

The Influence of Arabic on Nigerian Literature: a study of selected works of Abubakar Imam in Hausa

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Abstract

The heritage of a people is, without doubt, the bedrock of their identity. The sheer size of the Northern part of Nigeria makes it a very important part of the country. This vast region has been having a common identity forged by literacy in the Arabic language. For many centuries before the coming of the imperialists, Arabic provided universal understanding among people of the Northern Nigeria. It was so important that even the imperial agents studied Arabic language in order to penetrate the culture of the people of the area they wanted to colonize. When the foreign power eventually succeeded in enthroning its own language as the official language, Arabic still remains very visible not only as a religious language but also as a springboard for literary endeavors in both local and foreign languages of the North. This paper therefore intends to study the influence of Arabic on the Nigerian Literature using Magana Jari Ce and Ruwan Bagaja by the renown Hausa writer, late Alhaji Abubakar Imam, as a case study. The paper is divided into: introduction, short biography of Abubakar Imam, Arabic influence on selected stories, general analysis of the stories, conclusion and recommendation.

Keywords: heritage influence, identity, Arabic language, Nigerian literature.

Introduction:

Arabic writing and literature are leading components of Northern Nigerian heritage. Writing in Arabic is so widespread that even the indigenous language, Hausa, and other minority languages were written in ajami (Dr. M.M. Jimba 2010, p. 111) writing non-Arabic languages using Arabic orthography. An in-depth navigation of the culture of the North without some degree of Arabic knowledge is almost impossible. It is this fact that compelled even the early imperial colonialists to equip themselves with the knowledge of Arabic (Galadanchi, S. A. S. 1994, p. 76) to enable them penetrate the Northern region with ease. This makes it practically impossible to divest Northern Nigerian identity from its Arabic heritage.

Literacy had been established in the North long before the coming of the Western education. It became very evident to the colonial masters that there was need for access to the culture of the natives and this could be achieved through encouraging the very few among the natives with the ability to read and write in English to embark on this project. Competition in story writing was introduced after which successful entries were published; this attempt was very successful as, according to Ibrahim A. M. Malumfashi and Aliya Adamu Ahmed, (2007)

The natives came in contact with a whole new world of ideas, while the colonialists used it as a form or an avenue of understanding the mindset, culture and traditions of those they had to live with. (p. 77)

This whole idea of publishing was a very effective stimulus as the exercise was well embraced and it is the more reason why the colonial masters had to use the existing heritage as tool in introducing their own methods and language of education. The leading personnel used in this exploration so as to successfully domesticate Western education were those who were well grounded in Arabic education. This marked the beginning of writing Hausa stories using Roman letters.

This paper intends to study how Arabic has impacted on the selected stories of Imam Abubakar one of the pioneer writers of Hausa stories. His environment was predominantly the Hausa speaking Northern Nigeria. Although he wrote Hausa in Roman alphabets, it is very clear that the corpus of his sources and styles are influenced by Arabic language and literature. The works from which this paper springs are *Ruwan Bagaja* and *Mayana Jari Ce*.

Alhaji Abubakar Imam (1911 – 1981 A.D)

"Imam was a man of many roots; his earliest ancestry could be traced to Dikwa in the former Borno Empire (in the present Borno State). His great grandparents found themselves in the present Niger State, after a migration many centuries before the Sokoto Jihad in 1804

." (Revival of Abubakar Imam, Sunday Trust, Retrieved 13/11/2012)

He was born in Kagara in 1911 A.D. Kagara was a division of Kwantagora Province of old Northern region. The Province, together with some other provinces, later formed what used to be known as North Central State. The area is presently a part of Niger State of Nigeria.

Alhaji Imam trained as a teacher at Katsina Training Centre and thereafter took to teaching at Katsina Middle School in 1932. He wrote his first story *Ruwan Bagaja* when he was just 22 years old. His talent and commitment to creative writing was recognized and appreciated by Dr. Rupert M. East who invited him to Gaskiya Corporation, Zaria where he was exposed to more technicalities of writing. On his return to Katsina he was charged with the responsibility of writing more books. It was then that he wrote *Karamin Sani KunKumi ne* in 1937. Imam was appointed pioneer editor of the popular Hausa newspaper *Gaskiya Ta fi Kwabo*, which first came into circulation in 1939. He was the helmsman of this newspaper for twelve years.

He made his first trip to England in company of some West African Commonwealth journalists in 1943. He was appointed the first chairman of Public Complaints Commission by the North Central State in 1974. In addition to the aforementioned works, he wrote some other works namely *Yakin Duniya na Biyu*, *Tafiya Mabudin Ilimi* and *Tarihin Annabi da Halifofi*. Alhaji Abubakar Imam died on Friday 19th June, 1981 at the age of seventy. (N.N.P.C., *Gabatarwa (foreward)*, 1982, p. 1),

Abubakar Imam was a recipient of many honors including as O.B.E. (Order of the British Empire); C.O.N. (Commander of the Order of the Niger), N.N.M.C., and LL.D. from the University of Ibadan.

Sources of his stories

An irrefutable fact is that Imam's stories are well rooted in both the culture and literature of his traditional environment. He sourced his stories largely from huge volume of narrations made to pupils in Arabic *Islamiyah* schools in the pre-Western education structure of the North. This system is very much in practice in almost every part of the region. Pupils were gathered by their teachers in a spacious field where lessons on many topics were taught in local languages. This practice was not only peculiar to the North but it also cut across West Africa. The difference, however, is that while the tales and lore taught to children in many parts of Africa are purely indigenous to those areas, the stories told to young children in the Hausa-speaking areas are mostly Arabic stories translated and adapted to suit the understanding of the children.

Imam was not only a product of this system, he also acquired quality and advanced knowledge in Arabic and Islamic disciplines before he was introduced to Western Education. His father, Shaykh ^oUthman, was a revered scholar, a respected *imam* and a highly honorable and honored judge. Imam started his early education under the tutelage of his father and had become firmly structured in Arabic and Islamic education before he finally started venturing into Western brand of education. . (Sarumi, A. I., 2012, p. 179) This massive literacy background, to a very large extent, inspired his creativity thereby making his works a true picture of his society.

The mode of his stories

The mode chosen by Alhaji Imam in his stories reveals clear influence of an Arabic literary genre known as *maqamah*, an art that first became popular in the Abbasyd dynasty when Arabic literature blossomed tremendously –accommodating many new genres. It is a genre of Arabic rhythmic prose. (Hans W, 1961, p. 801) The first person who popularized this art was Abul-fadh1 Ahmad bin Al-Husayn Al-Hamadhani popularly called Badee^ouz-Zaman. He was born in the middle of the fourth century A.H. He wrote his *maqamat* in Naysabur and died in 398 A.H. (Ahmad al-Askandary et al. (n. d.) P. 80).

Maqamah is a literary speech meant to be read to the audience in just one seat. Each *maqamah* is prepared in a way that it would be narrated in a short period of meeting. (Dayfi Shawqi, 2005, P. 247) The audience contains, largely, educated people, and its plot is woven around a protagonist with a narrator giving reports on the activities of this main character. In each of the *maqamah* the protagonist always finds himself in a precarious situation but as well always manipulates his ways to get out of problem. The protagonist in most cases disguises his person to conquer his victims, but as the scene approaches its end the narrator uncovers the tricks, makes this known to the protagonist but keeps it, mostly, away from the audience.

This mode was adopted in *Ruwan Bagaja* where Alhaji is the protagonist and Malam Zurke plays the role of a supporting character. The similarity here is that the stories revolve round the two main characters, but in clear contrast to *maqamah*, the protagonist is also the narrator. Also, in *Ruwan Bagaja*, Malam Zurke, and not the audience, is the victim of Alhaji's manipulation. Also the stories here are not rhythmic, but they are scenic in nature. Like in the *maqamah*, they both reconciled at the end of every scene. This is just like the scenario we see in *maqamatul-Hareery* and *maqamatu Badee⁶uz-Zaman al-Hamdhan*y and several other *maqamat*.

Pedagogical traits

This is another direct influence of Arabic literature on the works of Alhaji Imam. Stories in his works are not just told, they are didactic i.e. meant to teach moral lessons. An example of didactic story in *Ruwan Bagaja* is that of his first meeting with Malam Zurke.

Alhaji, a stark illiterate, found himself in the midst of other illiterate people. Because of his ability to recite *Suratul-Fatihah*, he was made the Imam of the village. His cause was further helped by the fact that many recitations are done silently. He was so respected in the village and held in high esteem. Such was the status until Malam Zurke entered the village. After observing a congregational prayer behind the Imam, Zurke was appalled that such an illiterate was made prayer leader. He bared his mind and people were shocked at his observation. Narrating his encounter with Zurke, he says:

“Da gari ya waye aka je gun salla, ya ji ban iya kome ba, sai ya fara sarana gun Sarki, yana cewa a gwada mu das hi a ga wanda ya fi.” (Abubakar. I., 1966, p.8)
The following day we went for prayer; he (Zurke) then discovered that I knew nothing, and thence started condemning me before the King and suggested that competition be organized between us so as to see who is more versed.

Alhaji, however, demonstrated rare courage by accepting to challenge Zurke to a competition. He also insisted that it was to be to the full glare of the villagers. Zurke, in turn, accepted this challenge because of his conviction that Alhaji knows very little.

Unfortunately for Zurke he allowed Alhaji to take the initiative of starting the questioning as he felt there is no question from him he could not answer. This arrogance cost him dearly as Alhaji simply outsmarted him. Exploiting his popularity among the villagers, Alhaji drew a bend on the sand and asked Zurke to identify it and tell people what it meant Zurke faltered by first calling it r (ر), then n (ن). Alhaji now took maximum advantage of the audience and said it was clear Zurke did not know anything as what he wrote is crescent i.e. shape of moon in its first day. The entire audience chorused in affirmation. Zurke was so ashamed and was chased away from the village. The episode reveals how important it is not to be haughty, and that it is necessary to show respect to whoever is in position of authority. That being knowledgeable alone is not enough to attain any leadership position and that knowledge must be matched with humility are thematically highlighted here. It is always safer not to underestimate anybody, most especially an opponent.

Interaction with Invisible Beings

Another instance of the influence of Arabic literature on *Ruwan Bagaja* is the several encounters of Alhaji with invisible creatures. The existence of these invisible beings is a reality in Arabic literature. The holy book of Islam, Qur'an, not only attests to this, there is a whole chapter discussing their world and nature in the Book. (see: Qur'an 72) It is, therefore, a clear influence

of Arabic literature to see Imam giving the unseen creature prominence in his book. An instance of this is when Alhaji is been instructed, by a Jinni, on how to locate the well in which to draw the curative water:

“Da shigarka za ka ga dukuna, goma sha biyu jere. Ka kidaya daki na biyar daga hannun dama ka shiga na shida. Ciki ne rijiyar ta ke...” (Abubakar. I., P. 39)

On your entrance you will find many rooms, altogether twelve in a row. Count up to the fifth room to your right hand side, and then enter the sixth room; that is where the well is...

An encounter like this is a familiar occurrence in Arabic tales to the point that it is a common aphorism among them that every poet has his/her own jinn from whom he/she draws the spirit of creativity and poetry.

Magana Jari Ce (Volume III)

This is the last volume of a prose work written by Alhaji Abubakar Imam. The stories in this book and the other two volumes are told by a vizier parrot bought by a king. The stories borrow a lot from the popular Arabic *Alfu laylah wa laylah (One Thousand and One Nights)*. The pattern of narration is not only similar to that of the Arabic book; the stories here are also between few people. In the source book it is between *Shari Zad* and *Shahr Yar* with *Dunya Zad* in presence. In *Maga Jari Ce* however, it is between father-parrot and his son *Fasihi*. Another Arabic story book Alhaji Imam borrowed from is *Kaleelah Wa Dimnah*. He adopted the style of telling stories through animals and birds from this book.

Alfu laylah tells stories of a king, *Shahr Yar*, who was betrayed by his wife. He thereafter vowed to henceforth kill any lady who is unfortunate to marry him. He was behaving fully to his vow by bringing to an end the life of any lady that partnered him in bed. This was on until one day when his vizier could not find any lady. This vizier had two grown up daughters. When he got home the eldest of them noticed the melancholic mood of their father. On prodding, the father explained his dilemma. The daughter immediately volunteered to be the next queen and by implication the next victim. The father conceded to this wish after a lengthy discussion and assurance that she would be spared. *Shahr zad* took along her younger sister *Dunya Zad* with whom she perfected her story telling plot. The stories of *Shahr Zad* to *Shahr Yar* on request from *Dunya Zad* are what we have in *Alfu laylah wa laylah*.

This brief account of the book was given in order to grasp better how it has influenced the author of *Magana Jari Ce*. Alhaji Imam himself did not hide this fact as he repeatedly alludes to the book in his work. An instance of this is when the vizier parrot told his son *Fasih* at the end of one story that:

Yanzu zan baka misali daga cikin labarun wani littafi ne na larabawa da a ke kira Alfu laila. (Abubakar. I., p. 51)

Now I will give you an example from stories in an Arabic book called *Alfu laylah*.

The entire content of *Magana Jari Ce* could be taken to be an adaptation of *Alfu laylah* and other Arabic story books in the local Hausa language. The style, content and mode are very similar. Just as the source teaches moral and many ways of conducting oneself in a society, so does *Magana Jari Ce*. An instance of the book setting out to reach moral is a piece of advice the vizier parrot gave his son at end of one of the stories when he said:

“ *ka yi kokari da rika wannan labara mai tsawo haka. Koda yake ba yadda aka rubuta shi ke nan ba cikin Alfu laila, ba laifi. Wannan ma ai ya isa zama maka misalin gargadi na shida da na ba ka.*” (Abubakar. I, p.60)

You have tried a lot for keeping this lengthy story although that is not how it was written in Alfu laila. No problem, the one you memorized is enough as an example of the warning number six I gave you.

Also, as *Alfu laylah* contains palace stories, so is the setting of *Magana Jari Ce*. This is not a mere coincidence but a clear case of influence as the writer had traversed, extensively, existing Arabic literature books including *Alfu laylah wa laylah*. (Sarumi. A. I., P. 193)

Analysis

The significance of Hausa language in the cultural and literary identity of Northern Nigeria can never be over-emphasized. This is because the region, as depicted in the works of Alhaji Imam, has been a unique component of the larger federation now called Nigeria. The uniqueness was bestowed on the region by a very long tradition of literary writing. The tradition ensured sustainability of very a strong identity.

The study of this nature falls into the realm of inter-textuality. This theory was propounded by Julia Kristeva. It implies that “. . . a text cannot exist as a hermetic or self-sufficient whole, and so does not function as a closed system.” (Michael and Judith, 1990, p. 1) This is because, according to her, the writer is a reader of texts before he/she becomes a creator of texts. The presentation so far, to a very large extent, exposes the influence of Arabic on Hausa literature.

It is true that Arabic is different from the English language in which Hausa stories are written. It is also a fact that two literary works do not necessarily have to be in the same language for the influences to be considered. Hasan Jad is of the opinion that there could be impacts and influences between a literary language of a community and another. (Jad, H., 1978, p. 8) Hausa literature up to about the last two decades of the twentieth century was transformational because it was undergoing transition from being written in classical Arabic or *ajami* to being written in English.

It can therefore be conveniently said that the renaissance of Hausa literature spearheaded by Dr. Rupert M. East was not a case of reviving a dead literature nor creating a literature in an unlettered community. The inter-textuality in the writings of the authors of Alhaji Imam’s generation can mostly be noticed in contrasting their works with Arabic texts prevalent before transforming to writing in English. The influences are mostly reflected in themes and modes. The understanding here is that the content and mode of works by Hausa writers from that generation are the ones bequeathed by Islam and Arabic studies. The training acquired in colonial schools and Gaskiya Corporation notwithstanding, this heritage of Arabic literacy tremendously shaped the direction of Hausa writings.

The case of Alhaji, the protagonist in *Ruwan Bagaja*, brings to fore the influence of heroic attitude common in several Arabic texts. The heritage of sacrifice in order to safeguard family and communal honor is what made him leave home in search of *Ruwan Bagaja* in order to cure the prince of his mysterious illness. He was away from home and comfort for fifteen years at the end of which he successfully brought home the curative water a drop of which effectively cured

the sick prince. Alhaji instantly became a hero; this feat succinctly epitomizes the age long heritage of working to better the lot of the community.

The nature of the stories in *Magana Jari Ce* clearly displays the teacher in the author. This is not only in the fact that the stories are told by an elderly person but also from the fact that each story has goal, objectives and lessons. It could also be seen that the narration is interactive which ensures effective teaching and learning. Each of the stories is an anecdote of a sort buttressing the topic and sinking the lessons into the readers.

Conclusion

This paper has tried to explain how Arabic language and literature are the original source of literary writing in Northern Nigeria. The identity of the North can therefore be ascertained from the heritage that tells of their uniqueness. This uniqueness is deep rooted in their early literacy through Arabic language. Western education brought by the imperial colonial powers later got inroad into the literary culture of the Hausas but did not succeed in total replacement of the established Arabic heritage. Even the imperialists had to study Arabic for a successful voyage in Northern Nigeria administration. The torchbearers of writing Hausa in Roman orthography heavily relied on their Arabic literature that was very ubiquitous to transform to writing in English. The message of their work as seen in *Ruwan Bagaja* and *Magana Jari Ce* is to sustain the heritage and hence the identity. This heritage of Arabic language and literature is not only relevant but necessary because it remains an integral part of the Hausa cultural identity.

In view of the above the present writer wishes to offer the following recommendations:

- that serious efforts be made towards studying the early writers in Hausa language to appreciate more the parental status of Arabic;
- that studying the heritage of Arabic language be more encouraged as the majority of the early literary activities among Hausa people of Northern Nigeria are documented in it;
- that production of the works of early writers of literary works in Hausa be embarked upon as they are now short in circulation;
- that extensive study of Arabic will enrich the creativity of modern day writers among the people of Hausa extraction and the entire Northern Nigeria as this will expose them to additional sources;
- that advanced study of Arabic literature facilitates understanding better the norms and values of the Northern part of Nigeria;
- and, that contemporary writers in Hausa language should promote moral positivity in order to preserve the true identity of the North.

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