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AJAMIZATION OF KNOWLEDGE AS A UNIVERSAL BASIC EDUCATION PROCESS FOR MAKARANTA ALLO PUPILS IN NORTHERN NIGERIA

Abdalla Uba Adamu

Introduction

This paper argues that the victims of poverty in our society, especially Muslim Hausa in northern Nigeria, are the dispossessed out-of-school youth generally and erroneously referred to as *almajirai*. Their education is almost always seen by the mainstream educational establishment as a religious concern and therefore outside the province of the secular provisions. The lack of a regulatory body (and the sheer daunting impossibility of regulation) means that the mainstream educational needs of this cluster is not on the part of any government interventionist agenda of poverty alleviation and social service. This is reflected by the fact that so far, in about 39 years of political independence, no government policy has attempted to provide a strategy for the education of this large pool of untapped human resources. The fact that the *almajirai* graduate from youth scholars in their early teens to self-employed young adults in their late teens (have you ever wondered what happened to the hundreds of young *almajirai* - they seemed to simply disappear, only to be replenished by new ones for the same age!) means that they do have the capacity to succeed in life, if their basic educational needs are taken care of early enough. This paper is an attempt to provide a blueprint around which such needs can be taken care of.

Literacy

It is common to think of literacy as the simple ability to read and write. In part such thinking is a consequence of the naive assumption that alphabetic literacy is a matter simply of decoding graphs into sounds and vice versa. In fact, *literacy involves competence in reading, writing, and interpreting texts of various sorts*. It involves both skill in decoding and higher levels of comprehension and interpretation. These higher levels depend upon knowledge both of specialized uses

of language and of specialized bodies of knowledge. The intimate relations among language, literacy, and specialized bodies of knowledge have contributed to the identification of literacy with schooling.

Ajami as a Literary Concept Worldwide

The Arabic alphabet probably originated at some time in the 4th century AD from Nabataean, a dialect of Aramaic current in northern Arabic, but the earliest extant Arabic writing is traced to AD 512. The spread of Islam from the 7th and 8th centuries AD brought the language and the script to the vast expanse of territory extending from India to the Atlantic Ocean. The Arabic alphabet was adapted, with some necessary modifications, to such diverse languages as the Slavic tongues, Spanish, Persian, Urdu, Turkish, Hebrew, Berber, Swahili, Malay, Sudanese, and others. Thus the Arabic alphabet has been adapted to the Islamic people's vernaculars just as the Latin alphabet has been in the Christian West. It is this vernacular usage of Arabic that gave the resultant language or literary expression the sobriquet of *Ajami*. I will look at a few of the cultures that have adopted *ajami* as a literary form expression.

Ajami, literarily pidgin Arabic, seems to have originated in Spain. The dialect of Spanish used in Arab-occupied Spain prior to the 12th century and at the end of the 15th century was called *Mozarabic*, from the Arabic word for 'Arabized person'. It is also called *ajami* ('barbarian language' according to Arabs). It was spoken in those parts of Spain under Arab occupation from the early 8th century until about 1300. An archaic form of Spanish with many borrowings from Arabic, it is known primarily from Mozarabic refrains (called *kharjahs*) added to Arabic and Hebrew poems.

It was originally the spoken language of the urban bourgeoisie, who remained Christian while the peasantry generally converted to Islam, but it appears that many Arabs also came to use it as a spoken language. The language died out with the diminishing of Arab influence in Spain at the end of the 15th century, though Mozarabic has left its mark on the dialects of southern Spain and Portugal. It from

there that it leapt to North African countries of Tunisia, Morocco and finally finding its way to Islamized Sudanic nations. Other countries whose languages were affected by Arabic process of Ajamization include Uganda, Tanzania, Northern India and Pakistan.

Literacy in Kasar Hausa, 1380 - 1500

The arrival of Muslim clerics from Mali to Kano in about 1380 paved way for the intellectual development in Kano, and served to attract yet more scholars and merchants to the territory. Formalized Islamic education therefore established itself right from the reign of Ali Yaji dan Tsamiya (1349 - 1358). Indeed, one could argue that the complex structure of Islamic education system established by Zaghaita in 14th century Kano approximated any possible definition of a university.

Further, it should be pointed out that Islam had been in the neighbourhood of Kasar Hausa, in the Kanem-Bornu Empire, since the rule of Mai Humai Jilme (1085 - 1097) under the Sayfawa Dynasty.

This is because just like in Western Europe, the Middle East, North Africa and Central Asia, the tradition of higher education in medieval Kano had followed the pattern of consistent linkages between theology and the ruling class. Education became a function of higher spiritual interpretation, and the ruling class became its conduit through whose patronage and peerage the lecturers of the antecedent universities were granted royal charters to teach, certify students and grant permission for faculties to be set up in various sections in the community.

This was particularly applicable in the case of Kano territory in the medieval ages, since Zaghaita employed education and political power to promote the Shari'ah. He maintained the group's knowledge of and commitment to the Shari'ah by teaching it to them from the text of the *Mudawwana*, one of the early compendia of the doctrines of the Maliki 'school' of law.¹

From Arabic to Hausa to Ajami

Rumfa's enthusiasm in revolutionizing Islamic nature of Kano were matched only by his *Ulama* who undertook the task vigorously. In order to make learning easier and quicker, Arabic alphabets were

Hausanized and the teaching method was divided into what seemed to be introductory and specialization stages. In the introduction stages all the students were taught the reading and the writing of the Holy Qur'an in general terms, from the very beginning to the end of sixty *hizifs* of its contents. This stage took about five years to complete depending on the learning aptitude of the individual students.

In the second stage, the students were divided into two. The first group is made up of those who revealed signs of ability and interest in the further study of the Holy Qur'an were sent to Borno in the east (or gabas) where they would study various professors of Qur'anic education (called gwani). Gwani is an academic title somewhat equivalent to a doctorate degree given to an expert in the knowledge of the Holy Qur'an who graduated directly either from Al-Azahar University in Egypt or from the hands of its old graduates. After the completion and graduation from Borno, the Qur'anic Ulama were called Bornawiyans or Barnawa in order to signify their specialization area. They established Qur'anic schools in various places for both children and adults.

The second group, made of those who would like to specialize in the Islamic religious knowledge, apart from their Qur'anic education, were attached to what became called Zaure schools which were established in various wards in the city. In turn the Zaure schools were opened by Ulama who, in some cases, studied directly from the University of Sankore in Timbuktu or from the hands of some Ulama who studied and graduated there. Like their counterparts from the Borno schooling system, the Zaure school student study and specialize in Arabic language and literature, Islamic religious knowledge, history theology, Islamic jurisprudence and other branches of Islamic education. After completing their studies and graduation, such Ulama were given the name Tumbuktian or Tumbuktawa to signify their area of specialization.

It was during this period and for the propagation of Islam that the Hausa language began to adopt some Arabic words. Hausa grammar relied on the Arabic grammar until it became a written language in

Arabic character called *Ajami*. According to Hiskett,

... popular tradition has it that Hausa poetry was first composed and written down, in the *ajami* script, by Isa, the son of Usuman dan Fodiyo, and we have an early composition by Isa, in which he states that he has rendered the Shehu's Fula verses into Hausa (*Wakar ina Godfe Allah Da Yarda Tasa*). So far nothing has been discovered which leads us to question this tradition, and in the present state of knowledge we must conclude that Hausa first started to be used for formal composition at the end of the eighteenth or the beginning of the nineteenth century, and that this was almost entirely in verse form...²

Thus, the mechanism of using *ajami* to spread the Islamic message so that it reaches a wider section of the Hausa society by the early jihadists clearly acknowledged the wide-spread literacy among the massive Muslim population of Kasar Hausa. It is through this that *ajami* came to be adopted as a more or less religious literary mode of expression. This strong link between *ajami* and religious literature is to confer on the genre a sacred value that makes it difficult to create other literary work in the genre except perhaps for religious poetry.

Colonial Literary Policy and *Ajami* in Kasar Hausa

Ajami as a literary form, has been used as a vehicle for successfully transforming the intellectual mind-set of many societies where Islam rules supreme. So it was in Kasar Hausa for centuries from as early as 11th century with Islamic arrival to the Borno Kingdom. However, in 1903 the British colonial forces subjugated the emirates of Kasar Hausa. To discourage any further development of indigenous intellectual heritage - with over nine hundred years head-start - in September 1903, Wallace, the Acting High Commissioner, sent a circular letter to all residents telling them not to receive or reply to letters in Arabic sent to them by the emirs. It was after this policy came into full force that *ajami* started emerging as a literary language. Ironically, the early Kasar Hausa professors and literati found writing in *ajami* more difficult (*ajami gagama mai shi*, was the battle-cry, cut no doubt likely insinuated by the colonial administration in an effort to stifle its

further development) than in Arabic. And yet no forum was created by the colonial administration for the development of the *ajami* literary language; nor was such demanded by the pioneer revolutionaries who fought for Nigerian independence. There was half-hearted tokenisms, which clearly not meant to go far (e.g. *Yar Gaskiya Ta Fi Kwabo* in *ajami* and published in the 1940s).

Another nail in the coffin of literary *ajami* was driven with full force in 1912 when the Director of Education, Hans Vischer single-handedly came up with Rules for Hausa Spelling and created the framework for communicating with the natives. The rules, complete with little dots under b, d, and k to reflect the peculiar native "sounds" started the long, slow and willy process of subversion of the intellectual heritage of the Kasar Hausa which led to the written Hausa as the preferred literary medium embraced by both the colonists and native collaborators. The deliberate attempt to stifle any further indigenous intellectual development of Kasar Hausa becomes more glaring when it is realized that the arch-missionary, Reverend Walter Miller advised Lugard to introduce Hausa boko script in any schools established. Thus the suspicion of links between Christianity and boko in Kasar Hausa was borne out by this powerful connection between Lugard and Miller.

Further refinements of the boko script led to a trip to Germany in 1938 by the Svengali of Hausa literature, Dr. Rupert East, to consult Professor D. Westermann who in turn created the now standard Hausa hooked b, d, k characters and their upper cases.

Since the evolution of the *ajami* as a literary language in the 17th century in Kasar Hausa, efforts had been made by its literati to create specific rules for its application. Thus just as Vischer, East and Westermann standardized the Hausa boko script by introducing tonal elements absent in standard English alphabets, so too *ajami* scholars managed to adapt tonal variations between Arabic and *ajami*. In the end, it was possible to produce a full set of alphabets that more or less enabled the writer to convey significant meaning - as evidenced by the massive amount of religious *ajami* works available in Kasar Hausa

before the colonial interregnum. Even later, the 1951 census showed that the Northern Region figures of people literate in ajami were more than double those for boko. The first published appearance of Imfiraji in ajami signalled the spectacular success of the genre. Thus Alhaji (Dr.) Aliyu Namangi did for Hausa ajami what Nazir Akbarabadi did for Urdu literature in 19th century Pakistan.

However, sometimes in 1933 Vischer, eager to enrich colonial understanding of Hausa people's and their culture, came up with the idea that the best way to encourage people to go to schools and ensure those in the schools stayed was to write a series of primers in Hausa language aimed at primary schools. The vehicle of this idea was a literary competition which yielded the first clutch of now Hausa boko literature classics (Ruwan Bagaja, Shehu Umar, Gandoki, etc). It must be kept in mind that the scholastic tradition of the Hausa has always been the preserve of the *mallam* class; consequently even in popular literature the fountain heads, being carved out of that class, reflected their antecedent pedagogic traditions.

The competition, held in boko rather than ajami for which there were more people capable of reading it, successfully put ajami in the backyards of any intellectual discourse. It has since become restricted to a few class of *mallams* who struggle to keep it alive.

Writing the Rites to Right the Wrongs

In this paper I propose a simple argument. The vast majority of makarantun allo youths, aged 4 - 18 or so can read. They can read the Qur'an. Maybe they cannot speak Arabic or translate the Qur'an, but they can read it. Thus, they have a complete grasp of an alphabet and sentence formation. The number of these children available in northern societies is far much more than the number of children attending conventional primary schools. But because the state machinery does not recognize the existence or the usefulness of makarantun allo, or their pupils, there are no educational provisions for these children. The nearest the Government has come to acknowledging their existence is in the failed Islamiyya Primary Education project which was started sometimes in 1994 by the defunct National Primary Education Commission (NPEC).

Thus the fundamental weakness of any Nigerian Policy on Education over the years is the non-recognition of the Islamiyya and Qur'nic education systems especially as they relate to the Muslim Communities in this country. This non-recognition might be partly responsible for the educational imbalance across the country, and unless the Government recognizes this short-coming and accepts it as an obstacles to bridging the educational gap in the country, the educational imbalance will continue to be wider and wider for a long time to come.

It should be stressed that the current system of education in which the Islamiyya and Qur'anic education have not been fully recognized has not been very effective particularly in the Northern part of the country because the ways of life of the people have not been fully incorporated into the school system. The system seems to have relegated to the background the people's traditional value and forms and imposed on them the so-called "western education".

Since October 1994 efforts were made to produce an acceptable and balanced Islamiyya Primary Education Syllabus with the following objectives:

1. to ensure the integration of Islamic education with western system;
2. to enable the products of Islamiyya Education be self reliant;
3. to enable the products compete favourably with conventional primary schools products for places in junior secondary schools;
4. to boost the enrolment of pupils into Primary Education system;
5. to provide education along the lines that will be acceptable to some Muslim parents.

This is with the view that if a concerted effort is made, the two school systems can be integrated to serve the general societal needs for educating the youth. If this is achieved, it will further improve pupils enrolment and retention in the primary school. According to NPEC figures, there were about 10,465 Islamiyya Primary Schools in 1994 with a total enrolment of about 1,780,948. One can easily estimate

about four times that number of pupils attending makarantun allo. Again, according to NPEC figures, as many as six million children in Muslim northern Nigeria were not attending conventional primary schools, but were mostly attending Islamiyya Primary schools or makarantun allo.

Now imagine what life would have been if we have *Magana Jari Ce* written in *ajami*, so that our *makarantar allo* pupils could have access to it. Then imagine further the social revolution that would have happened if other materials - fiction, geography, environmental studies, etc. - were also all written in *ajami*. If there are less *almajirai* among the *boko schoolboys* (due to their education) then it follows that there would be much less *almajirai* among the makarantun allo schoolboys! Thus would have began a mass literacy process on a grand scale.

Stretch this imagination further, let us see if government can perform its duties of service to the people by labelling its major establishments in *ajami*. Buildings such as hospitals, Local Government Secretariat, NEPA, Water Boards, Housing Estates, major roads, etc could all become more than mere buildings to the teeming population of *ajami* literati by having their names in *ajami* as well as the *boko* script. Drive (or walk) along Niger Street in Kano, one of the earliest colonial layouts, and the *Gidan Goldie* building stares at you with its name boldly and proudly embossed in *ajami*. As a thriving commercial centre in the early 1920s involved in the peanut trade, clearly the owners of the building wanted to attract more peanut farmers and agents to their building by advertising what it is. The Dantata dynasty has also done this with inscriptions labelling their some of their buildings in *ajami*.

The most important function of education is that of giving the student a sense of dignity and self-respect. The makarantun also schoolboys have been given the erroneous assumption that attending such schools in an *almajiri* status (for many of them) means being a scholar-beggar. If they had an enriched non-formal curriculum which supplements their Islamic learning, then they will have their scholarship more, just as it is in any primary pupils will find begging disdainful.

Ajami therefore provides a possible escape route from illiteracy, and consequently, poverty.

Roses and Thorns

The picture is not all rosy. Of course there are bound to be problems. But they continued to be problems because no one wanted to solve them. The first deals with standardization of *ajami*. Almost every *ajami* scholar will harp on the fact that there is no standard form of writing in the genre. So how come there is a massive jihadist literature in *ajami*? A counter argument is that the jihadist literature, being religiously inspired, would find it easy to express thoughts using vocabulary common to Arabic and *ajami*.

The second problem deals with the fact that *ajami* uses alphabets associated with Arabic language and consequently the Qur'an. Any writing in the language is therefore seen as religious, and not meant for leisure - which contributed to ignoring any specific rules for writing in *ajami*. And yet now it is becoming clear that not all things written in Arabic are Islamic. This is despite the ignorant and empty saber-rattling rhetoric of critics of Islam, for instance on the alleged Islamization of Nigeria through printing "Arabic characters on the Nigerian naira currency notes" - critics from empty bankrupt intellectual void who lack the acumen to appreciate true scholastic tradition and the function of education. The simple fact that *ajami* readers constitute the largest majority of literary cluster in this country is justification enough for catering to their needs in our economy.

Further *ajamization* is seen, for instance, on bottles of spring water (e.g. Swan brand) which often carry an *ajamized* information box stating its contents. Even if it is argued that the typical *ajami* literati is not prone to quaffing bottled spring water, at least an effort is being made by some companies to revive a betrayed tradition.

Finally, the *ajami* literati community suffers from one or two peculiar superstitions concerning the use of certain alphabets in *ajami* which were apparently used in Hausa shamanism. Thus they are avoided in everyday discourse - further restricting the vocabulary of any *ajami* text.

If this superstition is still in force, then how come *Alfijir*, the only surviving *ajami* newspaper (established in 1982) from Kano refuses to quit?

Despite all these problems, if we wish to lead our people into the next millennium, we must break the paralysis of guilt, indifference and begin to start write the rites to right the wrongs inflicted on our society by our intellectual fountainheads in active collaboration with their colonial and missionary Svengails. Mass literacy is the only light that will banish ignorance and subsequently poverty. Such literacy cannot be attained through fancy of government projects, centers, agencies and other white elephants - which, in any event, are mainly focused on adult learner. It must start from the informal medium, through individual patriotic contribution to the literary emancipation of Kasar Hausa. I propose *Ajamization of Knowledge* as one possible way of mass educating at least six million *makarantun allo* pupils. It is their only hope of participating in an economy which set out to deliberately marginalize and alienate them.

Principles of Knowledge

Some of the practical ways we can adopt to begin the *Ajamization of Knowledge* would involve institutions, resources and private initiatives.

I propose the following steps as starting points:

Immediate establishment of a Center for Ajami Studies or the Department of Ajami Studies in any patriotic University whose purpose will be to refine the study of *ajami* as a literary language. After all, we spend millions supporting the study of French Language in Nigerian universities - when probably the number of French language speakers in Kasar Hausa would not exceed the total number of pupils in one *makarantar allo*.

Further, *ajami* is more beneficial to this society than French. If the National Universities Commission will not support the establishment of such department or Centre, then the patriotic philanthropists of Kasar Hausa should club together and do so.

In the United states, many philanthropists and organizations sponsor the establishment of whole departments, and indeed universities, in the pursuit of knowledge. For instance, Trinity

College, North Caroline became, under an endowment from the tobacco magnate James B. Duke, Duke University in 1924. Similarly, Harvard University was one of the most abundantly endowed academic institutions, with a capital outlay of more \$120 million dollars in 1929.

A variation of the institutional approach could be the introduction of Ajami Subject Methodology in the Education curriculum of Departments of Education, and Colleges of Education which will provide an experimental basis for the full development of Ajami Study Skills at an advanced stage.

Publishing of books in all genres aimed at increasing and enhancing mass reading habit among makarantun allo youths.

This will have to rely on private initiative of writers. The fact that young, bold and innovative Hausa language novelists (e.g. Yusuf Adamu, Ado Ahmad Gidan Dabino, Bala Anas Babinlata, and Balaraba Ramat Yakubu) have succeeded in awakening the society through the private publishing of new Hausa novels means that a network of printing, distribution and absorption of books written in ajami exists. For instance, in East Africa, Swahili-language translation now include works by African as well as Western writers. Swahili authors who have received local and international acclaim include the novelist Euphrase Kezilahabi and Mohammed S. Mohammed and the dramatists Ebrahim Hussein and Penina O. Mlama of Tanzani, as well as the Kenyan novelists Ali Jemaadar Amir, Katama Mkangi, and P. M. Kareithi. What will make this process easier in ajami is the fact that ajami, unlike say Urdu, or Swahili is not really a totally different language from the conventional Hausa language; its strength and character comes from its written rather than spoken form.

Translating classic Hausa books into ajami, instances, that come to mind here include *Magana Jari Ce*, *Karamin Sani Kukumi*, *Da'u Fatakeni Dare*, *Ilya dan Mai Karfi*, *Ikon Allah*, etc. Noted contemporary ajami scholars such as M.S. Ibrahim, R. M. Zarruk, and B. Sa'id can be sponsored by NNPC to do this. After all, NNPC sponsored a competition in 1978 to boost the creative reading habits among Hausa youths. Well they now

have about six million more Hausa youths from the makarantun allo streams - which means a larger market! Both the 1933, 1978 and 1980 literary competitions ignored the creative reading habits of millions of our youths. This would be an opportunity for NNPC to attempt to redeem itself.

- Publishing classic ajami literary materials in all aspects of history, sociology and political affairs in Kasar Hausa. These could eventually be housed in a special *Ajami Library* which will be under the Library Board and serve as a resource center for both the *mallams*, their pupils and numerous researchers. This will also rely on private initiatives. After all, the huge amounts of money they splash at book launching could better be utilized in this way.
- Creating *ajami* study centers in scholastic communities that provide support group and discussion clusters for the advancement of literary works in *ajami*. In Kano, for instance, *Makabo* would be an ideal starting point, as it was the site of the first university in Kasar Hausa, *Ajamawa* devotees could start this, and subsequently, with support from any people, it could evolve fully into an intellectual movement.
- Incorporating ajami in signboards, road posts and other buildings, both by the Government and individuals.

Let the *Ajamization of Knowledge* be the educational gift we bequeath to the millions of our *makarantun allo* neophyte in the next millennium,

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