

FUNCTIONALIZING AJAMI LITERACY FOR BROADER PARTICIPATION OF CITIZENS IN NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Abstract

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This paper discusses the theme of *Ajami* literacy as an instrument for national development. It focuses attention on the concepts of literacy in general and *Ajami* literacy in particular with reference to functionalism. It examines the relevance of *Ajami* and its future potentials as an instrument for national development. Finally, the paper examines National Education Policy provision with respect to *Ajami* and how the policy affects *Ajami* literacy, crowning it up with some pointers for reflections.

Introduction

Ajami is a form of writing a language with Arabic alphabets and numerals as a literary process. *Ajami* particularly refers to the skills of reading, writing and computation in Hausa Language. Arabic is the language of Qur'anic scripture and Islamic literacy for Muslims. The language has not only spiritual importance to Muslims but as well cultural, social, economic and educational values and relevance. This feature is synonymous to the position of English language, not only as language of the Bible (the Christian scripture) with spiritual function but equally with cultural, social, economic and educational values and relevance. Historical accounts have shown that both languages and their respective religions were the roots of literacy in Nigeria.

Illiteracy implies the absence of basic skills of reading, writing and computation at the level of individuals and society. A literate person is believed to be an enlightened and functional person. The importance and ills of literacy and illiteracy respectively have been identified by several research works to revolve around cultural, social, economic and educationally spheres of life. It is generally theorized that literacy and illiteracy have direct influence to national development and underdevelopment.

The definition of what constitute literacy is debatable and problematic. In Nigeria for instance, the problems as far as national literacy policy is concerned include language of literacy, who is literate and who is not? What is the use of acquired literacy skills? Are there opportunities for people who are literate in whatever form to practice their literacy skills acquisition accepted officially as a component of national development? How crucial is adult literacy to national development? These questions about the situation of adult literacy in Nigeria will be explored in the discussion.

It is among the objectives of this discussion to point out the erroneous marginalization of *Ajami* as a form of literary skills in favour of literacy in English alphabets. To show how *Ajami* literacy can be more relevant to individuals and social development. The paper also aimed at expounding the relevance of *Ajami* literacy and its future potentials. Furthermore, this paper has the significance of drawing government attention to *Ajami* literacy with the view to giving it official attention and including it in its national policy on mass literacy which is hitherto unmentioned. It is also significant for the general public particularly the 50 percent Nigerian Muslims to recognise the literary importance of *Ajami* and seek to promote it for individuals and national development. Finally, *Ajami* form of literacy needs the attention of the academia to carry out research on the best way of perfecting it and promoting its usage in the country.

The Concept of Literacy and Functionalism

Literacy has been defined in various ways by scholars of different cultural backgrounds. These definitions are based on principles and practices obtained in different cultural settings. It should also be noted that a universal conception of the phenomenon of literacy based on functionality has been proposed by scholars and organisations with interest in literacy as essential basic human requirement for survival. Omolewa (1981) has observed that, the phenomenon of literacy is a very effective instrument for human and societal development. Adamu (2000) believed that literacy involves competence in reading and interpreting texts of various scripts adding that it involves both skill in decoding and higher level of comprehension and interpretation. Literacy in its traditional form has been elaborately defined by Gudschinsky (1973) who stated

that a person is literate who, in a language that he speaks, can read and understand everything he would have understood if it had been spoken to him; and can write, so that it can be read, anything he can say.

For several years particularly among developing countries, the approach to literacy has been strictly traditional which lays emphasis on literacy as an end in itself. This approach has little or no emphasis to the relationship between literacy acquisition to individual's life and work, but simply according to UNESCO a literate person is he "who can with understanding both read and write a short simple statement on his everyday life". This trend was to change in 1965 following a world conference of ministers of education on the eradication of illiteracy held in Teheran, Iran under the auspices of UNESCO. The conference concluded that the traditional form of literacy as is practiced is heavily deficient to serve as instrument for national development especially among developing countries. A new approach which conceived literacy as a functional phenomenon is recommended and consciously promoted worldwide. This approach aims at making literacy relevant to individuals and national development efforts.

Thus, functionality in literacy is aimed at relating literacy to the individual's life and work within a community. According to General Report on the Third Conference on Adult Education "functionality should be taken to imply an integration of literacy training into society, so as to answer to cultural and social needs as well as to make it possible for the learner to participate in the life of society and to change it from within". In his observation on functionality in literacy, William (1969:95) stated that a person is literate when he has acquired the essential knowledge and skills which enable him to engage in all those activities in which literacy is required for effective functioning in his group and community, and where attainments in reading, writing and arithmetic make it possible for him to continue to use these skills towards his own and the community development. The two major requirements to functionalism are one, changes in economic and social opportunities and, two contributions to national economic and social progress. William (1969: 95) further identified seven (7) cardinal objectives of functionality in literacy, namely:

- i) To impart the skills of reading, writing and computation.
- ii) To provide work oriented knowledge.
- iii) To change the learner's whole approach to life.
- iv) To equip the individual to recognise, understand and subject to critical analysis and reasons behind his action.
- v) To prepare the individual to adopt a life of change in which traditions, custom and beliefs are constantly been challenged without causing him to lose his own identify,
- vi) To serve as a continuing process of learning,
- vii) To improve competence and widen his intellectual and social horizon.

Going by these objectives, functionalism in literacy has the purpose of making literacy skills acquisition purposeful and relevant to individual's social demands with the view to applying this skill to solve day to day problems. According to UNESCO (1988) functionally literate person is one who can engage in all those activities in which literacy is required for effective functioning of his group and community and also enabling him to continue to use reading, writing and calculation for his own and the community's development.

Ajami as a Literary Form

Hinzen (1994) has noted that no one has ever been born with the ability to read, write and count. He further, noted that communities or nations were offered the chance to learn or were pushed into a situation where these skills are necessary depending on historical and cultural contexts. This observation is true to the development of literacy of whatever form in Nigeria. Both *Ajami* and *Boko* forms of literacy which developed over the years in Nigeria have historical and cultural contexts anchored to the religions of Islam and Christianity which made fundamental demands on their followers or pushed their followers into a situation of learning the skills of reading, writing and computation in either Arabic alphabets or English alphabets. Oduran and Kazeem (1997) shared the **View** that the introduction of Arabic Literacy by Muslim traders towards the end of the 11th Century and western literacy through the activities of the Portuguese and British missionaries in the 16th and 19th Centuries provided the spring board for the take off of literacy education in Nigeria. Sarumi (2000) added that Islam and Christianity contributed to the development of literacy in Nigeria. He argued that prior to the advent of western education in many countries; Islamic literacy had been

well established citing Kanem-Borno empire as an example which had established literacy and numeric education in Arabic since 11th century.

Many Muslim communities in Nigeria have a long tradition of Arabic literacy dating back to 18th century A.D. that reached its climax with the establishment of the Sokoto Caliphate in 1804 up to 1903. This long tradition of Arabic literacy is said to have become so much part and parcel of the life of the people as far back as the middle of the 18th Century. It covers large areas involving many communities and ethnic groups around the North-West, North-East, North-Central, the Middle Belt, South West and some parts of the lower Niger areas. In all the ethnic groups in these areas Arabic alphabets have been modified and used in local languages as a form of literacy most especially in Hausa, Fulfulde, Yoruba and Kanuri languages. Adamu (2000) for instance expressed the opinion that the Arabic alphabets have been adopted to the Islamic people's vernaculars just as the Latin alphabets has been in the Christian west. It is also noted that in almost all parts of the world the religion of Christianity and Islam have been responsible for inculcating literacy skills to their followers aim at reading the scriptures and other religious literary works, but the end result has often been not only this but the effective use of literacy skills in many other areas of life and work, in making individuals more useful members of their community.

Historical accounts have indicated that the genre has played very significant role before and during the period of Sokoto caliphate. This role is not only on religious sphere but also on individual and social spheres. On individual level, record keeping, personal communication, literary work, and interpersonal transactions, were all undertaken applying Ajami (that is skills in reading, writing and computation in the vernaculars using Arabic alphabets). On the social level, government document, judicial records, trades and business transactions, as well as production records and diplomatic transactions were undertaken with Ajami literacy. Adamu (1990) in his account on the general history of the Sokoto Caliphate observed that the establishment of the caliphate new jobs were created and reserved for the literates, the pursuit of education became not only a religious duty but also an important social factor, that is a channel for materially improving the positions and material wellbeing of oneself. Adamu gave further evidence of the use of Ajami when he said that he (Dan Fodio) also wrote books and poems in Arabic and Fulfulde and a few in Hausa.

The Declining Relevance of Ajami Literacy

In 1903 the British defeated and took over the administration of Sokoto Caliphate. Ardo and Jumaidu (1990) opined that following the establishment of British colonial rule over the caliphate, the Islamic education system previously pursued was marginalized by the emergence of a new form of state sponsored formal education system. This marked the beginning of the declining relevance of ajami literacy among the Muslim communities. They also noted that even at the prime of the caliphate there was lack of seriousness in the pursuance of education for all perhaps the reason why Arabic, the language of the Islamic religion, was not learnt or spoken widely by the time the caliphate was conquered and in-fact even now almost a millennium (by conservative estimate) since the establishment of the Islamic education system in the area. This same treatment was accorded to Ajami which dwarfed its development and functionalism coupled with the notion by Muslims that education was mainly a religious duty. Another factor is that of British colonial administration treatment to Islamic education and Ajami literacy which in Adamu's view is always seen by the main stream educational establishment as a religious concern and therefore outside the province of the secular provision.

Making Ajami Literacy Relevant To National Development

In spite of the declining relevance of Ajami form of literacy by way of functionalism it still remains a very important form of literacy among the Muslim communities. This is because of its affiliation to Islamic religion which demand all its followers to learn to read and write in Arabic. In order to meet this fundamental demand it is observed that over 95% of Muslims children attend Qur'anic schools from which they learnt the Arabic alphabets and numerals. With mastery of the alphabets and numerals they adequately acquire the basic skills of reading, writing and computation that are converted to use into local vernaculars. Since the requirements of literacy vary very much from one kind of society to another and a literate person is one who can meet the normal demands for literacy made on him by his society, it implies that there is no particular language or orthography that has the exclusive usage for literacy. Just as Ilinzen (1994) argued that it is debatable whether the language imposed by past colonizers or the general attendance in school is (he correct criteria for determining the far reaching categorisation of literacy and illiteracy. And by all standard, Ajami

form of literacy has met all the requirements needed for an orthography which according to Stanford (1981) include psychological and educational factors, adequate writing system, teaching and reading materials and teacher's availability. Others are the aims of literacy instruction and the people's attitude toward language.

A pool of literates citizens of about 50 percent of the population exists and awaiting for opportunities to tap their dormant skills. The fundamental question according to Hinzen (1994) is how skills which have been taught with great effort but which cannot be immediately practiced can be maintained. The idea behind functional literacy rests on redirecting the concept of literacy away from its traditional context which is viewed as an end in itself and language specific to a concept of relevance and applicability as a means to an end with the view to enable individuals participate actively in community life. To make Ajami literacy functional therefore, it requires the creation of enabling conditions for all those who acquired the skills to put into practice in their day to day activities. Thus the following proposals are worthy of consideration.

1. Governments Policies and the National Language Question: English language will continue to remain the official language in the country with official recognition to three major vernaculars. Government should recognize, accept and promote the use of Ajami orthography as a literary form in some indigenous languages especially in those languages that have for long developed their literary form such as Hausa, Yoruba, Kanuri, and Fulfulde. With this recognition, governments should henceforth be translating its official documents main for public consumption using Ajami in these languages. It also become necessary for governments to come up with programmes and activities aimed at promoting the use of Ajami for the dissemination of information, ideas and knowledge across the country especially to those who have no other form of literacy skill apart from Ajami. This involved the federal, states and local government authorities.

2. The Print Media: Particularly newspapers, magazines, journals and periodicals. In the past, attempts were made by many concerned organizations to publish different media in Ajami for example, New Nigerian, Gaskiya tafi kwabo, Concord newspapers, the Triumph and many others. Failures of these publications notwithstanding, effort must be intensified by all stakeholders to promote publications in Ajami to boost enlightenment and re-awaken consciousness of vast number of Ajami literates who by official policy are considered illiterates.

3. The Academia: The academic community has the duty to protect and develop a durable form of Ajami literacy. It also has the duty to promote its practice especially universities, institutes and colleges. They will achieve these roles through research, and teachings as well as community services. The best approach to promoting Ajami for the academia is interdisciplinary and purposeful.

4. Research Institutes: These are specialized research organizations concerned with a specific sector of national development like health, education, agriculture, etc. The advantage of research institutes over the academia is application, This implies applied research carried out by the extension services section of different institutions. It involves the diffusion of ideas and innovations to provoke change. Many of these research institutes employed Ajami literacy as a strategy to community members, among who belong to Muslim communities but able to read and write in their mother tongues if encoded with Arabic orthography (Ajami). The Institute for Agricultural Research of Ahmadu Bello University is a good example. In its extension work in Northern Nigeria most of its instructional materials are published in Ajami.

5) Creative Minds: This involved encouraging publications of books, nobles, and other art works for disseminating information. This will enhance enlightenment and awareness.

6) Innovators and Inventors: With the development and influence of technology, these groups have succeeded in producing devices and materials as well as services which changes the way we do things with more efficiency and productivity. It is the more responsibility of inventors of products to provide manuals of operation which could be written in Ajami. This is the same with innovators of ideas. The change they envisage can only be achieved with understanding of the idea they want to inculcate. Changes in habits, attitudes and behaviour are only possible if the target of change is very

well informed.

7) Businesses and Industries: Members of business organizations need to do a lot of information and awareness campaign to sell their products or to keep equilibrium between products or services demanded and supplied. For example banks, service organizations can print public documents including or using Ajami orthography. This will provide information about a business and ensure quick responses to requests and other services. This will involve millions of people in the country. Industries will enhance their services to consumers by providing direction for product use written in Ajami. There are in the market today several products bearing information to users in Ajami orthography

8) Political Parties and Democratic Structures: Political parties has the responsibility of enlightening its members not only on party manifestos and government programmes but as well the sensitization of members about national goals and citizenship duties and rights. Political parties can disseminate information to members through printed matter using Ajami orthography. Institutions and organizations which seek to promote democratic ideal will employ strategies appropriate to information which can equally be carried using Ajami.

9) Parastatals and Institutions: Mostly: Federal, State or Local Government Agencies. Information to their client can be passed in Ajami characters.

10) Civil Societies: This group includes human rights organizations, advocacy organizations and others. Their coverage, acceptance and efficiency and effectiveness will be enhanced if they adopt Ajami in their communication to their clients and the general society

11) Development Organizations: These can be governmental or non-governmental, international or national. Those of them with a stake particularly in adult literacy include UNSCO, UNDP, UNICEF, UNHCR, ILO, WHO, ECOWAS, AU, etc. At the national level are mostly federal government development agencies. All of them have in common the objective of disseminating information, knowledge and skill acquisitions to enhance welfare and improve life. They draw large clients among Muslim communities who will benefit more, if information are carried in Ajami.

12) Other NGOs: Many of them operate at national and international levels with the common objectives of disseminating information to achieve attitude change, Ajami will equally serve as the perfect medium.

13) Individuals: These include philanthropists, and charity foundations with vested interest in adult literacy education. Their programmes can equally adapt Ajami for their clients in Muslim communities to improve the diffusion of ideas.

National Literacy Policy

Government since the collapse of Sokoto Caliphate has continued to sponsor education most especially literacy programmes aimed to eradicate illiteracy on the country. By 2001 estimates, rate of illiteracy among youths 15 and above was 40.7 percent. If the population of those literate in Ajami but not in western form is added the literacy percentage of the people will reach about 60% if not more. If these people are given the opportunities to apply the skill in their everyday activities Nigeria would have reached the literacy level required for taking off on the path to national development. Ironically, however Ajami has no place in the nation's education policy. Ajami is not mentioned in any part of its sections not even in the section dealing with 'mass literacy, adult and non- formal education'. Unfortunately again, government has a long history of participation in especially adult literacy because of the recognition of the ills of illiteracy and the desire to eradicate it. Oduran and Kazeem provided us with a vivid graph of government involvement and interest in mass literacy which they said begun since May, 1941 when a sub-committee was set by the colonial secretary's advisory committee to suggest the best approach to the eradication of mass illiteracy. This

means since then the point was missed for not recognizing and recommending Ajami as a form of literacy particularly for the Muslim communities in the country which constitute 50 percent of the people of Nigeria.

An examination of National Policy on Education (1987) as revised (1998) revealed that no provision of Ajami or its mention as a form of literacy. Mass literacy, adult and non-formal education provision contained in section seven (7) sub-sections seventy four (74) to seventy nine (79) did not make any mention of Ajami. All the same, the overall philosophy of Nigeria provided ground for recognizing Ajami literacy as a matter of national policy. The philosophy has the belief of one Nigerian society which "live in unity and harmony as one indivisible, indissoluble, democratic and sovereign nation founded on the principles of freedom, equality and justice". Whether this philosophy is meant to be idealistic or instrumental we cannot make conclusion. But basically this statement is to direct national conscience to work to attain the national objectives of achieving:

- a) A free and democratic society;
- b) A just and egalitarian society;
- c) A great and dynamic economy;
- d) A united, strong and self-reliant nation; and
- e) A land of bright and full opportunities for all citizens;

The philosophical foundation of education in Nigeria is built around the recognition of education as an instrument for national development and the need to provide functional education as an instrument for national development and a progressive, united Nigeria. The school curriculum must be relevant, practicable and comprehensive. The methodology will be based on interest and ability which will determine individual's choices in educational opportunities.

Generally, education in Nigeria at all levels and for whatever form or type has four cardinal goals which are;

- a) The inculcation of national consciousness and national unity;
- b) The inculcation of the right types of values and attitudes for the survival of the individual and the Nigerian society;
- c) The training of the mind in the understanding of the world around; and
- d) The acquisition of appropriate skills and the development of mental, physical and social abilities and competencies for the individual to live in and contribute to the development of his society.

After careful examination of these vital portions of the policy which makes provisions about education in general not its specific form all provided official recognition to Ajami except the provision on its application. One can only conclude that the situation is either an oversight or an omission. Whichever is the case there is the need to ponder over issues raised by Ilinzen (1994) in which he asked:

Who is equally literate and who is not, in what language, in what context and for what society, group and culture? How much do we really appreciate of language in a country contributes to a rich cultural heritage and how much do we respect this fact in our literacy effort? Is it not a fact that development of written cultures, the standardization of languages, and even the decision to use three national languages for literacy work in multilingual societies contributions to the total lose or/and the reduced use of languages? I hope that my brief reflections are taken as just sentimentality.

These posers summed up the situation we are in Nigeria particularly with regard to Ajami. A large population of Nigerians are literate not by official standard but by the fact of acquiring reading, writing and

computation skills in Ajami and personally utilizes them in their personal capacities. In many Muslim communities especially among the Hausa/Fulani, more enroll in Qur'anic schools than formal schools, many of them complete the Qur'anic level of education than completers of primary six. Learning seems to have higher degree of achievement in Qur'anic schools than the formal school.

Conclusion

From all indications Ajami literacy even though not given official recognition has continued to thrive and continued to gain more acceptance as evidenced by progressive innovations as for example with the Islamiyya Schools and in areas of curriculum content, methodology and organizational management. A further respite is the government recognition found in the Universal Basic Education blue prints. Many of its provisions have implications to Ajami either directly or indirectly. These are other factors that will eventually influence government policy on mass literacy to Ajami,

These factors are economic, social, political, cultural and technological. The beauty of all these however is the fact that Ajami form of literacy is a pool of resource waiting to be tapped. Replenishment of constant supply is absolute since the literacy genre developed out of long standing historical, cultural, political, and religious context.

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