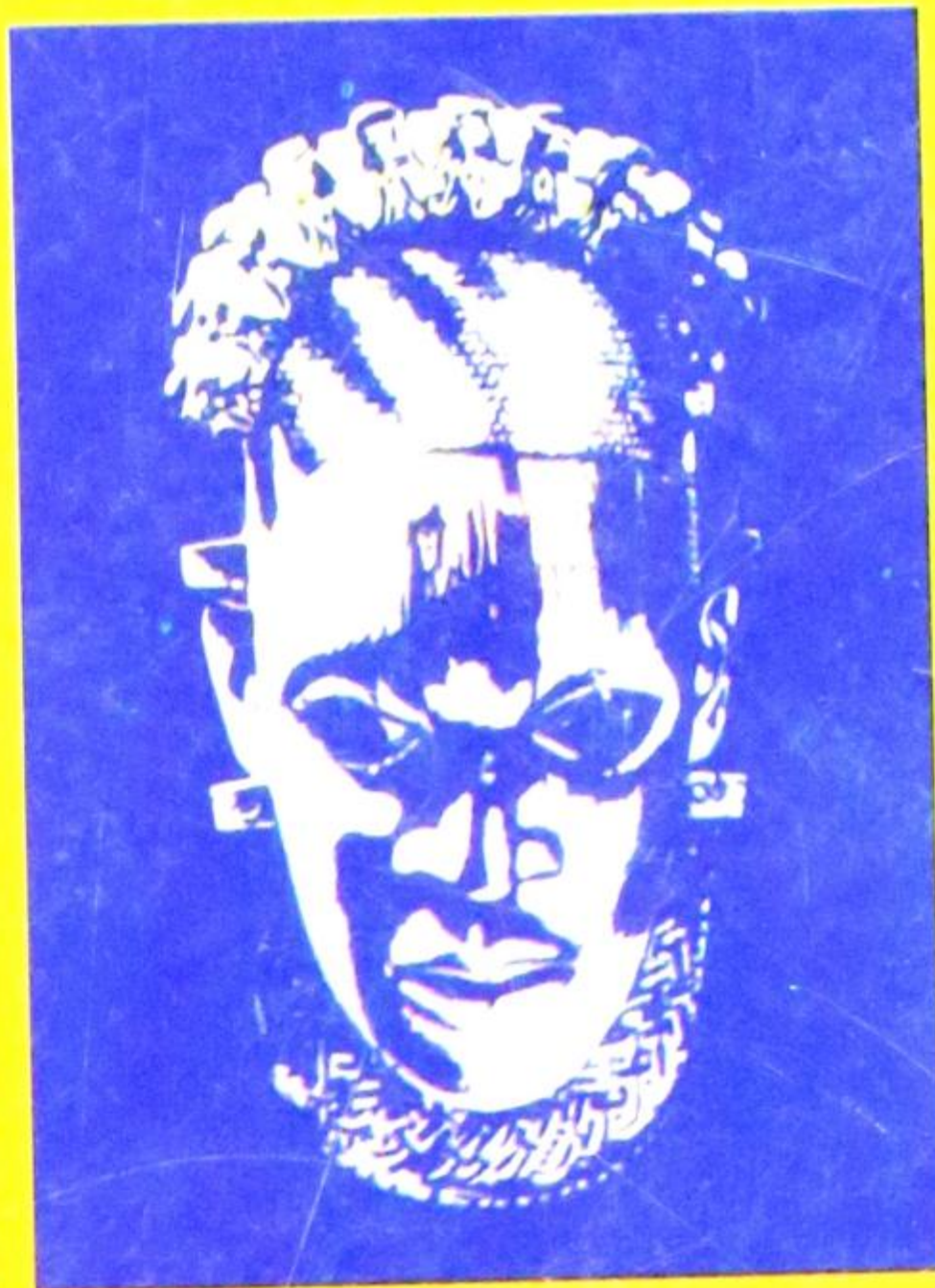




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FROM THE EDITOR

It is with great pleasure that we present to you this edition of **Ilorin Journal of History and International Studies** (IJOHIS). We had a plethora of submissions bothering on History and related themes. The papers that were finally selected by the Editorial Board addressed a range of issues that are seminal to our understanding of contemporary society. They also reflect the dynamics of the utility of history in an age of globalization. We thank you fervently for your interest and patronage of IJOHIS.

Dr. S.O. Aghalino
Editor (IJOHIS)

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THE ROLE OF AJAMI SCRIPT IN THE PRODUCTION OF KNOWLEDGE IN ILORIN EMIRATE SINCE THE 19th CENTURY

Ibrahim Abdulganiy Jawondo*

Abstract

Ajami script accompanied the establishment of Islam and Islamic scholarship in Nigeria. However, the attention of scholars of related disciplines has not been adequate on this subject. In Nigerian societies where Islam and Islamic scholarship were established, the first form of writing that was developed before proper use of Arabic language was Ajami script. That is, using Arabic letters to write indigenous languages. The Ajami script survives to the present day in some Nigerian societies and has been a good historical source. In Ilorin, some of the scholars that introduced Islam to Ilorin had language barrier with the learners. In some cases, the learners had to learn the language of the teacher first before beginning lessons on Islamic scholarship. However, as they learnt Arabic letters, Ajami scripting begun. It was used to document Islamic lessons, write letters and disseminate Islamic knowledge. This paper traces the origin of Ajami script in Ilorin Emirate and its role in Islamic scholarship and the production of knowledge in general. Using the available manuscripts of scholars, the paper concludes that Ajami script played a significant role in the establishment of Islamic scholarship and general literacy among Muslims in Ilorin since the 19th century.

Key words: Ajami scripting, production of knowledge, Islamic scholarship, Ilorin Emirate, Jama'a, Makondoro

Introduction

Ajami is a corruption of an Arabic word 'AJAM' which, if literarily translated, means 'other languages different from Arabic' but

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written in Arabic script. It is a literary skill that developed among some earliest Muslim elite in Ilorin. *Ajami* script is a product of the introduction of Islam and its scholarship into Ilorin. Ilorin Emirate which was established around the first quarter of the 19th century began as an administration based largely on the Shari'a. However, Islam in Ilorin pre-dated the establishment of an Emirate. Thus, the date for the establishment of Islam and its scholarship in Ilorin is still very remote. However, there were some events in the 17th and 19th centuries which popularized Islam in Ilorin and which might have misled some scholars to believe that it was each of the events that indicated the date of the establishment of Islam in Ilorin.

At this point, before mentioning the events, it is important to stress here that Islam was likely to have been practised in Ilorin since the time when Ilorin was a military camp under the Old Oyo Empire. But since Islam was not popular under the Empire, the Muslims in Ilorin, like other towns and villages under Oyo, must have practised the faith secretly like the Muslims did in the days of ignorance in Mekka. Thus, unlike in other emirates like Kano, Borno, etc., where Islam started with their political leaders and spread down the ladder and within the Emirates, it started in Ilorin among the commoners. The first event that popularized Islam in Ilorin was the establishment of a religious monastery (*ribat*) by Shaikh Al-Tahir Solagberu at Oke-Sunna, where Islamic activities were carried out and Islamic principles adhered to strictly. It was an abode of erudite scholars of different backgrounds to whom learners flocked for Islamic learning, guidance and Sufism.¹

The second event that popularized Islam in Ilorin was the entrance of Shaikh Alimi, a Fulani man, into Ilorin from Yoruba land. With his sojourn in Ilorin, the number of Muslims and Islamic scholars in Ilorin increased because of his large retinue. More and more learners, teachers and admirers were attracted by his erudition, piety and effective and efficacious spirituality.²

The third event was the establishment of an Emirate over Ilorin and its environs. This was as a result of the military victory of the Muslim *Jamaa* over the 'pagans' symbolized by Afonja, the Aare Onakakanfo.³ The Emirate was, to a large extent, guided by Islamic principles and Qur'anic injunctions. With the establishment of Ilorin

Emirate, the first Emir, Abdulsalam, also took some steps to fraternize with other emirates particularly the Gwandu Emirate for political and spiritual guidance for the survival of the nascent Emirate. For these steps, there were further inflocks of scholars from other emirates into Ilorin who assisted greatly, in the spread of Islam and Islamic scholarship in Ilorin. Among the scholars in this category were Shaikhs Sa'adina, Muhammed al-Takuti, Abubakar Bube, Ibrahim Sarekewu and others. For these efforts, Qur'anic schools became multiplied to the point of attraction that in 1859 Campbell noted that there were numerous Qur'anic schools in Ilorin.⁴

The Origin and Development of Ajami Script in Ilorin

Islam and knowledge are inseparable. The only tool to the effective practice of Islam is knowledge. Thus, believers are enjoined to seek God before the worship of Him. Consequently, the principal source of Islam is the Holy Qur'an written in Arabic. Thus, to get the message therein and the reward of reading it, every Muslim is enjoined to understand the Qur'an. The tool to understanding the Qur'anic is the understanding of the Arabic alphabet which consist of twenty eight letters. Thus, every Muslim scholar must necessarily expose his students to these Arabic letters. It is the understating of the alphabet that gave birth to *Ajami* script.

At this juncture, it is important to stress here that understanding the Arabic alphabet may not necessarily be the only genuine reason for the fast development of *Ajami* script. First and foremost, Arabic alphabet are not synonymous to Arabic as a language; thus understanding the Arabic alphabet could only aid the learning of Arabic as a language. Since, Arabic was a foreign language, understanding it, took sometime. Thus, the vacuum that existed between the proper understanding of the Arabic alphabet and learning and using Arabic as a language was filled by the development of *Ajami* script. According to Aliy-Kamal, Islamic scholarship progressed slowly in the 19th century because most of the students were adults who were married and had to work to feed their families; hence they did not devote full time to learning. There was also a language barrier between scholars who were Hausa and learners who were mostly Yoruba. Thus, students had to learn the language of the

teacher first before or along with the Qur'an. Lastly, the early teachers were non-professionals; they were foremost traders and preachers and then teachers. Thus, their teaching methods were tedious and problematic and so slowed down the pace of learning.⁵

The above views are corroborated by the observation of Yusuf in his study of traditional Quranic schools in Ilorin. He notes that:

It sometimes takes the new intakes between eighteen (18) and twenty two (22) months to be taught Arabic Alphabet in its different forms... because some of them are not usually regular in attendance of the school and also because of the wrong method of teaching usually adopted by Quranic teachers.⁶

Perhaps because of the above reasons or others best known to Danmole, he claims that in spite the efforts of the first two emirs of Ilorin to advance Islamic scholarship among their people, progress was slow and there were few people who could read Arabic texts at the time compared to other parts of the Sokoto Caliphate.⁷ The issue of language will be better appreciated if we remember that *Ajami* script developed and spread widely among the *Makondoro* scholars who until recently had no regard for the knowledge of Arabic grammar. They were known for their antagonistic posture to the learning of Arabic grammar and the like. They composed different songs to support their stand and to convince their students and disciples to stay by them. One of their popular statements against Arabic grammar is 'Nahw' Inawiii'⁸; that is whoever learns Arabic grammar will stomp in Hell fire. Their antagonistic songs include

Awa kewu, kewu yanju
Tiwa yato si kewu Ode oni
Kewu Kef, quf, ake damu enu.⁹

This literally translates to:
We have learnt, and our knowledge is superb,
Our learning is different from the modern Arabic learning
Learning involving *Kef*, *Quf* that are mouthtwisting

They were particularly openly opposed to the learning of Arabic grammar because it was not part of the system of education they received and any attempt to recognize it might mean losing their students.

Furthermore, a close assessment of the manuscripts of some early scholars reflected that at the beginning of the development of *Ajami* script, most users had no skills in the reading and writing of Arabic as a language. However, along the line some users of *Ajami* script started to include Arabic words in their writings. A close analysis of this shows the low standard of Arabic learning amongst them as most words used are either wrongly spelt or used.

The use of *Ajami* script also had the involvement of prolific Arabic users and writers. They got involved in the use of *Ajami* script in their attempt at documenting things in their physical, socio-political environment which did not have Arabic origin or sound.¹⁰ For instance, names of objects, towns, places, houses, and traditional names of individuals, titles of Obas, chiefs etc. were all written in *Ajami* script.

Apart from the slow progress in understanding and writing Arabic language, *Ajami* script might also have developed fast in order to take down notes from the lessons being taught. Another important possibility was reaching large audience with the knowledge of Islam and Islamic sciences since the significant part of the larger population had understood the Arabic alphabet, at least going by the account of Campbell earlier referred to in this paper which reported the growing number of traditional Qur'anic schools and the attendees..

In Ilorin, before the establishment of Islam and Islamic scholarship, there was no record of any form of writing. Thus, a substantial part of its history and activities were lost to the past. However, with Islam and Islamic scholarship and proper understanding of Arabic alphabets, the Muslim elite started to record their learning, transmit knowledge, record events in the society using Arabic alphabets but in the language they understood - Hausa, Nupe, Fulani, Yoruba and later Arabic. With the development of *Ajami* script, it became an important literary tool in the society. It was used to make personal lesson notes; it became a tool for Islamic evangelism,

documentation of important local medicine, events, business transactions and socio-political interactions.

As earlier said, before the establishment of an emirate, Ilorin was a military camp of the Old Oyo Empire.¹¹ This influenced the population of the Yoruba in Ilorin. Further more, since Shaikh Alimi finally moved to Ilorin, after staying in a number of Yoruba towns, some Yoruba people, scholars and students and Fulani men who had sojourned for long in Yorubaland moved to Ilorin with him or joined him. The Yoruba became the majority. The population, to a larger extent, influenced the adoption of Yoruba language as a lingua franca in Ilorin. It is important to stress here that at first, the official language in the palace was Fulfulde with which they interpreted the Qur'an but since the masses were largely Yoruba, the language was eventually adopted. This is not to say that other languages like Hausa, Nupe, Fulfulde, Kanuri, Gwari, etc., were not spoken. Indeed, the Ilorin dialect of Yoruba incorporates parts of other languages of the people that make up Ilorin Emirate - Malians, Sudanese, Nupe, Gobirawa, Fulanis, etc.

Ajami Script and the Production of Knowledge

According to records that are available now, the known early scholar of Ilorin that used *Ajami* script was Shaikh Badmos Omo-Musa Agbaji (d. 1895). He was popularly known for Yoruba Waka lyrics written in Arabic letters and with Arabic rhythm. Others after him who made significant use of *Ajami* script in writing poems and Waka lyrics were Shaikh Muhammad Ajongolo (d.1919), and Shaikh Saadu Kokewukobere (d. 1935) etc.¹² Through them *Ajami* scripting became popular among scholars and students in the emirate and beyond, most especially among Yoruba scholars. *Ajami* scripting was later adopted and widely used among the *Makondoro* scholars. These scholars are noted for wearing big turban and they are commonly seen in the Southwestern Nigeria. The first *Makondoro* scholar in Ilorin, Shaikh Yusuf, hailed from Agbaji, the birth place of Shaikh Badmos Omo-Musa Agbaji, the first known user of *Ajami* script. He was perhaps influenced by the writings of the Shaikh.

As earlier mentioned, *Ajami* script was used by early Ilorin scholars generally to document their thoughts, events, activities,

agreements, interactions, and for dissemination of Islamic knowledge. These areas of usage could be roughly categorized into three: The use of *Ajami* script for letter writing, the use of *Ajami* script to document alternative/traditional medicine and poems, songs, waka lyrics to educate and enlighten the public on the dos and don'ts in Islam.

It is important to stress at this point that although *Ajami* was used as a means of communication through letter writing, it was only popular amongst some early scholars. Such letters were usually very short and the contents were usually partially understood because of lack of standardization. Since the development of *Ajami* script was not the ultimate goal but a means to achieving the goal of Islamisation, little or no attention was paid to its phonology.¹³ However, whatever might be said about *Ajami* scripting, it helped in creating another class of Muslim elite who could communicate with one another through the use of *Ajami* script. It is rather unfortunate that the efforts of scholars at collecting some of these letters have not yielded much fruits because of the apathy of the general public and learners of classical Arabic.¹⁴

Furthermore, upon the development of *Ajami* script, most early learners used it to make jottings usually on the pages of either the Qur'an or any of the materials they were learning, to aid their understanding. Thus, most Qur'an or learning materials used by early students/scholars were full of such jottings in *Ajami* script. This act assisted them greatly in their scholarship.

In the earliest time, Islamic scholars were all-in-all to their students, their disciples and their host communities. They were teachers, fathers, guardians, counsellors, and psychologists. They were medical, political, social and economic advisers as well. Thus, they were usually approached with different problems ranging from religious to economic, social, political, public or private, to which they were expected to proffer solutions. Thus, the Muslim scholars became involved in the search for spiritual and natural healings to some of the diseases that were rampant in their locality such as malaria fever, headache, dysentery, chicken pox, small pox, infertility and infant mortality. Other areas of focus included psychiatric treatment, bed-wetting and seeking leadership position (like Oba, king) and wealth.

The different solutions to some of these problems and others that were initially committed into memories were then written down

with *Ajami* script. So, account of these solutions written in *Ajami* script survives to the present.¹⁵ Even though this account serves very little purpose to us now because of the difficulties in understanding the message in totality, it had served a great deal in promoting scholarship as they taught it to many of their learners. The fact that we could see the account and even discern some messages therein are proofs of the long existence of such alternative medicine and their practitioners.

Islam enjoins the Muslims to document agreement between or amongst themselves regardless of their relationship. The early Muslims in Ilorin, in order to heed this advice, made use of *Ajami* script which was the only means of writing available to them. Although efforts are still on to recover some of these agreements written down in *Ajami* script, the only one available to the researcher could not be used for security purpose. It is an agreement involving extension of credit facilities between two parties. Since there is no record of pay back, I think it is better not to publish such a document. However, the point one is trying to stress here is that, writing an agreement is an act of literacy which was made possible as a result of the development of *Ajami* script among Ilorin scholars of the past.

At this juncture, it is important to emphasize that the literary activities mentioned above which were gained through development of *Ajami* script were secondary to the Muslim scholars. Like the Christian missionary who introduced Western education to Nigerians to win souls for Christ, so was the development of *Ajami* script for the Islamization activities. Thus, the prose, poems, and songs composed in *Ajami* were primarily directed at Islamizing most effectively the early Muslims and converting the non-Muslims. The *Ajami* songs, poems and Waka lyrics were instructions on the five pillars of Islam, articles of faith, Islamic jurisprudence etc. and in particular, they emphasized the existence of God, His unity, Oneness, power, and bearing testimonies to the messengerhood of the Prophet Muhammad on. Abdullahi (P.B.O.H). Another area of focus was the condemnation of societal vices using the Qur'an and hadith as the yardsticks. Such vices included unrestricted mingling of sexes at ceremonies, unrestricted movement of married women in the society, alcoholism, adultery and fornication, theft, backbiting and slandering, rewards and punishments

to the believers and disbelievers respectively etc. For instance, one of the works of Shaikh Badmos goes thus:

Kadupe lodo Oba Alikadiru
Oba to logo to si sogo dara
O sogo O sa wa, Awaje mole
Oseru awon elomin wonje kafira
Otosì wa ka mo fun po tawa lore
katiju kabèru, kase daradara....¹⁶

We should give thanks to Allah, the
Powerful

God, the Gracious, for His grace
By His grace, we are Muslims
He made others to be unbelievers
it is necessary for us to give thanks to
Him for His grace.

We should therefore mellow, fear
Him and be righteous.

From the above, one could understand that the scholar tried to teach some attributes of God [The Powerful, the Gracious, the Creator and the Decider] and the responsibilities expected of a good Muslim; giving thanks to God, mellowing and fearing of God and being righteous. Thus, these types of songs rendered in *Ajami* script promoted Islamic scholarship not only among scholars but the general public who learnt the songs by heart. In fact, oral evidences about these songs and poems led to the search for and discovery of some of them.

Another useful poem is that of Shaikh Muhammad Bello Ajongolo [d.1919] in which he stresses the importance of the Qur'an, the functionality of its knowledge, as well as the messengerhood of the prophet. The poem goes thus:

...Alukurani t'Olohun fun Muhammo
akeinde
Talufa Alimi gbewole yii
Oun na la n lo tee doni

Imo amolo t'Olohun fun Muhammo
akeinde
Talufa Alimi gbe wole yii
Oun naa la n lo tee doni.¹⁷

The Qur'an given to Muhammad, the
last prophet
That Shaikh Alimi brought into this
town (Ilorin)
It's what we are using till date
The functional knowledge given to
Muhammad, the last prophet
That was brought in by Shaikh Alimi
It's still what we are using till date....

Going by the analysis above, it is crystal clear that the development of *Ajami* has led to the production of different knowledge in Ilorin Emirate. The *Ajami* script has been used for different types of literary activities such as letter writing, agreement writing, instructional materials and documentation of knowledge of traditional medicine and other activities. Thus, if *Ajami* script was not developed as at the 19th century much of what we know today about the activities of the early scholars and the happening in their era would not perhaps have been available at all or at best in the secondary form.

Problems and prospects of *Ajami* script

It is important to stress here that through the available *Ajami* scripts, a lot of things about the past are known. It has assisted greatly to spread literacy among people and in a way promoted the speaking of Yoruba language which strengthens the ties among Yoruba Muslim scholars. Talking about the place of *Ajami* literature in South Africa, Haroon writes:

Manuscripts are important because they contain ideas of scholars who have seriously pondered over their subject matter but did not have the opportunity of making them readily available to students or readers. They are important in that they lock away aspects of

the past which can shed light on the present and future. And because of this it is important to scrutinize their authenticity, their relevance, and their content to assess in which way they might shed light on a subject matter¹⁸.

However, in spite of the intrinsic benefits of these *Ajami* scripts, they are not without problems.

First and foremost, most of the *Ajami* scripts are in different patterns. Thus, it is indeed a great task to read them, hence, the viability of the popular Yoruba adage 'Ala Ajemi loma Ajemi re'. That is, only the writer of *Ajami* knows it. Apart from the fact that different spellings were adopted even by an author in a script or different scripts, some *Ajami* scripts contain two or more languages i.e Yoruba, Hausa and Arabic. Thus, this makes the reading more difficult for people who are not proficient in all the languages.

Another important feature of *Ajami* that needs to be mentioned is the inbuilt security. Some scholars particularly those that documented alternative or traditional medicines used phrases which were meant to secure the knowledge from unauthorized persons. In fact, the phrases rendered significant parts of the documents useless in some circumstances.

However, to keep *Ajami* functional, the on-going efforts of scholars at standardizing it should be supported. Scholars like Shaikh Abubakar Agbade of Ilorin and Professor Ahmad Shehu Abdussalam have made efforts in the standardization but their efforts also need to be reconciled.¹⁹ There is the need for Ilorin scholars to break the jin of the general apathy to the collection of *Ajami*/Arabic manuscripts in Muslim societies. The apathy was also reported of South Africa scholars by Haroon when he said:

No concerted effort was made to collect, collate, and catalogue them; the main reason for this is that the community at large is oblivious of the importance of preserving these mss [manuscripts] and texts. Therefore, it is not surprising to find them hidden away in cupboards of individuals without the proper care being taken to preserve them²⁰.

With the wide spread of classical Arabic and the positive change of attitude of the *Makondoro* scholars towards Arabic grammar much needs to be done on how to recruit new students for the use of *Ajami* and on how to recondition the *Mankondoro* scholars to continue to use *Ajami* scripting.

There is also the need to constitute a committee that will comprise individuals with adequate knowledge of some languages used in *Ajami* scripting in Ilorin; Yoruba, Hausa, Arabic, Fulfulde etc. and those versed in traditional medicine so that the knowledge contained in most *Ajami* script will be fully recovered and used for the benefit of humanity.

Conclusion

Ajami script was developed in Ilorin after the introduction of Islam and its scholarship. With the development of *Ajami* script, a group of elite emerged from among the Muslims who used *Ajami* to document their thoughts and events in the society. They went about teaching and learning Islam as a religion and as knowledge. *Ajami* scripting formed part of their methods of spreading Islam and Islamic scholarship. As utility scholars, they used *Ajami* to document knowledge existing in the society. Thus, from the recovered *Ajami* scripts, a lot is discovered about socio-economic, political and religious life of the people of their time. Consequently, one can safely conclude that the development of *Ajami* script facilitated the production of knowledge in Ilorin Emirate since the 19th Century.

Notes and References

- The world *Ajemi* is an acculturated fashion of *Ajami*. Although the two is used in Ilorin, the first is common among the unlettered or the general populace while the second is used by the lettered or the Muslim scholars. *Ajemi* came out of the Ilorin dialect of Yoruba language. It should be noted that the earlier scholars of Ilorin were from different background and of different culture but Yoruba language was second to Islam that unit them. It is not impossible that some scripts could have been writing in other languages and lost

like Nupe poem which was said to have been written by Shaikh Nda Salati.

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 15. See this book for a collection of Ajemi works on traditional medicine. I.A. Bello, Haonu Alulamau Wali Imam, Oshogbo, [nd]
 16. Jimba, Ilorin – **Waka** P. 11.
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