkiri al-munāza 'a*, 'Gaining insight by remembering the conflict,' on the Salaga civil war of 1892, and *Tanbīh al-ikhwān fī zikr al-aḥzān*, 'A message to friends on remembering hard times,' which also addresses the 1892 war and the decline of morality and good governance in Salaga (Hunwick, 2003).

It is important to mention that while some of these writings were in Arabic, a significant number of the early Muslim texts in Ghana were in *Ajami*, which refers to writings in African languages using modified Arabic script (Ngom, 2017). The Institute of African Studies at the University of Ghana once held a collection of these manuscripts by local scholars, which, unfortunately, disappeared due to years of neglect. Some of these manuscripts are now housed in the Arabic section of the University's Balme Library.

While these studies provide important data on the history of Arabic in Ghana, there is a dearth of contemporary research on the influence of Arabic in Ghanaian Muslim communities and society at large, as well as the current trends in Arabic education, and how these might impact its future in Ghana. These questions will be addressed in the subsequent paragraphs.

Method

The methods used in the study are described below.

Research approach

This study adopts a qualitative research method to explore the historical and contemporary development of the Arabic language in Ghana, focusing on its past and future potential. The qualitative approach was deemed most appropriate for this research because it allows for an in-depth understanding of non-quantifiable factors such as the religious and political influences

that have shaped the growth and significance of Arabic in the country over time. It also facilitates the exploration of the dynamics involved in the teaching, learning, and use of Arabic in Ghana.

Data collection

Given the qualitative nature of this study, data collection was based on desk research. This involved a systematic review and analysis of existing literature and other sources relevant to Arabic language education in Ghana. The primary sources included publications that discuss the introduction and spread of Arabic in Ghana, especially during the trans-Saharan trade and the establishment of Islam in the region. Academic articles on the role of Arabic in Islamic education and its significance in Ghana are also reviewed. Other sources included newspaper articles from 2016 that reported Arabic-related issues, particularly those concerning political party campaigns promising to make Arabic an examinable subject in the formal education system. Although Arabic was already taught in the Islamic Education Unit's Junior High Schools (JHS), it was not examinable. These articles were published in the months leading up to the 2016 general election. Additional information was retrieved from policy documents and reports from institutions that provide insights into the current state of Arabic education, including the role of the (Ghana) National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NaCCA) in integrating Arabic into the pre-tertiary curriculum.

Data analysis

Data collected through the desk research were analysed using thematic analysis. Key themes identified included the historical introduction of Arabic in Ghana through Islamic scholarship, the role of Arabic as a marker of religious identity, its role in religious and educational institutions, the sociopolitical significance of Arabic in election campaigns, and the future potential of Arabic language education in light of recent policy changes.

Arabic use in Ghana

The use of Arabic extends beyond religious rituals and has become an essential element of the social fabric of the Muslim community in Ghana. This section explores the various dimensions that have characterised its use in the country, beginning with its role as a marker of religious identity.

A mark of religious identity

One significant use of Arabic in Ghana is its role as a marker of religious identity. Arabic is deeply integrated into the religious practices of Muslims and plays a pivotal role in various rituals. For instance, the five daily prayers, the *azkaar*, 'remembrances/ invocations' and other religious practices are conducted exclusively in Arabic. In most of these rituals, the use of any language other than Arabic renders the practice invalid. As indicated earlier, efforts by the Wangara and Hausa Muslim traders contributed to the dissemination of Islam in the country, thus contributing to the spread of Arabic. Following the expansion of Islam into Ghanaian territories, the need to impart to believers the basic teachings of faith became necessary. This was often done in Arabic and was translated into local languages. These teachings were primarily conducted in mosques and *madrasas*, where local imams and scholars from these communities played an integral role in enlightening their congregations about the basic teachings of Islam. Through these efforts, Arabic became interwoven and integrated into the fabric of the Muslim community in the country.

The utilisation of Arabic, both in its original form and through translations into local languages, facilitated the effective communication of Islamic teachings and acquisition of basic knowledge of the Arabic language. As a result, the mosques and *madrasas* became vibrant centres where the Arabic and local languages converged, contributing to the development and preservation of Arabic among the Muslim community.

It is important to recognise that the use of Arabic extends beyond rituals and permeates various aspects of cultural and social practices, such as marriage and naming ceremonies for newborns. During the solemnization of marriages, Arabic is used in key instances such as the recitation of the *khutbah* ‘sermon’ and various Quranic verses, ensuring that religious identity is clearly maintained. Similarly, the use of Arabic is emphasised in naming ceremonies, especially when the ceremony holds a particular religious significance. Arabic is employed in beseeching the Almighty’s blessings on the seventh day after birth.

Equally important is the fact that, in the past, knowledge of Arabic was perceived as a measure of religious devotion. The Muslim community assumes that individuals who speak or read Arabic are religious, as they fail to understand the dichotomy between Arabic and Islam or between religiosity and knowledge of Arabic. A closer reading of certain religious texts, such as Quran 35 verse 28 that states, “It is only those among His servants who have knowledge that truly fear Allah,” indicates that their understanding is indeed well-founded. However, it must be emphasised that the generations who were actively engaged in Arabic scholarship, particularly those involved in its study and practice over the centuries, exhibited considerable religious devotion. This devotion should not be assumed to be merely a result of their mastery of the language. Their religious devotion stems more from an appreciation of religion, which undeniably was facilitated by their knowledge of Arabic. However, the same cannot be said of all generations, particularly the present generation, which acquires Arabic with different motivations.

Arabic as a lingua franca

The most common lingua francas in Ghana are English, Akan, and Hausa (Obeng, 1997). However, Arabic is also widely utilised among Ghanaian Arabists for communication within their communities. Arabists specialise in the study of the Arabic

language, Arabic culture, and the histories of Arabic-speaking countries. The majority of these Arabists are foreign-trained and pursue higher education in countries such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Libya, and other Arab countries. These intellectuals, now back in the country, contribute their expertise in various sectors of the country, fostering economic, educational, and social development.

The use of Arabic is not limited to the Arabists. This is also evident in the presence of loanwords in some local languages, such as Hausa. Akoto (2018) noted that Arabic is employed in Ghana in various discourses, although its comparative functional load is lower than that of English and other local languages. He also noted that “educational institutions in Ghana enact exoglossic² identity through the use of three global languages: Latin, French, and Arabic’ (Akoto 2018, p. 185). The inclusion of Arabic in this instance serves to make the institution appealing to a broader local and global Arabic-speaking community. Additionally, it serves as an announcement of the cultural diversity and inclusiveness promoted by these academic institutions.

The use of Arabic as a lingua franca among both the Ghanaian Arabist community and individuals of Arab descent has proven instrumental in fostering an understanding of the shared values and divergent perspectives. Using Arabic, Arabists discuss issues pertaining to their survival within the country. In instances where religious sectoral differences arise, such as between the Tijaniya and Ahlus Sunnah wal Jama’ah (ASWAJ), Arabic serves as a unifying medium to facilitate meaningful dialogue. Both groups relied on their shared Arabic religious texts, namely the Quran and Hadith, to present and argue their cases. Consequently, they are able to collaborate and find solutions within their communities using the language.

Arabic, as a lingua franca, also serves as a bridge between Ghanaian Arabists and Arab visitors to the country. It has become a crucial means of communication, bridging the gap for visitors

² The term *exoglossic* refers to the use of languages that are not indigenous to Ghana by these institutions to project a certain identity.

unfamiliar with local languages and facilitating interaction with the broader Ghanaian community in general. Moreover, over the past three decades, numerous NGOs from Arab countries, such as the Muntada Islamic Trust (now Al-Firdaws), Direct Aid in Ghana, the World Islamic Call Society, and Qatar Charity, have established offices in the country. Arabic predominantly serves as the bridge language between the heads of these organizations and their local counterparts. These bodies highlight the growing Arab presence in Ghana, which is sustained throughout the Arabic language. The use of Arabic as a lingua franca and the use of Arabic among Arabists on one hand, and between Arabists and those of Arabic descent on the other, promotes understanding and fosters partnership in various aspects of society. Additionally, it facilitates collaboration and cross-cultural understanding in both the local and global contexts.

It must be noted that the level of competence in Arabic is low within certain institutions dedicated to learning Arabic. Therefore, its use as a lingua franca is limited. This is particularly true for weekend *madrasas* and public Islamic schools under the Islamic Education Unit (IEU) of the Ghana Education Service (GES), where Arabic is integrated into the curriculum. The reason for this is clear. Some tutors in these institutions are not competent in the language and, as a result, may resort to using the local Hausa language for instruction in Arabic classes, regardless of the learners' proficiency levels. Another sociolinguistic phenomenon emerging in these schools is the substitution of English for Arabic because of its greater functional load in Ghanaian society. Moreover, those teaching the language in the hinterlands, having learned it informally, often possess limited knowledge and understanding of Arabic pedagogy.

However, the situation is different in tertiary institutions in which Arabic is taught. For instance, at the Department of Modern Languages of the University of Ghana, Arabic is taught by instructors who hold advanced degrees that equip them with

a deeper understanding of the language. These instructors are not only fluent in Arabic but also possess extensive knowledge of its various aspects, which is reflected in the department's structured and formalised Arabic curriculum that adheres to sound pedagogical practices.

Despite the presence of a notable Arab community in the country, primarily of Lebanese descent, specific figures for their populations are not available. Nevertheless, the interaction between Arabists and the broader Arab community is minimal, partly due to contrasting residential patterns between the two groups. While Arabists are typically Ghanaians residing within local communities, members of the Arab community often live in neighbourhoods distinct from these areas, contributing to minimal engagement. Additionally, the inherently diglossic nature of the Arabic language poses a challenge for successful interactions. Diglossia, as defined by Ferguson (1959) in his seminal article, refers to a situation in which two varieties of a language coexist within the same speech community: one functioning as a formal variety, such as Modern Standard Arabic (*fuṣ-ḥa*), and the other as a regional or local variety, such as Egyptian or Levantine Arabic. While Arabists in Ghana are fluent in the *fuṣ-ḥa* variety, which is the highly codified variant used in official conversations, this creates a communication barrier with members of the Arab community who primarily use their regional variety. Studies have shown that, in diglossic environments, speakers often prefer their variants over the formal or common variety (Husein, 2017). This linguistic divide poses a significant challenge to the continued use of Arabic as a lingua franca in the country.

The politics of Arabic language: A historical overview

Arabic has gained considerable attention from politicians in Ghana, particularly since the beginning of the Fourth Republic in 1992. It has become increasingly politicised in response to the grievances put forward by various Ghanaian Muslims about

the lack of appropriate attention to their developmental needs. Besides, its political significance has risen primarily because Muslims constitute an important minority capable of influencing the fortunes of any political party in the country.

The relevance of Arabic in Ghanaian politics became more pronounced during the presidency of John Agyekum Kufour, former president of the Republic of Ghana, who served from 2001 to 2009. During the 2001 annual *maulid*³ celebration, the National Chief Imam (NCI) made a request to the president for Arabic to become examinable at the Basic Education Certificate Examination (BECE) level. President Kufuor, who graced the occasion, assured the NCI and all Muslims that he would task the Ministry of Education to act on the request (Mohammed, 2001, as cited in Samwini, 2006). This announcement brought joy to the Muslim community and made the issue of Arabic education at the basic level part of the national agenda for education reform in Ghana. Unfortunately, not much effort was made by the Muslim community and other stakeholders to see to the actualisation and full implementation of the promise. Although the Kufour government engaged some Arabic instructors under the National Volunteer Programme organised by the National Service Scheme, it was discontinued during the first term of the National Democratic Congress (NDC) government of Atta Mills (Arabic Teachers' Allowance, 2016). However, with the implementation of the Youth Employment Agency (YEA) Act by the NDC government, an employment module was developed specifically to recruit Arabic teachers for Arabic/Islamic schools. Thus, in 2016, the YEA announced that it had recruited 6500 Arabic teachers across the country under the Youth in Arabic Module to assist in the teaching of the language (Abdul-Jalil, 2016).

It should be mentioned that as early as 1987, the government of the Provisional National Defence Committee (PNDC) established the IEU to coordinate the teaching and

³ *Maulid* refers to the annual celebration of the birth of the Prophet Muhammad often observed by *Sufi* 'mystical' inclined Islamic denominations.

learning of Arabic and Islamic studies in all Arabic/Islamic Schools in the country. Schools that fall under the IEU teach the full government/secular curriculum, in addition to Arabic and Islamic studies (Islamic Education Sector Study Ghana, 2007). The Unit which falls under the GES was also meant “to provide opportunity for Muslim communities in Ghana to gain easy access to secular education” (Sey, 2003. p. 11). Although Arabic is taught as a subject in these schools, there is often a lack of structured teaching techniques. Moreover, many teachers are ill-equipped to teach the subject effectively, often because of limited formal training in Arabic pedagogy. This challenge is further compounded by the unavailability of adequate teaching resources such as textbooks. Learners also place little or no importance on the learning of the subject mainly because it is not examinable. The Islamic Education Sector Study Ghana (2007) reported that, among other things, to enhance the quality of education in Arabic/Islamic schools, there should be periodical pedagogical training for engaged teachers as well as a standard curriculum and certification of Arabic language teachers.

Another notable historical event is the argument between the two main political parties in the country, the New Patriotic Party (NPP) and NDC, during the heat of the 2016 presidential campaign. The debate centered on the originator of the idea of making Arabic an examinable subject in the school curriculum. The Chief of Staff of the NDC administration, Julius Debrah, in an interaction with the Muslim community at Nsawam Zongo in the Eastern Region announced that President Mahama would introduce the study of Arabic at the Senior High School (SHS) level in 2017 and at the basic level in 2018, and make it examinable (Government to make Arabic compulsory, 2016). Ansah (2016) reported that Mustapha Abdul-Hamid, the spokesperson for the NPP flagbearer Nana Akufo-Addo, also claimed that the idea of teaching Arabic originated from the NPP, as outlined in their 2016 manifesto. He accused the governing NDC party of copying whatever the NPP put in its manifesto, calling it the

usual panic reaction of the NDC. Abdul-Hamid further claimed that the NDC lacked the capacity to talk about the issue in a conceivable manner, as it was not their original idea. Indeed, existing literature confirms that the 2016 manifesto of the NPP refers to Arabic education. It outlined policy intentions to support Arabic/Islamic instructors through training and incentives as well as to introduce Arabic as an optional language to be taught and examined at both the JHS and SHS levels (NPP Manifesto for Election 2016, p. 110).

Although the NPP promised to recruit Arabic teachers and ensure they were paid if it was voted into power, it is important to explain that the IEU of the GES already recruits Arabic/Islamic teachers to teach in the schools it manages—one teacher at the primary level and another at the JHS level. The new NPP promise, therefore, aimed to hire more Arabic instructors outside the GES scheme to address the significant shortage of Arabic/Islamic teachers in the Islamic school system.

Arabic language and politics in Ghana: Contemporary developments

When the NPP won power in 2017, the government created the Ministry of Inner-City and Zongo Development to, among other things, fulfil its promise regarding Arabic education. Vice President Dr. Mahamudu Bawumia disclosed that the Ministry of Inner City and Zongo Development was mandated to recruit 3000 Arabic instructors across the country to aid in teaching the subject as part of the government's commitment to improving the education sector (Kubi, 2018). In May 2018, Arabic instructors in the Ashaiman Municipality in a press conference extolled President Nana Akufo-Addo's government to fulfil his campaign promise to restore the teaching of the Arabic language in Islamic schools. They stated that 65 Arabic instructors had thus far been recruited in their municipality to teach the subject (Kubi, 2018). The new instructors were engaged under the Arabic Teachers' Programme model of the YEA.

Building on the initial success of the Arabic Teachers Programme, the Ministry launched a second phase in September 2020, aimed at improving the first phase to achieve better outcomes. Accordingly, another 3000 applicants from about 18000 applicants who applied for Arabic instructorship were recruited from all parts of the country. This cohort was designated to teach Arabic at the basic and SHS levels as part of the YEA's Arabic Teachers Programme. During the launch, Sector Minister Mustapha Abdul-Hamid announced that the Ministry was working towards changing the status of the instructors to permanent employees under the Ministry of Education. Previously, Arabic instructors were given a two-year renewable contract (the Ministry of Zongo Development launches second phase, 2020). This new move was intended to provide job security for instructors, while ensuring continuity in Arabic language education. The second phase, however, was never implemented because of the COVID-19 pandemic, leading to the cancellation or suspension of most government development projects, including the Arabic Teachers Programme. During a *maulid* celebration in 2021 at Aboabo in the Asawase Constituency of Kumasi, Ben Abdallah Banda, the Coordinator for Zongo and Inner Cities Development⁴ announced that the programme would commence in 2021. However, the programme never actually began because of the country's economic challenges.

Arabic language education in Ghana

As part of the NPP government's manifesto promise to make the Arabic language an examinable subject at the JHS and SHS levels, the language was included in the pre-tertiary curriculum reform spearheaded by the NaCCA in 2021, beginning with its introduction at the JHS level. This reform aimed to address national educational priorities and enhance the quality of pre-tertiary education. For this reform, the education system was

⁴ The Ministry of Inner-City and Zongo Development was converted in 2021 into a secretariat and headed by a Coordinator at the Office of the President.

divided into five key phases⁵ to ensure that a separate curriculum was developed for each phase (National Pre-Tertiary Education Curriculum Framework, 2018).

The development of the key phase four (JHS 1–3) curriculum, known as the Common Core Programme (CCP), was completed in 2020 and has been progressively implemented, starting from the 2021/2022 academic year. Arabic is a new learning area/subject that has been introduced in this programme. Unlike other subjects, it is an optional subject but is examinable at the end of the three-year learning cycle. Therefore, the first cohort of students in the key phase four curriculum is expected to sit for their Basic Education Certificate Examinations (BECE) in July 2024/August (NaCCA, n.d.).

Certainly, the introduction of Arabic at the JHS level as an examinable subject marks progressive development in the teaching and learning of Arabic in the country, as no previous government has taken this bold step. However, preliminary feedback from the Greater Accra Regional Office of the IEU suggests that Arabic/Islamic schools have not availed themselves of the current opportunity, as expected. According to a report by the Greater Accra Arabic Coordinator of the IEU (see Table 1), only 12 out of the 44 schools managed by the Unit in the Greater Accra region have registered candidates for the 2024 BECE exams. In total, 359 candidates from Accra, representing 6.44% of the overall national figure of 5572, were set to take the exam in 2024.

⁵ The key five phases are: key phase 1 (Kindergarten 1&2); key phase 2 (lower primary level of B1 to B3); key phase 3 (upper primary level of B4 to B6); key phase 4 (Junior High School of JHS1 to JHS3); key phase 5 (Senior High School of SHS1 to SHS3).

Table 1: Greater Accra schools registered for the 2024 BECE Arabic exam

Name of School	Boys	Girls	Total
Nurumustafia B'	20	23	43
Nurumustafia A'	16	15	31
FOMWAG	9	14	23
NuruIslamiya	16	11	27
Answaru-deen	22	27	49
Dar-es-salam (Amasaman)	18	17	35
Al-Zakiya	17	10	27
Mercy	5	0	5
Institute of Islamic Studies JHS	1	1	2
ICODEHS Islamic Basic (Adenta)	17	14	31
Umuraniya Islamic Basic	17	22	39
Rashad	16	31	47
Total	174	185	359

Note: Adapted from "Report on the First BECE Arabic Mock Exams" by Tobodu (2024).

As shown in Table 2 below, at the national level, 12 out of 16 regions in the country have registered candidates for the paper, with a total of 5572 students participating in the 2024 Arabic BECE exam. For some regions, only the total number of candidates was available, without gender breakdown.

The Ashanti Region had the highest number of candidates, with a total of 2303. This high participation could be due to the greater number of Islamic schools in the region, as well as a strong interest in Arabic education. In contrast, the Upper East Region recorded the lowest registration with only 20 students, suggesting a lack of interest or limited access to Arabic education. For the three northern regions (Northern, North East and Savanna), the data indicates that no candidates were recorded for the exams. This absence is attributed to a "sit-and-

wait” approach among stakeholders in the regions, likely due to their unfamiliarity with the exam process, as this is the first BECE Arabic exam. It could be argued that the optional status of the subject, as well as concerns regarding students’ workload from other compulsory subjects (10 in total), contributes to some of these initial implementation challenges.

Table 2: Nationwide registered candidates of the IEU for the 2024 BECE Arabic exam

Region	Boys	Girls	Regional Total	No. of Schools
Upper East Region	9	11	20	1
Upper West Region	-	-	832	26
North East Region	-	-	-	-
Northern Region	-	-	-	-
Savanna Region	-	-	-	-
Bono East Region	197	182	379	9
Bono Region	241	243	484	19
Ahafo Region	-	-	-	-
Ashanti Region	-	-	2303	73
Oti Region	-	-	130	9
Volta Region	-	-	70	3
Eastern Region	-	-	181	10
Western North Region	37	33	70	5
Western Region	70	77	147	10
Greater Accra Region	174	185	359	12
Central Region	-	-	597	19
TOTAL			5572	196

Note: Adapted from “Report on the First BECE Arabic Mock Exams” by Tobodu (2024).

The development of the Key Phase Five curriculum, which includes an Arabic learning area, was initiated in 2020. According to NaCCA, the curriculum aims to provide learners with the necessary knowledge, skills, and competencies to help them transition to further studies, the world of work and adult life” (NaCCA, n.d.). It is expected to be rolled out progressively starting in the 2024/2025 academic year.⁶ Although Arabic is an examinable subject at the SHS level, NaCCA seeks to introduce an Arabic curriculum that not only encompasses the WAEC Arabic syllabus, but also responds to the needs of the 21st century skills and competencies of critical thinking and problem solving. This new curriculum will align with globally recognised standards of language proficiency in Arabic education, while also preparing students to contribute to Ghana’s development priorities, such as economic growth and social cohesion.

Therefore, the introduction of the NaCCA Arabic curriculum fulfils the NPP government’s 2016 manifesto. Additionally, this implies that the WAEC Arabic syllabus for Ghana will differ from those of other West African English countries. Its focus on global competency and cultural awareness enables the achievement of the global sustainable development goal of quality education.

There is steady interest in Arabic language education at the tertiary level as well. For instance, at the University of Ghana, enrolment numbers in Arabic at Level 100 (i.e., first year students) are high, although there is a notable decline as students progress to advanced levels. For example, in the 2023/2024 academic year, 166 were enrolled in Level 100 Arabic, but this number dropped to 15 at Level 400. One possible reason for this sharp decline is that many students at Level 100 are either assigned the course by the University or select it as part of a bouquet of three courses they wish to pursue. The University allows students to drop courses as they progress towards

⁶ It should be noted that, through the effort of stakeholders, such as the Baraka Policy Institute, Arabic was reintroduced as an examinable subject in the West African Senior School Certificate Examinations (WASSCE) for Ghanaian SHS students starting from the 2017 May/June examinations (Abdul-Jalil, 2016).

majoring in a specific area or combining them. See Table 3 for the detailed enrolment numbers from 2021 to 2023.

Table 3: Enrolment numbers for Arabic students at the University of Ghana (2021–2024)

Academic Year	Level	Female	Male	Total
2023/2024	100	92	74	166
	200	18	11	29
	300	12	9	21
	400	11	4	15
2022/2023	100	105	67	172
	200	15	8	23
	300	22	11	33
	400	10	3	13
2021/2022	100	87	72	159
	200	24	12	36
	300	20	10	30
	400	10	3	13

Data retrieved from University of Ghana ITS iEnabler platform.

In addition to the University of Ghana and the Ghana Institute of Languages, which have been offering Arabic education since the 1960s, other institutions have recently begun offering Arabic education. For instance, Al-Faruq College of Education and the University for Development Studies (UDS) both introduced a Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.) Arabic programme in 2020, while the Akenten Appiah-Menka University of Skills Training and Entrepreneurial Development (AAMUSTED) followed in 2024 (Ghana Tertiary Education Commission, n.d.). The inclusion of Arabic in the Ghana Teacher Licensure Examination, organised by the National Teaching

Council (NTC), further reflects its growing importance in Ghana's education system.

Summary and discussion

Overall, the ongoing emphasis placed by both the NDC and NPP governments on Arabic education in the country has significant implications for Ghana's political, educational, and cultural landscape. Discussions regarding Arabic education are likely to persist, particularly during political campaigns and in the formulation of manifestos. The two major political parties aim to demonstrate their inclusive approach and sensitivity to cultural diversity through these discussions, ultimately seeking to attract more votes from the Muslim community. On the educational front, it is expected that, as conversations about Arabic education continue to evolve, policymakers will pay more attention to the quality of teaching and the availability of adequate language teaching resources. This is crucial for enhancing the teaching and learning of the Arabic language, as well as achieving the desired outcomes.

In sum, factors contributing to the growth of Arabic education in the country include official recognition and support from the state, favourable educational policies, and economic and cultural ties with Arabic-speaking countries. The debate between the NDC and NPP prior to the 2016 elections, regarding the introduction of Arabic as an examinable subject, its inclusion in the NPP's manifesto, and the stipends provided by both governments to Arabic instructors indicates the official recognition of the subject and its significance in Ghana's educational landscape. Indeed, the educational policies introduced by both the NDC and NPP governments have contributed significantly to the expansion of Arabic education. The inclusion of Arabic as an examinable subject in the curriculum provides students with the opportunity to learn the language. Policy implementation strategies, such as training activities for Arabic teachers in the new curriculum and the provision of a teacher's guide by

NaCCA, ensure high-quality teaching and learning experiences. These initiatives by the NaCCA, along with their engagement with stakeholders, have raised awareness and enhanced the prospect of Arabic education in the country.

Future implications

The future development of Arabic in Ghana is contingent on the strong foundation provided by NaCCA through the development of a standard curriculum, which ensures consistency in the teaching and learning of the subject across educational institutions. Given that most children attending Arabic/Islamic schools are initially exposed to Arabic education in local *madrasas*, it is anticipated that in the coming years, more of these schools will opt to include Arabic as part of their language subjects for the BECE examinations. This will potentially lead to higher enrolment rates and increased interest at both the JHS and SHS levels, as well as in tertiary institutions.

Opportunities related to Arabic language use and education in Ghana are multi-faceted. Proficiency in Arabic advances the peaceful coexistence between Ghanaians and Arabs, and promotes a mutual understanding of both cultures. Furthermore, the multilateral relations between Ghana and the Arab world will be strengthened, leading to increased trade exchanges, business partnerships, and economic growth. Individuals proficient in Arabic may find job prospects in multinational companies established in both regions and beyond, since it has become one of the languages of commerce in the world. They may also offer their expertise as translators and interpreters at regional and international conferences and meetings organised in the country and abroad. Additionally, given Arabic's status as one of the major languages spoken at the United Nations (UN) and the African Union (AU), it holds significant economic potential for its speakers.

However, despite the positive outlook on Arabic education, significant challenges persist. These include the lack of

NaCCA-approved Arabic textbooks and trained, licensed Arabic instructors. Additionally, enrolment figures at Al-Faruq College of Education and AAMUSTED remain low, highlighting the need for the engagement of more qualified tutors and increased support for Arabic training programmes.

Furthermore, the current number of periods allocated for Arabic instruction on the weekly lesson timetable at the JHS is woefully inadequate and will neither sufficiently improve learners' progress in the subject nor help them achieve excellent results. Currently, the number of periods approved by NaCCA for teaching Arabic at the JHS level is only one period per week, with each period lasting 40 minutes (National Pre-tertiary Education Curriculum Framework, 2018). Unlike local languages, mastering Arabic requires more instructional time, especially considering the limited opportunities for language practice outside classroom environments. Addressing these challenges will foster the growth and sustainability of Arabic education in Ghana.

Conclusions

This study explored the use of Arabic in Ghana, focusing on its historical development, current trends, and future prospects. It has been shown that Arabic was not only used for making amulets for the protection of the Asante kings but has historically served as the language of the elite, particularly at the king's palace, where it was used for recording events, correspondences, and other official matters. In addition, the Arabic literacy tradition was found not only in chiefdoms but also in communities where Muslims lived. Even though Arabic is not one of the designated instructional languages, it remains well-established in the country, as evidenced by its scholarship and usage.

Furthermore, the ongoing development of Arabic curricula at various educational levels plays a pivotal role in the future of the language. This will ensure a standardised syllabus and assessment, facilitating its integration into more schools

and ensuring continuity. The discourse surrounding Arabic has raised the awareness among language stakeholders. It highlights the importance of cultural diversity and the inclusion of all segments of Ghanaian society in nation-building.

Arabic has the potential to become a popular subject at the pre-tertiary and tertiary levels. This is supported by its emergence as an instrument of political engagement during election campaigns, where politicians, particularly from the NDC and NPP, leverage its religious significance to connect with the Muslim community and gain their support. To effectively realise the growth of Arabic education, as envisaged in the new curriculum, stakeholders, particularly the IEU and its governing board, must effectively monitor student progress and ensure quality education delivery. Continuous professional development for Arabic language teachers is also crucial. This will enable them to stay abreast of current developments and effective methodologies in the field of teaching foreign languages, such as Arabic. In addition, addressing the competency gaps and sociolinguistic shifts observed in educational settings is critical in preserving Arabic's role as a lingua franca in the country.

A limitation of the current study is its exclusive reliance on secondary data, which does not reflect the personal experiences and perceptions of current Arabic language students or educators. Future research could address these limitations by incorporating primary data collection methods, such as interviews or focus groups, to provide additional insights into the contemporary state of Arabic education in Ghana. Further studies could also focus on the electoral impact of its politicisation and assess whether either of the two main parties, the NDC and NPP, has actually benefitted from the Muslim voting bloc.

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