

THE IMPORTANCE OF ARABIC LANGUAGE TO RESEARCH EFFORTS IN ISLAMIC STUDIES

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Abstract

There is no gain saying the fact that Arabic Language is an inseparable Siamese twin with Islamic Studies, as the latter cannot promise a standard status in isolation of the former. Any deficiency in the mastery of Arabic Language is a direct deficiency in Islamic Studies. The reason, among others, is that the primary sources of Islamic Studies can only be conveniently and adequately understood, through the study of standard Arabic Language in which the Qur'ān and other sources of Islamic Studies were rendered. The alarming incessant fall in the standard of Islamic Studies in our modern academic experiences, and the proliferation of many extremist thoughts among the Muslim *Ummah* could be linked among other causes, to the lack of a satisfactory understanding of the revealed texts from which every sect picks its supportive evidence. This research has been conducted to discuss the important role Arabic Language could play in conducting researches in the field of Islamic Studies and the threats that lack of the knowledge of standard Arabic Language may pose to conducting standard researches in the field of Islamic Studies. The research also answers some frequently asked questions that invariably occur and offer some suggestions that might aid successful works in writing Islamic Studies projects in Arabic.

Keywords: Arabic language, Research efforts, Arabic references, Islamic Studies

Introduction

History of West African civilization confirmed that Arabic Language had played significant roles in the development of modern civilization. For instance, in the history of Nigeria, Arabic Language happened to be one of the fundamentals of her civilization and culture, the reason being that Islam was introduced to Nigeria in the middle of the eighth century alongside the Arabic Language. Impliedly, Arabic language had been in existence in the country centuries before the introduction of English Language. History has it that Islam came into Nigeria from the Northern part of the country, through the Arabs who came to trade in Nigeria from Egypt and Sudan, some of whom came from North Africa through Mali (West Africa). It was through this route and with the aid of

those traders and other consequential factors that Islam spread through the South-Western region of Nigeria in the late fifteenth century, after which it was widely spread to other parts of the country, especially during the period of Uthmān Ibn Fūdi's administration.¹

It is clear from the above, that Arabic Language came together with Islam, as many of those who subscribed then, to the Islamic faith were encouraged to learn Arabic Language at all costs through the learning of the skills of reading, writing and speaking. This shows clearly that Arabic Language had apparent impacts in the development and growth of the civilization and culture of the Nigerian society both, in the Northern and the Southern regions, as evident in the various manuscripts written by Muslim scholars from both the Northern and the Southern parts of Nigeria some of whom are Uthmān bn Fūdī, Abdullahi bn Fūdī, Ahmad Belgore, Tajul Adab² e.t.c and also among the Yoruba scholars many of whose works were written in Arabic and some of their works could be found in the various libraries across the country. The current researcher had personally had privilege to go through some of these manuscripts written by Uthmān bn Fūdī, his brother Abdullah bn Fūdī and some of their disciples. As a confirmation to this, Dike observes thus:

As an historian myself, I have taken the keenest interest in this development, for it is through the aid of these Arabic documents and those written in African language in the Arabic script, that the scholar will be aided in his task of unlocking the secrets of the African past. It has been a revelation to the whole world of scholarship to realize for the first time that Africa before the European penetration, so far from being a dark continent, was in fact a continent where the light of scholarship shone brightly, as the Arabic works now being discovered bear testimony.... The Arabic scholars of the present, drawing upon the writings of the Arabic scholars of the past, will be able to bring before us the events and happenings of the past ages of Nigeria and so help to write a history we may rightly call our own.³

From the above historical account, it is true the assertion that:

No one can deny the intellectual and administrative roles of Islamic scholarship in pre-Independence Northern Nigeria and South-Western Nigeria as Arabic Language was a grace for Africa's original contribution to knowledge.⁴

Importance of Arabic Language to Research Efforts in Islamic Studies

There is no doubt that Arabic Language is inevitably essential for any meaningful research in the field of Islamic Studies and in the fact that any researcher in the field is expected to have competence in the Arabic Language. One of the reasons for this is that the Noble Qur'ān, which is the book of every Muslim and which is equally the first source of Islamic Studies, was revealed in Arabic Language. Allah says:

And truly, this (the Qur'ān) is a revelation from the Lord of the 'Ālamīn (mankind, jinns and all that exist); brought down by the trustworthy *Ruh* (Gabriel); upon your heart (O Muhammad, S.A.W.) that you may be one of the warners; in plain Arabic language (Q.26:192-195).

This means that Islamic Studies cannot be properly understood without adequate knowledge of Arabic Language, and that it is rather impossible for anyone to become an expert or eminent scholar in Islamic Studies without having a deep knowledge of the Arabic Language. Al-Imam Az-Zamakhshari narrated in his book titled *Al-Kash-shāf* that:

Once a Bedouin over-heard a man wrongly reciting a verse Q. 9: verse 3 which reads:

(وَأَذَانٌ مِنَ اللَّهِ وَرَسُولِهِ إِلَى النَّاسِ يَوْمَ الْحَجِّ الْأَكْبَرِ أَنَّ اللَّهَ بَرِيءٌ مِنَ الْمُشْرِكِينَ وَرَسُولُهُ)

Placing the Kasrah vowel on the *lam* of the word (*Warasūlihi*) which means: And a declaration from Allah and His messenger to mankind on the greatest day, that Allah is free from all obligations to the disbelievers and His messenger. The villager said scornfully that if Allah is free from the Prophet, then I am also free from him. The man heard the Bedouin's statement and dragged him to the caliph 'Umar. On getting there, the Bedouin narrated what he heard from the man's recitation and immediately, 'Umar ordered people to learn Arabic Language.⁵

It is observed, that the mere difference in the vowelisation had changed completely the meaning of the verse, as the correct recitation is to vowelise the word with *Dammah* (*Wa Rasūluhu*) which means: Allah and His messenger are free from all obligations to the disbelievers.

Also, Al-Imam As-Sayūfī mentioned in his book titled *Al-Itqān*, the statement of Mujahid which reads: "It is not permissible for a person who believes in Allah and the last day to say anything concerning the book of Allah if he is not well-grounded or fluent in Arabic Language."⁶ As-Sayūfī

then commented on this statement by saying, “It is not sufficient for one to possess a little knowledge of Arabic because an Arabic word can sometimes have dual meanings and the person may know only one of them but the other meaning is what Allah means.”⁷

Furthermore, the *Sunnah* which is the second source of Islamic Law, and can be defined as the statements, actions as well as tacit approvals of the Prophet,⁸ cannot be well understood without adequate knowledge of Arabic Language. This is because the Prophet was an Arab and all his sayings were recorded in Arabic Language. Candidly, any research conducted in any area of Islamic Studies would be incomplete without adequate proofs from the Qur’ān or *Sunnah* to illustrate the Islamic rules relating to that topic, the efforts of which are only attainable by someone who can independently understand the complexity of Arabic Language. Also, *Al-Athār*, being the statements of the companions, which are sometimes quoted as evidences to support views concerning the topic, are also recorded in Arabic Language, because the companions of the Prophet were all Arabic speaking people and nobody would understand their statements except an Arab by birth or speech.

Apart from the above, the highest percentage of references in the field of Islamic Studies which every researcher needs are also written in Arabic Language. Most of the works in the fields of *Hadith*, Islamic Jurisprudence (*Fiqh*), Qurānic Exegesis (*Tafāsīr*), the knowledge of inheritance (*Al-Farā’id*), Science of *Hadith* (*Mustalahul-Hadīth*) and others that are available in different universities, departmental or individual libraries, have not been translated into other languages. This shows the importance of having deep and adequate knowledge of Arabic Language to assist the researcher, otherwise, the research work will be inconclusive and futile.

In addition, majority of the terminologies used in Islamic Jurisprudence (*Fiqh*), Principles of Islamic-Jurisprudence (*Usūl-l-Fiqh*), Islamic Law of Succession (*Al-Farā’id*) and other Islamic-related courses are in Arabic Language and are mostly very difficult to be translated into other languages, though they are also very important to research in Islamic Studies. Thus, the knowledge of Arabic Language is highly required for the proper understanding of these terminologies. Finally, some of the disagreements of scholars on various issues in Islamic Jurisprudence are due to the subtle nature of the Arabic Language, which accounts for different interpretations of some Arabic words or analysis of Arabic grammar.

Statements of Great Scholars of Islam on the Importance of Arabic Language to Islamic Studies

Many scholars have discussed the apparent importance of Arabic Language in understanding Islamic Studies among who are:

a. Imam As-Shātibi had said that many causes of innovation in textual deduction may be linked to the negligence and /or ignorance of Arabic Language:

Among it is that they put forward contributions on Qurānic and *Sunnah* related discussions even though they are deficient in Arabic Language without which they cannot understand from Allah and His apostle. Thus, they fabricate lies on Sharī'ah through their own understanding and practices in the religion in contradiction to those of renowned scholars.⁹

As-Shātibi even considered deficiency in the understanding of Arabic Language as one of the causes of extremism. He cited the case of the Khawarij whose creed revolves on *al-Tahkīm*. Based on the generalization of Allah's statement, "The decision is only for Allah" (Al-'An'ām: 57), he said it is possible that because of the hidden nature of this incidence that the Khawarij opine that there should be no decision (on religious issues) except from Allah, relying on Allah's wordings, "The decision is only for Allah" (Al-'An'ām:57, Yusuf :40). They based their argument on the generalization of the wordings and that it should not be specified, throwing away other statements of Allah such as His statement, "appoint two arbitrators, one from his (husband) family and the other from her's (wife)" (An-Nisā' :35) and when he says," As adjudged by two just men among you" (Al-Mā'ida : 95). This is because if they know Arabic principles of specifying the generalized statements (*Takhsis*), they would not have objected to that and might have reasoned that this generalization might have been specified."¹⁰

b. Ibnu-Juzay also emphasized the importance of Arabic Language in the understanding of the Qur'ān. He agreed that it is required of the interpreter of the Qur'ān to know Arabic Language when he said:

As for Arabic Language, it is incumbent on the interpreter to know the Arabic words in the Qur'ān, the unique words and science of Tafsīr. Many have authored many books in the field of unique words of the Qur'ān. As for Arabic syntax, it is also required from the interpreter of the Qur'ān because, Qur'ān was revealed in Arabic language and thus he needs to know the language. The syntax is of two divisions; declensional analysis and morphological

sciences that deal with the post -constructional principles of Arabic words.¹¹

c. Ibn-Taymiyyah also added to this discussion when he opined that Arabic Language is an inseparable entity from the religion. He emphasised that the religious understanding cannot be without it. He submitted:

Arabic Language itself is part of the religion, its understanding is compulsory because understanding of the Qur'ān and *Sunnah* is compulsory and they cannot be understood except with it and whatever thing without which a compulsion can be carried out is also compulsory. Although, it may sometimes be personal obligation or communal obligation.¹²

As-Shātibi also explained explicitly that there is no way *Sharī'ah* can be fathomed except through Arabic Language and this makes its learning more compelling, and that the more efficiently one understands Arabic Language the more efficiently one understands the *Sharī'ah*. He wrote in his book on *Maqāsid*:

The reason for learning this knowledge (Arabic language) is that we had said in the book of *Maqāsid* that *Sharī'ah*'s lingual franca is Arabic and if it is so, no one can understand it as expected except who understands Arabic expectedly because they are both linked to each other except in the areas of the Qur'ānic inimitability features. Any assumed beginner or intermediate in the learning of Arabic Language will consequently be a beginner or an intermediate in the understanding of *Sharī'ah*. The intermediary has not reached the peak in the understanding of Arabic Language, and when he does, it is then he will consequently reach the peak in understanding the *Sharī'ah* and then be referred to as an authority in the field. Just like the companions and others among those who were eloquently rich in the religious understanding and became authority. Whoever is below their level has relatively become deficient in the *Sharī'ah* understanding in relation to the ratio of his deficiency and whomever is deficient in his understanding, can neither be an authority in his sayings nor have his sayings respected.¹³

Actually, many scholars who wrote on *Ijtihād* under the discussions of *Usūlu-Fiqh* have stated that knowledge of Arabic Language is a prerequisite for *Ijtihād*. This means no one can claim *Ijtihād* to himself except he is versed in Arabic Language, because it is the way leading to the

understanding of the Arab speech. Imam Al-Ghazālī wrote in his book, *Al-Mustasfā* while mentioning prerequisites of *Ijtihād*:

Secondly, knowledge of Arabic Language and syntax in a way that it enables him to understand Arab speech and culture of expression and to the extent that he is capable of differentiating between the direct and the indirect, the compressed and the comprehensive, the real and the figurative, the general and the specific and the expressed and the implied speeches. Actually, he is not expected to be versed in Arabic Language and syntax just as Alkhalīl and Al-Mubārīd or that he knows everything in the language and the syntax but he is only required to know what suffices in understanding the meanings and motives contained in Arabic speech.¹⁴

‘Umar wrote to Abu Musa Al-Ash‘ari and said: to proceed, understand the *Sunnah* and understand Arabic Language, render the Qur’ān in Arabic Language because it is an Arabic book.¹⁵ Al-Imam As-Suyūti joined the notable scholars in his book *Al-itqān* and contributed expansively to the importance of Arabic Language and its apparent role in the interpretation of the Qur’ān. He also made Arabic Language one of the preconditioning etiquettes and one of the required knowledge that the Qur’ān interpreter must understand when he said:

Firstly, the language because it is through it he explains the vocabularies and their meanings accordingly. Mujahid said: “no one that believes in Allah and in the last day would say anything concerning Allah’s book except that he knows Arabic Language, it is not sufficient that he knows a little. Secondly, the syntax, because the meaning of speeches differs because of the syntactic differences thus, it needs to be considered. Abū ‘īsā related from Alhasan that he was asked concerning a person who learns Arabic for the purpose of sound articulation and sound reading. He replied: “good! Learn it, because a person may read a verse comprehending a part and he will be ruined by the other (parts).¹⁶

As-Shaykh Adam Al-Ilori was an erudite West African scholar whose contributions to knowledge and humanity spread across the sub-Saharan regions. He authored many related literatures in the duo disciplines of Arabic and Islamic Studies in the part of which he wrote that:

It is impossible that Islam places its sit on the surface of any city except that its civilization (Arabic and Islamic Studies) is fixed in its four walls wherein two Arabic schools would be founded; the

Qurānic schools for the children and the Arabic science schools for the adults.¹⁷

In another area of his work, he submitted thus:

for this, it is commonly noticed that as early as a man embraces Islam he would run to learning Arabic words then to studying Qur'ān and its sciences such as learning Arabic syntax in order that he may understand the Qur'ān and what connects to it.¹⁸

In his contribution on the importance of Arabic Language to Islamic Studies, Oloyede asserts thus:

As the language of Islam and as such used in countless Koranic Schools across countries, this adds religious importance to the value of Arabic Language, which served and continues to serve as the medium of the contribution of Muslim scholars to the world of learning. Earlier scholarship in Greek and Roman civilizations were transmitted to Europe through the medium of Arabic translations. Non-Muslim Arabists and Islamologists have also understood the futility of learning Islamic without Arabic and have thus contributed to the understanding of the fastest growing religion in the world and the second largest religion in United States of America, United Kingdom, Canada, France and Germany. Arabic therefore is indispensable in the study and understanding of Islamic Studies. It thus serves dual purposes - the conventional and the sacred.¹⁹

The Honorable Justice I. A. Haroon of the Kwara State Sharia Court of Appeal contributes in the same line when he opined that:

It is expected of a *Kadi* to have an exposure to the original Islamic materials relevant to the law in a particular case before him; Qur'ānic text, *Sunnah*, Consensus of the *Sahābah* and of those who follow them and *Qiyās* in that order. He should apply his industry and dexterity to conduct research into original materials most of which are in Arabic. Knowledge of Arabic is an indispensable tool of a *Kadi*, no wonder the National Judicial Council in its circular reference NJC/CIR/HOL/1/51 dated 24th march, and 2011 makes it mandatory for Kadis or any person aspiring to become a *Kadi* to acquire a sound knowledge of Arabic.²⁰

In reasoning to the same end, the review of the benchmark minimum academic standards by the National University Commission (NUC) requires “ability to read Islamic texts in the source language.”²¹ In the other area, the philosophy of Islamic Studies program under Benchmark Minimum Academic Standards (BMAS) of the National Universities Commission emphasises the fact that:

Islamic primary sources are in Arabic. This explains why proficiency in the language is crucial to the proper understanding and competence in the Islamic Studies discipline. Students should be able to read and digest the primary sources of Islamic Studies, which are the Qur’ān, the Hadith and *Fiqh* as they are the source language.²²

With these and other related quotes from respected scholars of Islam, the ancient and the modern and from both within and outside Nigeria, it is clear the extent of the futility of studying Islamic Studies in the isolation of Arabic Language, let alone carrying out a research in the field of Islamic Studies with an apparent ignorance of its lingua franca, Arabic Language.

Some Useful Arabic References on Islamic Studies

Below are some useful Arabic references in the field of Islamic Studies:

a. *Al-Fiqh* (Islamic Jurisprudence): The references under this branch of Islamic knowledge can be divided into three different types:

- References relating to a school of thought (Al-Madhhab) such as the Hanafīs, the Malikīs, the Shafī’īs and the Hanbalis.

i. Examples of *the Hanafis* references include:

1. *Ad-Durru’l-Mukhtār* written by Al-Imam Al-Haskafiyy
2. *HāshiyatuRaddulMuhtār* written by Ibn ‘Abideen
3. *Al-Hidāyyah* written by Al-Margīnāny
4. *Sharh Fathil-Qadīr* written by Ibn Al-Humām
5. *Tabyīnul-Haqāiq Sharh Kanzid-Daqāiq* written by Azzaylai’yy.

ii. Examples of *the Maliki* references include:

1. *Ash-Sharh Al-Kabīr* written by Ad-Dardīr
2. *Al-Khurashyy Sharh Mukhtasar Seedy khalīl* written by Al-Khurashyy
3. *As-halul-Madārik Sharh Irshādus-Sālik* written by Al-Kashnāwyy

4. *Al-Mudawwanatul Kubrā* written by Al-Imam Malik
5. *Adh-Dhakhīrah* written by Al-Qarāfi
- iii. Examples of the *-Shafi'i* references include:
 1. *Al-Ummu* written by Al-Imam Ash-Shāfi'ī
 2. *Nihāyatul-Muhtāj* written by Ar-Ramliyy
 3. *Tuhfatul-Muhtāj* written by Ibn-Hajar Al-Haythamī
 4. *Mughnil-Muhtāj* written by Sharbīniyy
 5. *Al-Muhadh-dhab* written by As-Shīrāzī
- iv. Examples of the Hambali references include:
 1. *Al-Insāf* written by Al-Mardāwiyy
 2. *Al-Iqnā'* written by Al-Hajjāwī
 3. *Kasshāful Qīnā'* written by Al-Bahūtī
 4. *Al-Mubdi'* written by Ibn Muflīh
 5. *Muntahal-Irādāt* written by Al-Fatuhī
- References combining all the four schools of thought such as:
 1. *Badāi'u Sanāi'u fi tartībi sharā'i'* by Al-Kāsānī
 2. *Al-Mabsut* by As-Sarkhasī
 3. *Bidāyatul -Mujtahid* by Ibn Rushd
 4. *Mawāhibul-Jalīl* by Al-Hattāb
 5. *Al-Majmū'* by Annawawī
 6. *Al-Mugnī* by Ibn Qudāmah
 7. *Al-Fiqh- Islāmiyy-Wa-Adillatuhū* by Prof. Wahbah Azzuhayliyy
- References that treat topics in Islamic jurisprudence, such as an-Nikāh, *at-Talāq*, *al-Ḍiddah* and others.
- b. The Principles of Islamic Jurisprudence such as:
 1. *Al-Ihkām Fi Usūli-l-Ahkām* by Al-Āmidīyy
 2. *Al-Ihkām Fi Usūli-l-Ahkām* by Ibn Hazm Adh-dhāhiri
 3. *At-Tamhīd Fi Usūli Fiqh* by Abul Khattāb
 4. *Al-Burhānu Fi Usūli Fiqh* by Imām Al-Haramayn
 5. *Raudatun-Nādhir* by Ibn Qudāmah
 6. *Al-Ibhāj* by As-Subkī
- c. Tafsīr
 1. *Tafsīrul Qur'ān il A'dhīm* by Ibn Kathīr
 2. *Al-Jamī' Li Ahkām il Qur'ān* by Al-Qurtubī
 3. *Jam'īul Bayān Fi Tafsīr il Qur'ān* by At-Tabarī
 4. *At-Tafsīr Al-Kabīr* by Ar-Rāzī
 5. *Adwāul Bayān Tafsīrul Qur'ān bil Qur'ān* by As-Shinqītī

- d. References on Hadith, such as:
 - 1. Sahīhu Bukhāri by Al-Bukhāri
 - 2. Sahīhul-Muslim by Muslim
 - 3. Sunan Abī Dāud by Abu Dāud
 - 4. Sunan-at-Tirmidhī by At-Tirmidhī
 - 5. Sunan-Nisāiyy by An-Nisaiyy
 - 6. Sunan-Ibn Mājah by Ibn Mājah
 - 7. Musnadul-Imām Ahmad by Al-Imām Ahmad

Most of these references mentioned earlier can be found in both departmental and university libraries and some also through private libraries possessed by scholars who graduated from Arab countries, especially Saudi Arabia. They can also be found in Islamic bookshops. The topics of the project can be easily chosen by going through the table of contents of the books or by seeing the departmental scholars for advice. There is a list of past project topics in some universities from which a researcher can choose. Sometimes, this can be found in the departmental or university libraries. An effort is also being made in collating all the project topics written in Arabic Language for the twin departments (Arabic and Islamic Studies) of all universities in Nigeria. When it is done, this can be useful for the purpose of research in Islamic Studies.

There are other various types of references which can be useful for research, among these are:

- a. Theses on past project topics
- b. Academic journals
- c. Newspapers
- d. The internet
- e. Documentaries on Islam presented in the media (television, radio, etc.)
- f. Some CDs such as *Al-Maktabatu-sh-Shāmilah* which contains thousands of Islamic books written in Arabic Language.

Conclusion/Suggestions

At this juncture, it can be concluded that Arabic Language is, beyond any iota of doubt, very important for researches in the field of Islamic Studies. The existence of Arabic Language in Nigeria before English Language has also proven the impact of Arabic on the civilization and culture of the country. On the other hand, this work has discussed the

role of Arabic Language in the understanding of Islam, while beneficial statements from many respectable scholars of Islam were also mentioned. This study discusses various examples of some references on Islamic Studies that can be useful for research works in the field. In addition, answers to some frequently asked questions from researchers and students of Islamic Studies were answered. That notwithstanding, the following suggestions may be helpful for the successful development of Arabic Language in writing projects on Islamic Studies:

- a. The management of any university that offers Islamic Studies as a course should endeavour to uphold the rule that any prospective Islamic Studies candidate should have adequate knowledge of Arabic Language before admission into the Islamic Studies programme.
- b. The Department of Islamic Studies should always encourage its students to write their projects in Arabic Language as it had been before, because of the contribution of past project writers in Arabic Language, which are beneficial and encouraging.
- c. The Department of Islamic Studies should organize seminars, workshops and intensive programs in Arabic for the students to assist them in having adequate knowledge that will enhance the ability of their students in their preferred field of study.
- d. It is recommended that the Department of Islamic Studies makes it mandatory to researchers to write every project or research abstracts and summaries in Arabic Language.

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