

A Study of Relationship between Arabic and Yoruba Languages

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Abstract

This study examined the relationship between Arabic and Yoruba languages. An attempt is made to trace the history of the Yoruba as a race and the influence that Arabic language has on Yoruba language. This influence is observed in the pronunciation of some Yoruba words traceable to Arabic with the same meaning. These facts, if well proved will go a long way in lending credence to the historical belief that the Yoruba race originated from the Arab. To elucidate this, traces of Arabic words in Yoruba language are noted. Similarity in pronunciation of some letters in both languages, comparison in construction of words between them and similarity in the use of some words in both languages are analysed with the views of some Arabic scholars. Conclusion is then drawn to show the impact of Arabic on Yoruba Language.

Keywords

Arabic, Yoruba, Language, Semitic, Race

1. Introduction

No language in the world is without an origin. The origin may be from where it is being spoken or near to it. The language spoken may change from the origin but still, there must be traces or elements of this origin in it that will show emergence of this language from this source.

This is what happened in the Arabic diffusion of Arabic to Yoruba Language either by borrowing or historical connections. On historical connection, Burns (1972: p. 120) explains that before the first settlers of Yoruba stock at Ile-Ife led by Oduduwa, there was a black tribe called Negro, which was small in number but these emigrants (The Yoruba) later dominated this tribe with their language and culture.

Abubakre (2004: p. 21) explains how Yoruba language has been so much influenced by Arabic through various linguistic borrowings that one can be tempted to believe the speculated theory of Yoruba migration from

Mecca. He states further on internal proofs of Yoruba's early contact with Arabic and Islamic institutions in the literature of *Ifa* poetry, the theme of which is about *Orunmila* and *al-Qaadī* (Yoruba: *Alukaadī* or *Alikaadī*), a judge of the Sharia court.

To ascertain the level of relationship between Arabic and Yoruba languages, this paper will look into the following issues:

- 1) Origin of Arab and their Language
- 2) Origin of Yoruba and their Language
- 3) Traces of Arabic words in Yoruba Language
- 4) Similarity in pronunciation of some Arabic and Yoruba Letters
- 5) Comparison in construction of words between Yoruba and Arabic languages
- 6) Lexical similarities in Yoruba and Arabic languages
- 7) Conclusion

2. Origin of Arab and Their Language

According to [Khalifah \(2000: p. 46\)](#), the Arab originated from Semitic race who lived in Euphrates, the land between two rivers (Tigris and Euphrates). Distress in this ancient city led to their separation throughout the World while the Arab settled at the Peninsula attributed to them. Their language is Semitic and it is nearest to the origin because the Arab did not mix so much with others (unlike other tribes whose languages have gone beyond the boundary of their origin). The said Semitic languages, as stated by [Al-Fakhūri \(N.D: p. 143\)](#) are:

- Babilīyyah wal Ashiriyyah (Babylonian and Assyrian)
- al-Ibraniyyah (Hebrew)
- al-Himyariyyah (Himyaritic)
- al-Aramiyyah (Phoenician)
- al-Finiqiyyah (Phoenician)
- al-Habbashiyyah (Ethiopian)
- al-Arabiyyah (Arabic)

[Rahim \(2003: pp. 2-3\)](#) states that Arabic Language is the language of Prophet Ismail, though it was neither the language of his father (Prophet Ibrahim) as his language was *Kildāniyyah* (Chaldean) nor that of his mother who was an Egyptian and her language was *Ibrāniyyah* (Hebrew). Researchers on Ismail's language, according to [Khalifah \(2000: p. 46\)](#) have two opinions viz:

1) That he learnt this language from his neighbours who were Yemenites from Amalikiid tribe who lived with him beside *'Zamzam* (a spring in Makkah). It was among them that he got married.

2) That Arabic Language was the Language of Ya^crub son of Qahtan who was recognized as the father of the Arab and got his name from the place called *Araba* from the *Arabal-Muta^carribah* (the dwellers of the cities among the tribes of Arab) who mixed with others and also lived in Yemen.

With regard to these opinions, the Isma'elite language came from Yemen. Apart from this, one may think that its pronunciation is Chaldeanite and Hebraic languages from his father and mother respectively and later spread all over Arabian Peninsula with different pronunciations.

[Adedimeji \(2012: p. 122\)](#) reveals that Arabic is the mother tongue of the Arab. This tribe are the people that speak Arabic as their native language. Their language along with the Hebrew and others forms the large chunk of the Semitic languages. Majority of Arab originated from the Arabian Peninsula. Some scholars asserts that the name *Arab* was derived from *Araba* which is another name for *Tuhaamah* a settlement in the peninsula that the early Arab were confined to and the social, cultural, religious and linguistic nerve of all the present-day Arab.

3. Origin of Yoruba and Their Language

[Folorunso \(2009: p. 16\)](#) is of the opinion that the origin of the Yoruba people remains uncertain, that no definite knowledge has emerged. He explains that the general trend of theories on it are based on Yoruba oral traditions that of a possible origin in the East especially from the Arab according to history on one side. The other side is that they came from Egypt because of similarities of culture, religious observances, works of arts and burial between the Yoruba race and ancient Egypt. This assertion made some scholars concluded that they migrated from the Upper Nile of Egypt.

Earlier on, Burns (1972: p. 120), in his contribution on the origin of the Yoruba and their place in Nigeria, he states that the African population in Nigeria is divided into numerous tribal and linguistic groups (with Yoruba inclusive) great and small, speaking different languages, professing different religions and different from one another in manner and customs. With particular reference to origin of Yoruba, he admits that little is known. Their ancestors have left for them practically no written records or monuments and their traditions interwoven with myth and legend, fragmentary and in many cases conflicting. He then explains further that the statement made by Sultan Bello of Sokoto, that the people of Yoruba, originated from the remnants of the children of Canaan, who were of the tribe of Namrud (Nimrod) (popularly called Lamurudu in Yoruba) and settled at Ile-Ife as a consequence of their being driven out of Arabia by Yaa-rooba, son of Qahtan to the Abyssinia. On the way, they left a tribe of their own people at every place they stopped. He also opines that all tribes of Sudan originated from them. He concludes that whatever their origin, it is probably that the Yoruba were originally of Negro blood.

Eventually, a further tradition that they (the Yoruba) came from Upper Egypt has better foundation in the sense that certain carved stones found at Ile-Ife, the manner in which the dead are bound for burial and the kind of cloth used for this purpose are supposed to indicate an Egyptian origin.

Al-Ilori (1987: p. 33) in his own part, did not support a myth that the fore-father of Yoruba and his wife descended from heaven down to Ile-Ife and from there his sons and descendants spread-black, white and yellow in complexion throughout the world. He referred this statement to Samuel Johnson and his further explanation on what Sultan Bello has said from Muhammad Masani in his book *Az'haru'r Ruba.fi Akhbari Biladi Yoruba*.

In his own submission, Al-Ilori affirms the statement that the present Yoruba tribes were formed from four origins: 1) Negroes, 2) Nubians, 3) Berbers and 4) Arab. He opines that the last three tribes have dwelled in Egypt, took from their cultures and carried them to Yoruba land. He then gives account that it has remained till now in Yoruba some of Arabic words which are more than one third in which Yoruba speak daily as it has remained in Nubian and Berber languages.

Based on the different opinions on the origin of Yoruba and their language, it is apparent that part of Yoruba language did not come from nowhere but seems to be connected with Arabic than any other languages.

4. Traces of Arabic Words in Yoruba Language

Apart from the borrowed words from Hausa to Yoruba language like *Kai* means “leave the place”, *gāni* means “to see properly”, *magaji* means “heir/leader of a family” and host of others, there are still many words in Yoruba language which emanate from Arabic. It cannot be said precisely here how and when these Arabic words diffused to Yoruba language beside the indications that showed the coming of Yoruba either from Upper Egypt or from the descendants of Nimrod. Besides, the word “Yoruba” seems to emanate from the said Ya^orub son of Qahtan.

5. Similarity in the Pronunciation of Some Arabic and Yoruba Letters (Table 1)

There are some letters in Yoruba that are near in pronunciation to Arabic ones. These may be taken through the historical link between the Yoruba and Arab people (see Table 1).

There are some letters that are peculiar to either Yoruba or Arabic Languages alone that cannot be found except in either of the two (see Table 2).

6. Comparison in Construction of Word between Yoruba and Arabic

Among the characteristics of Yoruba language is the struggle to vowelize all Arabic words or to stop on them because it is not known in Yoruba to stop on consonant (*as-sukūn*) but ending the word on vowel always such as *mu^oallim* in Arabic *malīmu* in Yoruba, *qalam* as *Kalamu*, Qurān as *Kurāni* etc. This also appears in pronouncing some Arabic nouns such as Kāmil in Arabic but Yoruba calls it Kāmilu, Ibrāhim as Buraimo, Maryam as *Mariamo*, Şerifah as Şerīfatu, Mas^oud as Masūdi etc.

Furthermore, Ghaladanchi (1982: p. 125) also supports the views of relevant constructions in some areas in Arabic that if we look at the angle of grammatical and etymological bases and structure of the word, it will be observed that local grammatical bases have impact on the student of Arabic language. In the struggle to use it, the student falls to mistake either in grammar or etymology in direction of pronunciation.

Table 1. Similarities between Arabic and Yoruba letters.

Yoruba Letter	Arabic Transliteration	English Equivalent
Aa	Alif Hamza	A
Bi	Ba	B
Ti	Ta	T
Ji	Jim	J
Hi	Ḥa	H
Di	Dal	D
Ri	Ra	R
Si	Sin	S
Ṣi	Ṣhin	Sh
Fr5i	Fa	F
Gi	Ghayn	G
Ki	Kaf	K
Li	Lam	L
Mi	Mim	M
Ni	Nūn	N
Wi	Wā	W
Yi	Yā	Y

Table 2. Differences between letters of Yoruba and Arabic languages.

YORUBA	ARABIC
Ee	Thā
Eẹ	Khā
Gb	Zayy
Oo	Ṣād
Ọọ	‘ayn
Pi	Ḍād
Uu	Qāf
Ii	Ḥā
	Ṭā

7. Lexical Similarities in Yoruba and Arabic Languages (Table 3)

There are some similarities in the use of words in Yoruba and Arabic languages especially the words that have something to do with religion and its creed or names of some items. Some of the words seem to have Arabic origin while others look like borrowed ones. The study will focus on those seem to have Arabic origin alone with the same meaning in the two languages.

In this regard, Abubakre (1983: p. 60) quotes from Joseph Greenberg the four possible sources of language similarities (see Table 3).

- 1) chance,
- 2) symbolism,

Table 3. Similarities between Yoruba and Arabic words.

Yoruba	Arabic (in Transliteration)	Meaning in English
Ààrá	Ar-Ra ^c ad	Thunder
Abeṛe	Ibrah	Needle
Àduà	Ad-Du ^a	Prayer
Alááfià	Al- ^c Āfiyah	Good Health
Alààyè	Al-Ḥayyu	The Living One
Àléebu	Al- ^c Ayb	Blemish
Àlikámà	Al-Qamhu	Wheat
Àlubarika	Al- Barakah	Blessing
Àlùbòsà	Al-Başal	Onion
Àluwàlá	Al-Wuḍu	Ablution
Àşále	Āsal	Evening
Baálé/Baále	Ba ^a al	Husband/ Lord
Dábirà	Dabbara	To dispose
Èébú	^c Ayb	Abuse
Fààrí	Fakhr	Ostentation
Fítílà	Fatilah	Wick
Hàntu/Hànturu	Khaṭṭu	To write Arabic character
Işeṛe	Ḥasala	To happen
Ileyá	Adhā	Immolation
Máléékà	Malaika	Angel
Òmùḡo	Ḥamuqa	Stupid/Imbecile
Qdún	I ^d	Festival
Wákàtí	Waqt	Time/Hour
Iná	An-Nār	Fire
Qlḡhun	Allah	God

- 3) borrowing, and
- 4) genetic relationship.

He gives details that using the above analysis as a yardstick to measure the relationship of Arabic with Yoruba, it will be found that both chance and symbolic similarities are of marginal use in a linguistic investigation. He stresses further that if the similarity of a lexical item in a language with another one that involves both form and meaning, such similarity is due to receive an explanation more than of a chance. At the same time, if an item requires an historical explanation, there is need to modify its historicity. If the historical connection justifies a genetic interference then that is a step ahead of the other whose historical relationship involves only borrowing.

8. Conclusion

Having carried out this study on the comparison between Arabic and Yoruba languages, it can be easily concluded that the belief of some people that Oduduwa, the progenitor of the Yoruba, descended from Heaven to Ile-Ife is baseless and misleading. The history confirms the statement that the present Yoruba tribes were from four origins *i.e.* Negroes, Nubians, Berbers and Arab, while the last three were to have known to have dwelt in Egypt, took from their languages and cultures and carried them to Yoruba land.

There are some indications to suppose that parts of Yoruba language emanated from Arabic, which has root in Semitic language. In addition to this, mixture of different languages or dialects in use without proper records to guide these languages/dialects and the speakers always brings another language/dialect in between; neither the totality of the first language/dialect nor the second. Generation after generation, the first and second languages/dialects will gradually diminish until they are forgotten totally while the emergence of that new one will supercede them in terms of speaking and daily uses. That is what might happen in Yoruba/Arabic case. In a nutshell, the comparison of Arabic and Yoruba languages shows that the diffusion of Arabic to Yoruba may be attributed to historical connections between the people of Yoruba and the Arab.

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