

ISLAM AND THE PROMOTION OF MULTILINGUALISM: LESSONS FOR THE NIGERIAN MUSLIMS

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ABSTRACT

Language is the vehicle of a people's worldview and cultural values. The diversity of languages is a deliberate act of God and sign of divine power at work in the organization of the universe. Acquisition of different languages had been one of the major features of Muslim education throughout the world. However, the recent skeptical approach as well as the laissez-faire attitude of the Muslims towards the promotion of multilingualism demands special attention by scholars. This paper is purposely designed to explore why this is so. To do this, attempts are made to discuss the roles of the Muslims in the promotion of multilingualism in the early days of Islam and to suggest an alternative means of integrating religion into linguistics as a way of promoting multilingualism among the contemporary Muslims.

INTRODUCTION

The Beneficent (God) taught the Qur'an
He created man, taught him the mode of
speech (Qur'an 55: 1-4).

The above verses of the Qur'an show that the faculty of speech is a divine gift from God with no reference to a particular language whether local, national or international. The Qur'an further reveals that apart from human beings, other animals and birds are also endowed with speech faculty. The Qur'an says for instance:

And Sulayman was Daud's heir. He said: O ye people! We have been taught the speech of birds, and we have been given everything. This is indeed grace manifest (from Allah). And before Sulayman were marshaled his hosts, - of jinn and men and birds, and they were all kept in order and ranks.

At length, when they came to a valley of ants, one of the ants said: O ye ants, get into your habitations, lest Sulayman and his hosts crush you (under foot) without knowing it.... (Qur'an 27: 16 -18).

The Qur'an further discusses the discovery of the Queen of Sheba's empire by Prophet Sulayman's hoopoe, and how it narrated its ordeals to its master, Sulayman.

From the foregoing, it becomes manifest that all human languages and other animal languages are important and that they are gifts of Allah. In other words, the roaring of lions, the crowing of cocks, the braying of donkey and the barking of dogs are means of meaningful communication among them. To confirm that the gift of speech faculty should be a means of realizing the uniqueness of Allah, Allah calls on man to ponder on this saying: "Have We not made for him two eyes? And a tongue and two lips?" (Qur'an 90: 8 -10). Tongue no doubt, is the most important instrument of speech while the lips have an effective function in speech as many phonemes are produced by the lips.

The revelation of God's message in a particular language takes much after the language of the recipient of the message and this raises

such a language to the status of divine language. In other words, the revelation of the Qur'an in Arabic language is as a result of the Prophet being an Arab.

And We have not sent any messenger except with the language of the people; in order that he might make (things) clear to them. (Qur'an 14: 4).

The spread of any religion from its source to other areas calls for the adoption of the language of revelation of the religion's scripture in order to maintain the originality of such a religion. This explains why wherever Islam goes, its language, Arabic follows.

It needs to be mentioned that language diversity is a deliberate act of God for the purpose of study by people for them to appreciate the signs of God. A portion of the Qur'an reads:

And among His signs is the creation of the heavens and the earth, and variation in your languages and your colours. Verily in that are signs for those who know. (Qur'an 30: 22).

The above verse rejects the biblical account of the Tower of Babel theory which sees variation of languages as a punishment inflicted on mankind for his dubious attempt to go beyond his boundary. The verse also poses the challenge of researching into various languages with a view to understanding them. This paper therefore intends to discuss the efforts of the Muslims toward the promotion of multilingualism and the means through which the study of languages were encouraged. It finally offers some suggestions on the integration of the local, scriptural and colonial languages for them to be used interruptedly in Islamic circle.

THE LINGUISTIC CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE MUSLIMS

There are numerous sayings of the Prophet on acquisition of knowledge by the Muslims. Apart from religious knowledge, the Prophet encouraged the Muslims to seek knowledge of science-related disciplines

and even urged them not to limit the acquisition of knowledge to their micro environment but also to go out as far as to China seeking it, when Islam had by then, not reached the place. The urging of Muslims to seek knowledge even unto China is an indication that the Prophet encouraged the Muslims to learn their language at least to facilitate spontaneous communication and free interaction. Apart from this, the Prophet also encouraged the study of foreign languages by asking Zaid ibn Thabit, his chief amanuensis who had initially learnt Persian, Greek, Ethiopian and Aramaic to further learn Hebrew for him to read *Kitab al-Yaoud* (Tibawi, 1954). Based on the consciousness of their identity and responsiveness to effectively communicate with others, Muslims had bequeathed distinct and diverse languages to humanity. This is noted by an erudite scholar when he writes:

The Pahlawi speaking were the first to create Persian by exactly the same method; and they were followed by the speakers of Sanskrit and other languages of the Indian subcontinent who created Urdu and other modern vernacular such as Pushtu, Punjabi, Sindi, Baluch and Bengali, by speakers of the Bantu language group who created Swahili and Hausa; by speakers of the Turkic group of languages who created Turkish, Uzbek and Tajik; and of the Malay group who created Malay. These languages, and the Islamic literatures, which were produced in them under the inspiration of Islam, are all contributions to the human spirit, an enrichment of the human legacy. In many instances, the Islamic linguistic contribution had lifted the language from an archaic age to modernity, enriching its vocabulary with that of Islam, giving the new language its alphabet, and granting it the inheritance of Arabic literature with much of its poetical and literary forms and themes, and providing it with a

bridge of communications with the then-known world (Al-Faruqi, 1995: 14-15).

The extension of Islam beyond Arabia territory led to the contact of Muslims with other languages and cultures. Before the invasion of the Persian and Byzantine world by the Muslims, such cities as Alexandria and Jundishapur had developed into centres of learning. After the occupation of these cities by the Muslims, these learning centres were left undisturbed as the Muslims saw that as an opportunity for them to acquire the available knowledge in their conquered territories. From there, Hindu, Persian, Syrian and Greek works began to be studied and translated into Arabic. Thus, the Muslims in their bid to promote knowledge and education though captured these cities territorially, were being captured culturally, as they imbibed the language of their captured areas for them to acquire the available knowledge from them. The epoch of translation of foreign works into Arabic was reached during the Abbasid period when Caliph Al-Ma'mun expanded the already established *Baytul-Hikmah* (House of Wisdom) or the *Bayt-at-Tarjumah* (House of Translation) as a centre for translation and research, and highly qualitative translators were employed to translate foreign works into Arabic.

The translation of foreign works into Arabic suggests the incentives given by the Muslims to multilinguists whether Muslims or non-Muslim. Among such multilinguists that helped in the translation works were George the son of Bakh-Tishu, Musa ibn Khalid who translated Pahlavi and Greek works into Arabic and Hunayn ibn Ishaq who was regarded as the greatest of all translators of classical works into Arabic (Nakosteen, 1964). In addition to the *Baytul-Hikmah*, many schools and universities were established by the Muslims all over the Muslim world, for them to have in-depth knowledge of both ancient and modern disciplines, arts and science. Through this, Muslims became eminent in all fields of learning.

As essential as one's local language or mother tongue is in the expression and promotion of cultural values, Muslims consider the knowledge of the text of the Qur'an in its original language essential as well. This is due to the fact that the daily obligatory prayers could only be conducted in Arabic and during which extracts from the Qur'an are to be recited in Arabic too (Yahaya, 1985). This explains why Qur'anic and Arabic schools sprang up anywhere Islam stayed. Thus, Islam and Arabic become twin sisters that could not be separated easily. Denham and Clapperton observed that schools of Arabic learning scattered all over Nigeria, as they saw them in places like Kuka, Katsina and Sokoto between 1821 and 1830. Before long, Arabic became the official language of the Northern states in Nigeria. The literary contributions of scholars like Shaykh Usman Dan Fodiyo, Shaykh Abdullahi, Shaykh Muhammad Bello and Shaykh Adam Abdullah al-Alory, to mention but a few, are in Arabic. It is interesting to note that John Hunwick has compiled most of the Arabic literatures written by Africans. Sefan Reichmuth and Deremi Abubakre gave the list of Ilorin, Nupe, Ibadan, Lagos and other areas of Southern Nigeria Arabic writers in this work.

Another important contribution of the Muslims to multilingualism is the development of *Ajami* which is a modified form of Arabic letters for instructional purposes, written communication and mass education. *Ajami* was seemed to have originated in Spain under Arab occupation from the 8th century until about 1300. It is with this method of writing that Hausa poetry was first composed and written down.

It needs to be mentioned that Arabic as a language of Islam, had influenced many languages considerably. The Maltese language, spoken on the island of Malta was said to have been developed from the western Arabic dialects of Algeria and Tunisia. Modern Persian equally has many Arabic loanwords. An enormous number of Arabic loanwords were observed in Swahili language of East Africa. Apart from this, the Arabs elevated the status of Swahili to a lingua franca used by several

closely related Bantu-speaking tribal groups. This was aptly documented by Adamu when he writes:

In the early 19th century, the spread of Swahili inland received a great impetus from its being the language of the Arab ivory and slave caravans, which penetrated as far north as Uganda and as far west as Zaire. Swahili was later adopted by European colonialists, especially the Germans, who used it extensively as the language of administration in Tanganyika, thus laying the foundation for its adoption as the national language of independent Tanzania. In Kenya and Uganda, other local languages also received official encouragement during the colonial period, but the tendency in these countries is now to emphasize the use of Swahili. The oldest Swahili literature, which dates from the early 18th century, is written in the Arabic script. (Adamu, 2000: 13).

The emergence of colonialism as well as the coming of the Christian missionaries marked the introduction of Western education to some African countries. As against the Islamic education which used Arabic as its medium of instruction, western education was vehicled by English language as its medium. The adoption of English language as the medium of instruction in western system of education as well as the lingua franca of the British colony assisted the language to prosper. The Muslims who initially objected to western system of education later adopted it for them to be able to get the available 'white collar jobs' by then, and for them to contribute meaningfully to the socio-political and economic development of the country. In this wise, the Muslims are expected to acquire knowledge of Arabic to perform their religious rituals, and to acquire a European language to be able to perform their civic duties as citizens of their nation.

In addition to the above, in some countries like Pakistan, which have local languages and a national language, a child has to learn his local language, his national language, an European language, and his religious language – Arabic. In Nigeria, English language is regarded as the nation's second language, while the use of the mother tongue is approved as the medium of instruction at the early stages of primary education. In the same vein, the National Policy on Education approves acquisition of one other language of the country other than the mother tongue, when it says:

In addition to appreciating the importance of language in an educational process, and as a means of preserving the people's culture, the Government considers it to be in the interest of national unity that each child should be encouraged to learn one of the three major languages other than his own mother tongue. In this connection, the government considers the three major languages in Nigeria to be Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba (N.P.E, 1981:9).

The greater part of the Muslim world today thus consists of populations which speak a diversity of languages. Urdu and Bengali are the common languages of the Muslims in the South-Asian sub-continent, while Swahili and Hausa are common among the countries to the south of Sudan apart from Arabic and a European language which are important languages for them as well.

Another trend in the history of multilingualism among Muslims was the imposition of intermediary languages. This is true of the Persians who out of tribal chauvinism after capturing India imposed Persian as the official language of the Muslim rulers of India and their language of culture and education. Same was the case in Albania where Turkish language was imposed and Albanian language was completely banned from schools. The shortcoming of this type of language policy is aptly described by Syeed (1995) when he writes:

That this language policy blocked the communication of Islamic teachings among the masses is evident from the low percentage of Muslims in India and the lack of literature in the regional languages despite more than 600 years of Muslim rule in India. Soon after the Muslims lost their power, Persian also fell from grace....because the patrons of Persians did not realize that an intermediary foreign transplanted language could not be imposed for long and that the best media for Islamic language were the languages of the people alongside the language of the Qur'an.

From the above, it becomes manifest that the use of local languages as the medium of Islamic culture is essential, while the language of the Qur'an could not also be neglected. Upon all, Muslims had made indelible and remarkable contributions to the promotion of multilingualism all over the world lexically, grammatically and contextually.

THE COG IN THE WHEEL OF MUSLIMS' LINGUISTIC CONTRIBUTIONS: THE NIGERIA EXAMPLE

From all indications, the fear of the Muslims lies not on the number of languages to be acquired by them, but on the effect of the languages acquired on their religion. Though, the colonial masters promoted the European languages, the Christian Missionaries were the major promoters of the languages. Their arrival marked the establishment of the Western system of education, which they monopolized for many decades. In those days, reading and writing were religiously connotated. According to Ayandele (1966), education in those days meant Bible knowledge, Christian ethics, Christian moral instruction, Christian literature, some arithmetic, languages and craft, all geared in the direction of producing Christian who could read the Bible. That western education through which English language could

be acquired was aimed at converting Muslims into Christianity was confirmed by James Johnson when he said: "Our desire is to get as much as we can of our religion into Muhammedan (sic) scholars before they leave school." (Gbadamosi, 1978: 128).

The association of Christianity with English language made the Muslims looked at Western education with contempt and so, the Muslims were lackadaisical and unenthusiastic to the learning of English as a language. To add to this, many erroneous and hostile texts about Islam were written in English. The translation of the Qur'an into English by M.S. Cole did contain a number of erroneous and un-Islamic assertions. Also, derogatory statements against Islam were said to have been uttered by those who administered schools where English language was taught. Muslims were being described as primitive, obstacle to the progress of civilization and all that is pure, holy and noble. Rev. M.J. Luke was said to have declared Islam as a religion that did not do any good for the country and did not teach the people anything whatsoever (Gbadamosi, 1978). Little wonder then that the Muslims felt reluctant to allow their children learn the language of those who showed such a great hatred any enmity to their religion. Those who did so did it at the expense of their religion. This explains why in Ceylon, the Muslims refused to have anything to do with the Western education of the Island up to the 19th century. The Muslims' resistance to Western education and its language of instruction was much felt in Northern Nigeria where Clarke (1982) observes that:

Out of the estimated 12 million people in Northern Nigeria in 1952, only about a quarter of the Muslims had a basic competence in English, while in Kano, ...only about 23,000 out of 3 million people were literate in English, and of these 50 percent were from other parts of Nigeria.

The *laissez-faire* attitude of the Muslims to acquisition of English language persisted at independence era of Nigeria even with the introduction of Islamic Religious Knowledge and Arabic into the Western curriculum. This attempt was seen by them as an attempt to lure them into accepting western education, or how could Islam be studied in 'Christian' schools and in English, the 'Christian' language. With the use of English as the medium of instruction for teaching Islamic Studies, the Muslims are thus rendered into relying on secondary sources to tap their needed information, while Arabic is relegated to the lowest ebb. This consequently leads to production of graduates of Islamic Studies who could not recite the Qur'an in its original language. In other words, the rate at which English as a language is elbowing out Arabic from the school system leads to production of half-baked Islamists who rely on texts written by orientalist whose works are hostile, contumacious and fallacious to Islam and are capable of polluting the minds of Muslims against Islam.

As Muslims were pessimistic of adopting English as a language but were later conditioned to accepting it, the war against Arabic became imminent in Nigeria that the powers that be decided to erase the impact of Arabic from the sphere of public in the country. The first step taken in this direction became manifest in the elevation of French above Arabic in the basic school curriculum. Initially, Arabic and French assumed the same status of optional subjects, but later, the latter was elevated. The 1998 revised version of the National Policy on Education specifically mentions it that it is desirable of every Nigerian to speak French, and that French shall be the second language in Nigeria and shall be made compulsory in schools to ensure smooth interaction with neighboring countries (National Policy on Education, 1998: 9). The reason for making French a second official language is not tenable to us. If it is for that single reason, we want to strongly submit that Arabic too deserves that better treatment. Ogunbiyi has rightly observed that Arabic is the mother tongue of a Nigerian ethnic group known as Shuwa Arabs who lived in Dikwa, Gamboru, Ngala

and Gajibo in Borno State (Ogunbiyi, 2005: 19). Apart from this, the language deserves to be accorded a serious status as it is equally an international language. Learning of Arabic by Nigerians will further facilitate better interaction of the country with many Arabic speaking countries which share socio-political and cultural affinity with Nigeria. The position of the country could further be enhanced among some other international organizations like the United Nations Organization (U.N.O) the African Union (A.U) and the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (O.P.E.C) , Organization of Islamic Congress (OIC), where Arabic is a working language. The nation also stands the chance of benefiting greatly from the Arab countries which have recorded giant strides in the area of petro-chemical industry. This could be effectively done through exchanging of ideas and experiences which could only be possible in the absence language barrier (Bidmus, 1991: 5).

It is however disheartening to notice that rather than according Arabic the desired status, the new policy on basic education does not allow it to be taught in the first six years of basic education, whereas French becomes a compulsory subject right from basic four and up to Basic nine. Arabic however surfaces from Basic Seven upward as an elective subject. Apart from this, some people embarked on campaign of calumny against the language, especially the Arabic inscription on the nation's currency until it was finally removed from the currencies by the then Central Bank Governor, Prof. Charles Chukwuma Soludo.

MUSLIM AND MULTILINGUALISM: THE WAY FORWARD

It is our considered opinion that Muslims should relentlessly learn, study and master all available languages be they local, national or international. They stand the chance of performing their religious roles through languages acquired by them and they become vaccinated against the evils of the people whose language they understood. The involvement

of Muslims in promoting multilingualism would help them to fulfill the following objectives:

(a) Correcting wrong information about Islam:

There are literatures written in different languages by non-Muslims on Islam and Muslims, which contain damaging and insulting information about Islam and Muslims. The only means of identifying and rectifying such fallacious information is to be versed in such languages. It has been observed that other faith communities are taken advantages and opportunities of the secularist worldview of the philosophy of education to implant the Christian religious ethics and norms in the methodology, content, philosophy and purpose of education to the detriment of Muslims. A good example of this is cited by Oloyede (2000) who observed that the Christian leaders in Nigeria played pioneering roles in the development of Yoruba language, hence “Sunday” becomes translated to Yoruba as “Ojo Aiku” (Resurrection day), “Monday”, “Ojo Aje” (Day of Marketing), “Wednesday” as “Ojo Eeru” (Day of Ashes – Ash Wednesday) and “Friday” as “Ojo Eti” (Day of Retardation). Friday is so derogatorily translated in view of its uniqueness to the Muslim world.

(b) Rendering Islam related words and terms in Islamic manner:

There is no doubt that Muslims have been carried away consciously or otherwise by following the rendition of non-Muslims in some Islam related words or phrases. This is mostly common in the beautiful names, which have been mutilated by their biblical equivalents. This is equally the observation of Al-Faruqi who says:

Muslims are particularly prone to having their beautiful Islamic names mutilated, because of the general ignorance of Arabic or the difficulties of transliteration. Names which have a Western equivalent (Yusuf, Ya'qub, Ishaq, Yunus, Musa, Ibrahim, etc)

are hastily changed in their Biblical equivalents (Joseph, Jacob, Isaac, Jonah, Moses, Abraham, etc), without awareness that these Biblical personalities represent entirely different meanings to the Christian and /or Jews than the Qur'anic names do to the Muslim (Al-Faruqi, 1995: 10).

It therefore becomes pertinent to render Islam related words and phrases in Islamic manner rather than blindly imitating or making assumed popular equivalents of such names, terms or words.

(c) Correcting wrong spellings and meanings:

Influenced by local languages and mother tongue, many Islamic names are wrongly spelt. It thus becomes imperative for the Muslims to correct such in line with the generally approved transliteration format. As such Mecca should be corrected to Makkah, Mohammed to Muhammad, Koran to Qur'an and Hegira to Hijrah. Also, such wrong dictionary meanings as reference to "Allah" as "Muslim God" (See Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English) and to Muhammad as the founder of Islam, must be corrected accordingly.

(d) Applying Arabic Words/Phrases in Translation

In his 'Toward Islamic English, Al-Faruqi (1995) rightly observes that many Arabic words are not easily translatable without distorting or losing the original taste of such words. To guard against this, transfer of the actual word in its original language is demanded. While doing this, endnote or footnote is required for further explanation of the word or phrase concerned.

THE TASK AHEAD

Apart from the rectification of the anomalies of some languages as they affect their religion, Muslims the world over have some major tasks

ahead of them for them to regain their past glory of linking the past with the present. The tasks include:

i. The Challenge of Translation

Muslim scholars' relentless efforts led to the discovery of the literary and scientific legacy of ancient civilizations of Greece, Persia and India. Over a period of centuries, they learnt, translated and commented on the works of these civilizations. Through translation, works of the ancient civilizations were preserved. If the works had not been translated and developed by the Muslims, many of them would have been lost or destroyed. The European nations equally adopted the same method in the 12th and 13th centuries when they embarked on translation of the Muslim works into Latin. For example, in 1144C.E, Jabir ibn Hayyan's book on alchemy, "The Composition of Alchemy" was translated into Latin. Also, Gerard of Cremona, who was famous for his translations of Arabic scientific works, translated Jabir's work "Book of Seventy" into Latin. Ar-Razi's book, which runs into twenty volumes, was equally translated into Latin in the 13th century. Also, Ibn Sina's greatest works were translated into Latin, while his "Al-Qanun fit-Tib "Canon of Medicine" was said to have been translated 87 times all or in part (Lemu, 1990). Contemporary Muslim scholars need to be alive to the task of translating from Arabic into local, national or international languages and vice versa. To do this effectively, they need to acquire proper mastery of the language they translate to or from.

ii. The Challenge of Publication

Muslims did not become great only by their translation works, but also by their contributions to literary activities in all fields of learning. In the present dispensation, Muslims need to rise to the task of producing and publishing texts not only on languages but also in all other areas of specialization. Through this, misinformation about Islam will be corrected and the true nature of the religion will be portrayed.

It needs to be mentioned that some prescribed English textbooks in our schools contain unwarranted provocative expressions as well as bad image of Muslim names. An excerpt from the Macmillan Primary English Course Pupils Book 4 is used to confirm this stand.

THE STORY OF ALAKE

Alake was a beautiful woman, and her husband, Olu, was a prince. They had a son whom they named Dele. In a nearby village, there lived a wicked magician named Ali. Ali already had many wives but not contented. When he heard about Alake, he wanted her to be his wife, too. He dressed himself as a holy man, and went to her house. He told her to follow him. Alake was afraid to disobey a holy man. So, she went with him. Ali quickly changed her into a dog and carried her away to his village. When Ali got to his home in the village of Ifon, he changed the dog back to Alake (Unit 11, Pp. 53).

From the above, Ali, a Muslim name and the name of the fourth Rightly Caliph in Islam was painted black as a womanizer, a deceitful man, a wicked magician and someone who destabilized families around. More derogatory images of Islam are contained in Books four and five of the same authors and such Yoruba books as "Owo Eje," "Iyawo Alarede" and a host of others which are not only hostile to Islam, but are prone to ethnic chauvinism and religious cataclysm. To check this anomaly therefore, Muslim scholars are seriously requested to start writing texts devoid of the shortcomings of the non-Muslim writers.

iii. Establishment of Schools and Universities

In order to create Islamic environment for learning different languages and promoting multilingualism, Muslims need to complement efforts of the government by establishing schools and universities especially now that it is conspicuously manifest that government alone could not provide for all its citizens educationally. In Islamic history, the schools of Basrah, Kufah and Baghdad were established for the promotion of Arabic language. It is when schools and universities are established that Muslims could design their language policy for such schools and the opportunity for learning European language, Islamic language and African languages will be enhanced.

If the above could not be easily attained, we suggest that students of a particular language be made to undertake certain compulsory courses in another language. For instance, students of Arabic should go and minor in French and vice-versa. Also, there is serious need for the Arabic Language Village at Ngala and the Nigerian French Village in Badagry to come together for the purpose of facilitating multilingualistic collaborative works among them through exchange programmes.

Students of languages must be motivated by the governments of the countries whose languages are studied by providing them with relevant teaching aids, scholarships, textbooks and other instructional materials. Such students must be encouraged to have at least three month visit to the countries whose language they are studying.

CONCLUSION

From the discussion so far, it is clear that Muslims had in one time been in the forefront of the promotion of multilingualism. They became disappointed at the rate of misinformation about their religion in their bid to learn foreign languages. While kicking against them, they stuck to Arabic as if they were glued to it. When later they opened their minds again, they started studying foreign languages at the expense of

their religious language. The liberation of the Muslims in the contemporary world lies in their studying languages, Islamizing them and presenting them in the manner that suits their religious taste. This can best be done by including local, national and international languages into the Arabic school curricula, embarking on book writing and establishing schools and universities. Through this, integration of religion into linguistics will be possible and Muslims will be contributing to the socio-political and economic affairs of the country.

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