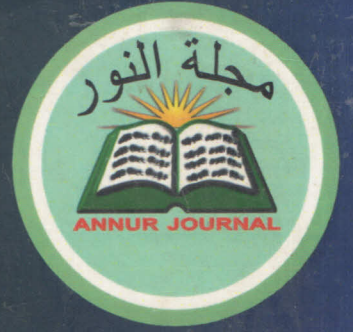




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مجلة اللغة العربية والدراسات الإسلامية

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قسم الدراسات العربية

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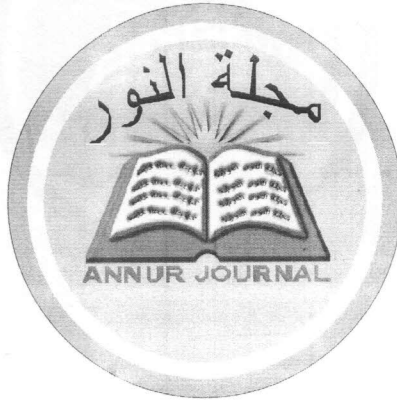
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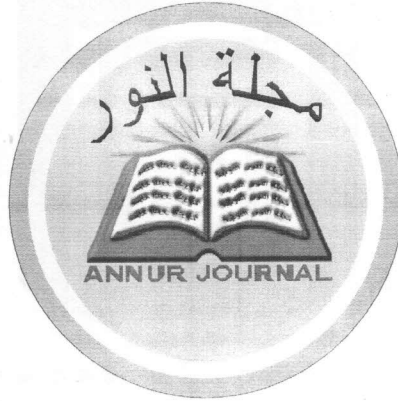
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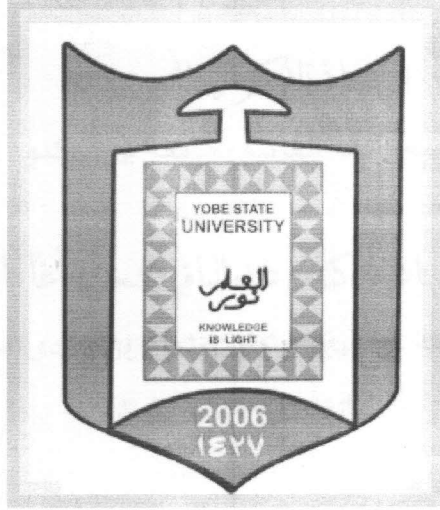
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**(1) MODERN TRENDS IN WEST AFRICAN ARABO-ISLAMIC  
SCHOLARSHIP IN THE CONTEMPORARY PERIOD**

By

**ALIY ABDUL WAHID ADEBISI***Department of Arabic,  
University of Ilorin, Ilorin***Abstract**

There was a general stagnation in the intellectual vitality of the Arabic culture until the close of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The 19<sup>th</sup> century however signaled the rebirth of the Arabic culture which started in Egypt and from there it spread gradually in varying degree to the rest of the Arab world. This cultural resurgence with its full import on the Arab Muslim society gave rise to Arab national consciousness and has spillover effect in the Sub Saharan region. This paper examines the dynamics of the Arab cultural resurgence which has found expression in continuity and change particularly on the West African scene up to the contemporary period.

**Continuity and Changes in Arabic Literary Culture**

In modern Arabic literary culture, the close interaction between literature and socio-political issues makes it difficult to isolate one from the other. Since literature mirrors life of a particular society in a given period of time, the importance of the socio-cultural dimension of the society is particularly relevant in dealing with human experience and derives its significance from probing it.

The renewed contact with the West kindled in average Arab the extent of their backwardness in contrast with the advancements taking place in the Europe. By 18<sup>th</sup>



century, the clerics had laid the foundation for the revival of the Arabic language and despite its originally religious orientation, this revival contributed a great deal to the creation of modern Arabic literature.

It is equally noteworthy here that the adoption of the Western literary modes came much later than that of western technology or even western thought. This was because of the earlier inherent difficulty in adapting to the alien cultural products as literature with its infinitely subtle and complex elements, which requires not only a thorough and intimate knowledge of a foreign language, but a complete readjustment or reeducation of sensibility.<sup>(2)</sup> Westernization in Turkey had profound impact upon Indian Muslims. They, too, thought of changing their lifestyle and sought to establish cultural link with the West as they adopted European cultural values.

### Arabo-Islamic Cultural Awareness and Neo-Classicism in Afro-Arab World

There was the quest for cultural identity, heart searching, and at times agonizing self-analysis to which the Arabs were driven through their interactions with the western culture. All these kept reflecting in the works of the literati. The stirrings of nationalism, in the form of rediscovery of the Classical Arab literary heritage, which coincided with the wave of religious revivalism in Egypt, led by the intelligentsia who were concerned with reviving the social, political, and more importantly cultural structure of the country. They had the task of establishing the basic principles of Egyptian enlightenment: the rediscovering of the true spirit of Arab cultures and its historical links with other world cultures and the analysis of its relation to new aspirations and demands.

These thinkers, beginning from say Muhammad 'Ali, formed the crop of precursors of the Egyptian Arab culture whose ideology later influenced contemporary Arab literati such as Taha Husayn, 'Abbas Mahmoud al 'Aqqad, Ibrahim 'Abdel Qader al Mazini, Abdel Rahman al Rafe'i and host of others. This gave rise to the neo-classicism in the Arabic literature of the nineteenth century.<sup>(3)</sup>

Their ideology was partly lies in the dialogue they encouraged between Arab culture and that of the rest of the world. Their goal was the invigoration of Arab culture, which they hoped would lead to the establishment of the Arab identity not only in Egypt but throughout the Arab nations. Their loyalty to Arab traditions could be more discernible in their literary writings, which were aimed at enhancing and renewing the tradition while looking into the future.

Al Aqqad, for instance, engaged in comparative study of the Islamic and Western political and philosophical thinking with a view to studying Islamic thought through the introduction of challenging Western ideas. However, he never lost faith in the capacity of Arab culture to renew itself, develop, and modernize in the face of such challenges; and it was to the Arab literature past and contemporary, that he always returned bringing with him an established interest in Western culture. Appealing to fostering nationalism, these

nationalist movement icons worked towards restoring to the people a sense of pride in themselves, though combining between their traditions and that of Western thought.

With the attempt towards rethinking classical Arabic literary culture, Arabic literature witnessed a dramatic change and continuity as poetry, for instance, metamorphosed from one school to another, all in the bid to transcend the considered period of stagnation in the literary culture. Nevertheless, the neo-classicism dominated the poetic creativity from the last decade of the nineteenth century through the 1920s, and has never really died out.<sup>(4)</sup> This literary ideology was not however, went unchallenged especially by the group of *avant – garde* poets and critics, both in Egypt and in North America, who began their direct attacks on them. These émigré poets in America were led by Gibran Khalil Gibran. Besides, the Egyptian school popularly known as *Diwan* also launched attack on the neo-classicists whose aim was to revolutionize the stable emphasized the subjective element of experience.<sup>(5)</sup>

In short, from America to Egypt, the Arab Romantic Movement spread to other Arab countries wherever there were acute feelings of deprivation, or of a discrepancy between aspiration and reality, especially on the personal and social plane.<sup>(6)</sup> In 1920, *al Rabitah al Qalamiyyah*, (lit. Pen League) a literary society which had a deep impact on modern Arabic literature, was founded in New York. Its members were Gibran, who was elected president, Nu'aymah Abel Messih Haddad, Illia AttaAllah, William Katzefflis, Nassib Arida and Rashid Ayoub. The members of *Al Rabitah* effected a revolution in Arabic literature to be compared with that of the English and French Romantics a century later.<sup>(7)</sup> Every year *al Saih* an Arabic newspaper in New York issued a literary review in which they all contributed. In 1921, *al Rabitah* published an anthology, which contained poems, stories, and essays by its members. Nu'aymah's introduction was the manifesto of this late Romantic Movement.<sup>(8)</sup>

### Arabic Literary Heritage in Contemporary Nigeria

The Arabic literary heritage of Nigerian authorship has witnessed a tremendous development since it started some nine centuries ago, and continued developing with Islam as its primary focus. But following the advent of British colonialism at the turn of the twentieth century, Arabic learning in Nigeria began to be influenced by the Western system of education, which eventually reduced the heavy influence of Islam over Arabic literacy. Arabic literature began to provide a medium through which members of Nigerian society strive to understand themselves and their environments. Thus, Nigerian Arabic literature started bearing a new outlook in addressing socio-political and economic issues, some of which are related to religious orientation.

The contemporary literary works of some Nigerian Arabic writers who began to engage societal and cultural themes and issues showing that the development of *national literature* in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century pose a significant challenge to the religious

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orientation of the Muslim scholars, leading to a paradigm shift away from the ancient preoccupation with religious subjects matter to new engagement with literary genres.

The new trend in Arabic literary production acquires the character of Nigerian national literature in its portrayal of Nigerian life, leading one writer to describe it as "Nigerian Literature in Arabic."<sup>(9)</sup> Yet despite these changes in the new Arabic literature of Nigeria authorship, one still notices religious elements in their writings such as allusions to or direct quotations from the Qur'an.

The pioneers of the new Arabic literary trend mostly comprise of the Nigerian Arabic scholars who attended universities both at home and abroad, beginning from the 1930s. They were exposed to the cultural and intellectual values so closely related to the Western literary models that later came to influence their writings, as well as their teaching careers in Nigeria's universities and other institutions of higher learning. They came back with new ideas and thoughts born out of their various experiences. They tend to conceptualize literature as a means of conveying primarily an experience that is intrinsically valuable, pleasurable, and enriching human life with insights.

Although literature may differ from one society to the other, it usually reflects the pattern of life that exists in such society, including its problems and aspirations. Literature is an important tool for social education and cultural understanding, which can only be garnered through literary appreciation. This literary appreciation is an attempt to explore and penetrate the mind of the writer by identifying what really prompted him to write and the content of the literary piece. The new Nigerian Arabic writings have contributed to the understanding of the contemporary Nigerian society.

The new Nigerian Arabic literary works have equally explored social ills and how to solve them. The anthologies of Isa Alabi Abubakar are good examples here. In Nigeria today, there is what a writer describes as 'culture of corruption' which has eaten deep into the fabrics of the nation with negative consequences on national growth and development. By this critical portrayal of the "culture of corruption" in Nigeria, some of these Arabo-Islamic literati demonstrate how the new Arabic literature tackles social problems. They follow the recent examples of artists becoming social crusaders and political mobilizers who add more values to their callings and contribute to national development.

Contemporary Nigerian Arabic literati have understood that while literature portrays life of a particular society, it equally assumes the role of teaching values as well as criticizing the social ills of the same society. Thus, literature is considered social crusader that opened new vistas in the social development of contemporary Nigeria. Although the new Arabic literary writings are mostly concerned with the everyday life of the average Nigerian in the political and social aspects, it is also true that Islam has remained a crucial factor in the socio-economic and political development of Nigeria.

A study of Islamic cultural heritage found in the Arabic literary works of contemporary Nigerian literati contribute to the thorough understanding of the social,



psychological, and intellectual life in Nigeria. Yet the new Arabic literature is still different because of its attention to secular subject matter. For example the contents of the *Suba'iyyat* and *al Riyadh* of Isa Alabi Abubakar show that, apart from some religious topics, the poet discusses issues such as the problem of June 12 general election in Nigeria, ethno-religious fracas in Plateau State, terrorism, globalization, Palestinian-Israeli war, etc.

Also in his *al Riyadh*, the poet treats subjects such as morality, politics, and nationalism. Umar Ibrahim also shared similar experience in his popular *Hadiqat al Azhaar* where he treats nationalism, patriotism, as well as other related social issues. The Nigerian Arabic literary writers sought to break away from the Arabian aesthetic values and ideologies.

Instead of blending into Arab cultural homogeneity, the new Nigerian Arabic literati emphasize greater diversity and hybridization of subject matter; they also increase experimentation and innovation in their pursuit of more authentically Nigerian and by implication African models, worldviews and cultural essences. Thus they contribute to replacing imported structures of privilege with more democratic and populist forms of consciousness.<sup>(10)</sup>

The following excerpt is from Abdur Rahman Zakawy's poem titled 'ila abna' *Yuruba ajma'in* (To the Entire Yoruba Race)<sup>(11)</sup>:

إلى أبناء يوربا أجمعين	إلى كم نشتكى وبها ثبورا
نعيش بارضنا عيشا أسيرا	ونطرد من مساكننا جبورا
ومن أنهارنا نسقي حميما	ألم نشعر بأحداث شعورا
نقهقر عن سيادة كل يوم	فشت أخبارنا فشقوا نصيرا
ألسنا قبل حاضرنا رجالا؟	ولم أر بيننا فطنا بصيرا
أصرنا أمة عمياء عفوا؟	أمكم من يبين لي أمورا
إلى أبناء يوربا أجمعين	لنعرض ذكرها فورا جديرا
ففي نيجيريا أمم ثلاث	ويوربا إيبو آخرها ظهيرا
وأولاهما وأكثرها هوسا	رئيسا بالتجبر بل أمير
أبت أولاهما إلا تكون	وكانت يوربا شيئا حقيرا
وكانت قوم إيبو بالنيابة	ويتخذون من قومي وزيرا
تصبرنا على الأحداث قسرا	

#### Translation

#### To the entire Yorubas

We are living a life of captivity in our land  
Till when shall we continue distressingly crying woe?  
We are made to drink hot water from our own rivers  
We are being forcibly chased out of our residences  
Everyday we retrogress in leadership  
Don't we have feelings of the sad events?



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etic values and  
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opulist forms of  
titled 'ila abna'

Aren't we great men before?

By then our fame was widely spread

Have we become a blind nation?

I don't see a wise and discerning person among us

To the entire Yorubas:

Is there any in your midst who can explain things to me?

Nigeria is a country of three nations

Mentioning them here earnestly is highly required

The first and most populous is Hausa

Followed by Yorubas and lastly the Igbos

The first nation insisted only on becoming rulers

By force, or [becoming] commanders

The Igbos used to deputize;

While the Yorubas are reduced to contemptuous nothingness

In another poem on the 10th year anniversary of the controversial annulment of the presidential election allegedly won by the late Mashood K. O. Abiola, Isa Alabi Abubakar composed these seven<sup>(12)</sup>

لما أهان طغائنا مشهودا	يا قوم كنا في البلاد شهودا
رفعوه حسب مكانه محمودا	ورموا في جب المنية بعدما
قعر السجون وكيّله قيسودا	في يونيو انتخبوا رئيسا عرشه
ذات البرائن والنفوذ قيرودا	في يونيو جعل الطغاة أسدا
أرض الضغينة والنزاع جحودا	في يونيو جعل الشرار بلادنا
نحسا وترجى أن تكون سعودا	في يونيو ظهرت سياستهم لنا
(مشهود) هل يرضى الممات حسودا؟	قد مر عقد بعد ظلم طغائنا

My people, we are all living witness in the country

When our oppressors disgraced Moshood

He was thrown into the dungeon of death

After he had been honorably elevated

In June a president was elected but his throne

Was a prison cell where he was held captive

In June the tyrants turned our lions--

Once powerful and influential—into monkeys

In June the evil doers of our country turned

The land into rancor and strife

In June their politics toward us become clear

Sad, when it could have happy

A decade has passed after the oppression of our tyrants

O Moshood, does death please with envious?

### Economic Phenomenon

The role of economy in determining the development of any society cannot be overemphasized. The living standard of any nation depends on the level of its economic development particularly in this era of globalization. This in turn determines the political and cultural structure of the society.

The poems of Abubakar Isa Alabi explores some of the economic problems confronting Nigeria as a result of poor management of the country's abundant petroleum reserves. Abubakar describes periodic shortage of petroleum products in Nigeria. He wondered how a country that produces petrol could still suffer shortage of the product, while other petrol-producing countries have been enjoying good living standard. The following lines are from his poem titled *azmat bitrul* (the petrol crisis):

طوب هذا الزمان سكّنت الصوت \*\* فماذا يقال بالغضب؟  
وأهبطوا (نير) في الحضيض فلا \*\* قيمة للمال ساعة الطلب  
بلادنا ناقصة مباركة \*\* لها فصال لذيذة الحلب  
لكنها تستدرّ هافنة \*\* دون سواها بقوة الغلب  
ونحن حلّ بها نعيش أخى \*\* عيش غريب مشرّد وصب

### Translation

The misfortunes of this period have made voices silent

For what can one say in anger?

They have caused Naira's precipitous fall to the ground

Their currency has no value when needed

Our country is a blessed camel

She has off-springs with delicious milk

Except that the benefit (of the milk) goes a faction

But not to her—on account of an overwhelming compulsion

And we inhabitants of the country are living, O Brother

The life of a banished stranger

Abubakar composed these lines in response to a request for a poem describing the economic problem of the country.<sup>(13)</sup>

### Conclusion

Arabic learning came into contact with the western system of education in Nigeria, and some Nigerian scholars of Arabic embraced the study of Arabic and Islam from the orientalist perspective, thereby changing their original orientation. Thus, Nigerian Arabic literature started wearing a new outlook by addressing social, political and economic issues in ways devoid of religious orientation.

Using Arabic for literary expression and communication is timely in contemporary Nigeria. Arabic has been divorced from the yolk of exclusive religious usage. The gate of religious conservatism has been challenged and opened to a new literary world in the same way that the gate of *ijtihad* in Islamic jurisprudence has been reopened. One significant

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طوب هذا الزمان  
وأهبطوا (نير) في الص  
بلادنا ناقة  
لكنها تستدره  
ونحن حل بها نعيش

outcome of the new Arabic literary writings is the presentation of Nigerian *national* literature, which has hitherto predominantly expressed in English, to the Arabic-speaking world for appreciation and comparative studies. By using Arabic to express Nigerian literature, Nigerian Arabic literary writers contributes to what a writer describes as the "store house of human experience and an expression of inner feeling transmitted to others in such a way that makes them share voluntarily the experience of the artist poet or prose-writer."<sup>(14)</sup>

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