

CHAPTER THREE

ARABIC CONTRIBUTION TO CONTEMPORARY NIGERIAN LITERATURE: THE ILORIN LEGACY*

By Abdulmuttalib Ahmad Ambali OFR

I want to thank the organizers of the Convention of the Association of Nigerian Authors (A.N.A.) for their kind gesture to invite me to address this august audience. I must confess and right from the beginning crave for your indulgence, if I fail to meet your expectation on this topical issue. The more I delve into the topic the more I realize that it is a deep well, full of water of knowledge and the more I realize that it is an ocean of research that the more you swim in it the more you realize that you still have a long way to go. It is one of the tempting topical issues that the more you know the less you feel you know about it. Added to this is the scarcity of the time at my disposal to prepare for the talk. * However, I promise you that, by the grace of God, I shall do my best. The invitation hinted me that, "It is expected that the talk will focus on the literary output of the three venerable and influential Ilorin literary gurus who have been identified as (1) Shaykh Muahammad

Kamalud-deen Al-Adabiy (2) Shaykh Abubakar Ibn Ikokoro and (3) Shaykh Adam Abdullahi Al Ilory". The combination makes the task difficult for me and very intriguing because it arouses my interest and curiosity.

The Origin of Arabic

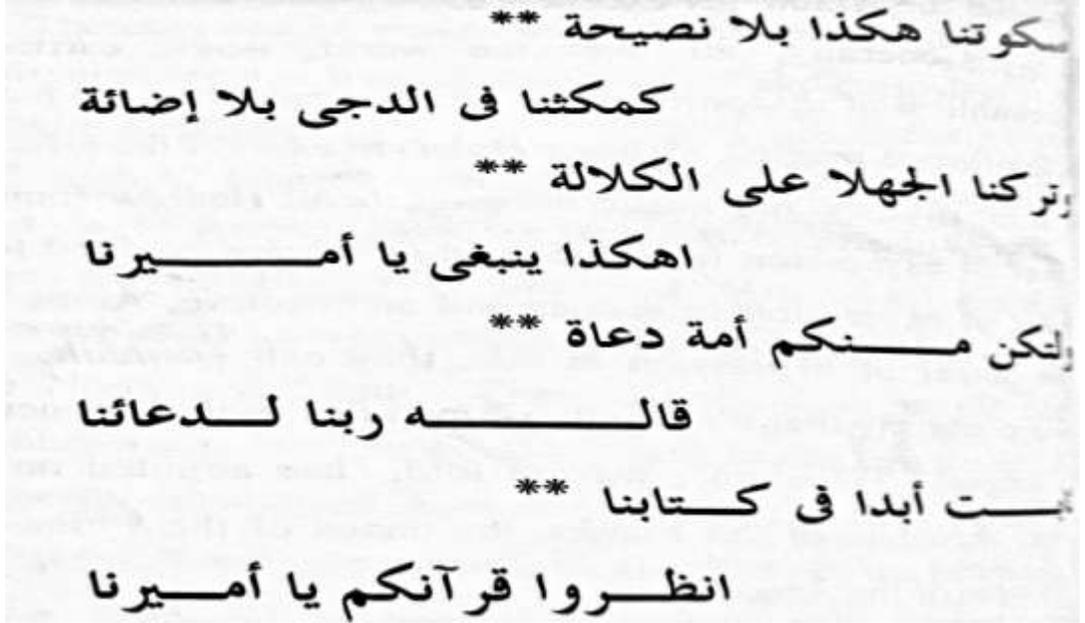
I wish to take-off from the origin of Arabic and its influence on the Arabs. The word 'Arabs in its primitive sense refers to the inhabitants of **Jaziralul 'Arab** i.e. Arabian Peninsula which is both geographically and culturally divisible into the North and South. Their dialects both in the two geographical zones were originally called Arabic. In the South there was the dialect of **Yaman** while the dialect of **Hijaz** dominated the North. The Arabs of the North of the peninsula, unlike their southern counterparts, had little or no contact with the peoples outside their world. They were restricted in the North by the Mediterranean Sea, in the East by Persian Gulf, in the West by Red Sea and Gulf of 'Adan in the South.

It was within the North that Islam was born and it was the Islamic faith that brought the Arabs of the North out of their shell and gave them the break through to have contact with the outside world. It was then that the northern dialect of **Hijaz** metamorphosed into the **Linga Franca** of Islam and over-night

superseded its southern sister dialect of **Yaman** and became the Arabic per excellence.

Generally, all over the world, magic carries the connotation of disapproval but Arabs regard their language as “a legitimate magic”, (**Sihrun Halal**) to express the effects the rhythm, rhymes and music have on them, Hebrew found the power of expression in Psalms and Greek are credited for the power of expression statues and architecture, Arabs found their power of expression in ode, they call **Qasidah**. They believe and say that the beauty of man lies in the eloquence of his tongue. “Wisdom” we are told, "has alighted on three things: The Franks, the hands of the Chinese and the tongue of the Arab"¹

A poet among the Arabs, had his function in the time of war or peace. He was a molder of public opinion, oracle, guide, orator, historian and spokesman of his community and respected assessor of the rulers of his time, Shaykh Badamasiy Ibn Musa of Agbaji in Ilorin used his knowledge of Arabic to play this role against the ruler of his time who attempted to seal the mouths of the Muslim preachers in Ilorin.



Meaning:

Our silence in this manner without caution is a similitude of remaining in darkness without lamp.

Our dear ruler, is it proper for us to abandon the men without knowledge to go astray? Our God ordered those who called to the way of God to let there be among them a group who will be calling to the way of Allah. It is forever so in our scripture. Have a look at your Qur'an, our dear Emir.²

History of Ilorin

The Author of the History of the Yorubas, Reverend Samuel Johnson (Anla Ogun) classified Ilorin as one of the three peculiar

Yoruba towns. Its other peculiar sister towns are Ibadan and Abeokuta. He lamented the odd situation in Ilorin Peculiarity saying:

*How it came about that Ilorin a **pure Yoruba town** and one time the third city in the kingdom fell into the hands of **aliens** and to this day allegiance to other than its **rightful sovereign** but to this day the principal market and the chief mosque of the town remain still in front of the house of the founder and the **rightful owner of Ilorin.**³ (Emphasis mine)*

The opinion remains correct and incontrovertible as long as we limit our consideration to the dominance of Yoruba as the language of Ilorin Community. I opine, however, that the sentiments expressed by the learned author did not take cognizance of the fact that it is not all the time that the language spoken in a society serves as **bona fide** criterion to determine the socio-cultural life of the society. Ilorin is a good example.

The students of Ilorin history are unanimous that it was a very small village founded towards the tail end of 18th Century, say 1780 about thirty years before the coming of Sheikh Salih Alimi, may Allah be merciful with him. The earliest settler was Ojo Isekuse, a hunter from Ilofa, followed by Eminla, then another hunter, Dada, who settled at Okelele and later, Afonja, the Kankanfo, joined them. Of great significance to our discussion and general history of Ilorin was a group of Muslims who settled in what is today known as Ilorin before the beginning of 19th Century. They chose Okesuna as their place of abode. **Okesuna** was the place of abode of all those who opted to live individually and as a group according to the dictates of Islam. **Suna** is an Islamic term which means the Muslim way of life. These people did not constitute part of the people of Ilorin Rev. Johnson had in mind when he talked of Ilorin's peculiarity. He said:

*There were several towns
and villages around at no very
great distance from Ilorin, e.g.
kanla, Okesuna, Ganmo,
Elerinjare, Idofian, Oke-Oyi...*⁴

Alhaji Adam Abdullahi Al-Illory identified the spot of Okesuna along the present site of the mini campus of University of Ilorin. The head of Okesuna Muslim Community was a distinguished and pious scholar Attahir Sholagberu. The arrival of Sheikh Salih Alimi in 1817 was a significant turning point both in the history of Islam and Ilorin itself. The former changed from private to state religion. The magnetic personality of Sheikh Salih Alimi won the attraction, recognition and respect of all the groups who had earlier settled in and around the place known as Ilorin today. His personality also attracted followers from both North and South of what became Nigeria.

The influx marked the turning point of transformation of Ilorin from a village wrapped in obscurity, to a town destined to play a leading role in the history of Nigeria, especially in the spread of Islam to where it was not known in Yorubaland and its consolidation where it has reached.

Sheikh Salih Alimi sought and obtained the co-operation of all the groups ranging from his pupils, associates to companions, some of whom were Fulanis, Hausas, Nupes, Yorubas and Kanuris to establish an Islamic society, named Ilorin Emirate. New Ilorin was an amalgamation of the Okesuna group, the Fulani group

headed by Olufadi, the Gambari group under the leadership of Bako and the Yoruba groups of Afonja, Ojo and Dada. They were unanimous to seek God's favour by observing one-month voluntary special fasting in which they fed only on fruits and plants. With this background, it is difficult to agree with Rev. Johnson that Ilorin is being ruled by "aliens" and that its allegiance was misplaced. This is because Ilorin has undergone a change from tribal community to a Muslim society. Hogpin observed:

The population as already stated, is predominantly Yoruba, though it is now of so cosmopolitan a character as so defy classification respecting its origin. Even Johnson the historian would have some difficulty in deciding to which of his four great sections of the Yoruba race these people may be said to belong. Indeed, it is doubtful whether it ever was capable of such classification; it probably grew at an early date to be a town of refuge to all and sundry in times of unrest. Ajikobi and Alanamu are definitely Yoruba wards, as are the Ibagun and Okaka Sub-wards of the Gambari and Fulani wards respectively. The

Emir's ward and two of the sub-wards of the Fulani Ward possess Fulani rulers and three sub-wards of the Gambari ward a Hausa administration; but in none save Zongo and Karuma in the Gambari ward, essentially Hausa quarters, does any but the Yoruba predominate among the ordinary population.⁵

The most conspicuous legacy of the Founding Fathers of Ilorin was their reflection of the statement credited to the Prophet, peace be on him, that: "Two classes of thirsty people cannot be satisfied: the seekers of knowledge and the seekers of material wealth." As they belonged to the former, they spare no effort to seek knowledge. A Yoruba student seeking the Islamic knowledge from a Fulani and Hausa Mallam had to learn the mother tongue of his teacher to remove the language barrier between the pupil and the teacher, though later, the teachers mastered Yoruba, the dominant language of the society. It must be mentioned that the knowledge was sought for the understanding of the religion and its practice and not for economic purpose. This was why it did not stop their economic and commercial activities. The mornings were devoted to teaching and learning, while the afternoons were left

for weaving, fanning, cap making, blacksmithing, embroidery and other craft works. The evening were left for the commercial activities to sell their product. Thursdays and Fridays were the weekends and as such the marriage merriments were fixed traditionally for that period of the week.

The Muslims take the knowledge of Islam as **Amana** i.e. a responsibility which should be discharged by its practice and dissemination. This made the propagation of Islam through learning, teaching and preaching another legacy of the founding fathers of Ilorin. I want to classified efforts into the home and the expansionist sectors. Many scholars established Arabic schools in their respective houses to discharge this onerous responsibility. A school of specialists in Islamic jurisprudence. *Tafsir* Qur'anic exegesis and Hadith was established by Muhammad Ibn Ahmad Baygore (1913d) Ahmad Ibn Abubakar was a product of the Al-Baygore School. *

Ahmad Ibn Abubakar

In compliance with the traditional modesty of Ilorin, I shall deal first with the oldest of the three personalities of our focus, Shaykh Ahmad Ibn Abubakar. His family house is Ile Ikokoro in

Aluko. A reliable source puts his birth at about 1870. He was a pupil of a number of distinguished scholars in Ilorin and finally Shaykh Muhammad Baygore.

He travelled far and wide within Nigeria and through self-efforts, and despite the common and understandable cold attitude of the people of his age to Western Education, the sage acquired literacy in English both from Lokoja and Lagos. The genius never visited any Arab land nor had the opportunity of formal education in any regular school, yet he attained enviable mastery of Arabic as reflected by his works: both prose and poetry. He had his education through the traditional method and had no contact whatsoever with any Arab.

Like he was a product of knowledge from many scholars he produced a number of scholars. On the list of such pupils of his were the great preacher Shaykh Muhammad Bello Ajongolo, Shaykh Salahud Din from Ikoyi, Shaykh Nalah Olosun, Shaykh Abdul Salam Fagba who later established at Ijebu Ode, Shaykh Hanbali, Shaykh Abubakar of Sakama, his scribe and Shyakh Abdul Hamid, one time Imam Imale, that is the direct father of the Imam Imale, Shaykh Abdullah Abdul Hamid, may Allah preserve him for the service of knowledge and faith, who was the second in command

in the hierarchy of Imams in Ilorin. Shaykh Abdul Hamid, may Allah shower His mercy on him, distinguished himself in both writing in prose and poetry.

Firstly, on the request of Shaykh Abubakar of Ita Akanni in Lagos, Ahmad Ibn Abubakar wrote his book called *Iltiqat Al Mutun* in five branches of Arabic studies. The book dealt with *Nahw*, Grammar *Sarf*, Etymology *Ma'aniy*, Semantic *Bayan*, Eloquence and *Badi*, Esthetic.

Secondly, his most popular book is called *Ta'lif*. Its full and real name is *Akhbarul Quran Min Umara Balad Ilorin*, meaning, the record of the events of the tenures of the rulers of Ilorin. The ten chapters of the book briefly traced the History of Ilorin from the inception up to the reign of Amir Sulayman. It was completed in Rabi'l Awwal 1330AH corresponding to 1912C.E. It discussed the great events of the first six Emirs of Ilorin; their Imams, Judges and other key officers of the Emirate. The sage was criticized for writing on the Emirs rather than the scholars. It might be true but the Emirs' role dominated the Society and their chronology provided the convenient order to follow to determine who was, what and what events occurred at each Emir's time. Many events

in those days were dated by time of the rulers. We should not forget also that the Emir's were themselves scholars.

Thirdly, one of his poems that history retains for us was in praise of his friend and master Alhaji Muhammad when he was appointed Wazir in 1922 in Bida. It is a forty-line poem.

Fourthly, we are in the possession of **Ratha** eulogy he composed on Imam Harun, a distinguished scholar from Ibadan who died in 1935.

Finally, out of what is at our disposal is the **Qasidah**, Ode, he composed in 1930 **Edul Adha** festival during the reign of Amir Abdulkadir who ruled Ilorin from 1919 to 1959. The Qasidah was 18 lines composed to express thanks and reciprocate the Emir's gesture.

Shaykh Ahmad Ibn Abubakar left nobody in doubt that he was a genius of all the times. He produced great scholar and left indelible marks of piety and scholarship in the sand of history. Interestingly all the poetry works compared with the prose in **Ta'lif** revealed strangely, greater power of expression in the former than latter.

It is equally curious to want to know why *Ta'lif* stopped in 1912 in the reign of the sixth Emir while there is abundant evidence that the author lived to witness the era of the ninth Emir.

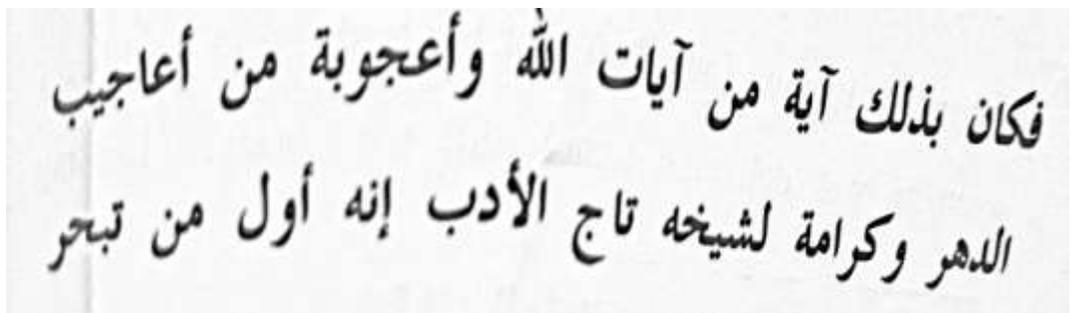
Alhaji Muhammad Habibullah Kamalud-Deen (FISN. MFR, ORSA Egypt)

Taking the historical incident in which Balogun Biala, one-time Balogun Ajikobi was deported as basis, the birth of our second personality was fixed around 1907. The father of the figure under focus Mallam Habibullahi of Ara-Agbaji compound, Ilorin lived on weaving and embroidery and trained his child in the trade. He sent him to Shaykh Salahudeen Babata, Ilorin to obtain the rudimentary lessons of Qur'an as the tradition of the people of Ilorin to learn Qur'an side by side

With acquisition of a trade. Against the wish of his father, a Muslim scholar, whose family's house is next but one to Aragbaji compound enticed Shaykh Kamalud-deen for reasons not immediately appreciated nor disclosed until much later as unfolded by the subsequent events. His colleagues in the care shaykh Muhammad Jumu'a Al-Labib, included Shaykh Imam Yahaya Adafila who spread the knowledge of Islam in Ibiraland.

Shaykh Salih, one time Imam Imale of Ilorin and Alfa Salman Omoda (**Al-Muftiy**) otherwise popularly called Alfa Ake i.e. going by the area where he established in Abeokuta and Alfa Zakariyyah Omoda who taught the founder of the militant group who have a special way of putting on their turban and generally referred to as **Makondoro** group.

When Shaykh Adam had cause to record the achievement of Shaykh Muhammad Kamalud-deen, he described him as '**Ujubatuz Zaman** i.e. the miracle of the time. He (Adam) reflected on the incident when his (Muhammad's) teacher ordered him to take charge of his public air sermon at tender age of fifteen. He said and I quote:



فكان بذلك آية من آيات الله وأعجوبة من أعاجيب
الدهر وكرامة لشيخه تاج الأدب إنه أول من تبحر

يُتَخَرَّجُ فِي مِثْلِ سَنِهِ فِي جَمِيعِ بِلَادِ نِيجِيرِيَا بَلْ فِي غَرْبِ
أَفْرِيْقِيَا عَمُومًا فِي ذَلِكَ الزَّمَانِ...

By the virtue of performance, he has become one of the great signs of God, one of the wonders of the time and an evidence of the greatness of his teacher, Tajul Adab. This is because he is the first to attain the height of academic excellence at his age throughout the Yoruba land and indeed the whole West Africa at that time.⁶

He used three distinguished geniuses to illustrate the greatness of Alhaji Muhammad Kamalud-deen: Imam Shafi'y, Ibn Tiamiyah and As-Suyyutiy who attained such a height by or before they were twenty. He argued that their cases are distinguishable from that of Shaykh Kamalud-deen for a number of reasons. Imam Shafi'y lived in Makkah and learnt from Shaykh in charge of the sacred Mosque, **Ka'bah**, before going to Madinah to learn from

Imam Malik. Ibn Tamiyyah was a child born unto the family of scholars. For As-Suyyuti he explained that his nickname was "the child of books". His mother was looking for a book for her husband in his library when he was delivered right inside the library. The big contrast in respect our personality is that, unlike all these giants of Islamic Knowledge, he was typically from a modest origin of unlettered parents. He learnt from non-Arabs and grew in a non-Arabian environment. Yet he attained that height at that tender age. He cannot be called but one of the wonders of our age.

It is setting oneself an herculean task to attempt to list his pupils because there is no town or village in Yoruba land that you will not find his direct pupils or those who learnt from his disciples. It is said that he was of critical mind, meticulous and applied the principles on himself and his writings to such extent that most of his works are not within easy reach of the member of the public. Yet the sharp eagle eyes of research of Alhaji Adam Abdullahi availed us with one of Shaykh Kamal's previous works. It is the poem he wrote in 1945 to receive the 9th Emir of Ilorin and the Emir of Bauchi, when the latter paid the former a royal visit and the latter made the former pay a visit to Alhaji Kamal's school as a model of excellence. Part of it reads as follows:

بدا قمر مجد بمدرسة العلا **
أميران صنوا الأصل بحرا عطية

أمير إلورن والأمير بزيلة **
أمير بوشى ذى حما وسرية
ومعه ولي العهد صينت حيانه **
وقاضى قضاة العادل فى قضية
كذلك إمام الدين محمود اسمه **
وأستاذ أفرنجية ذى مزية
أؤدى إليكم واجب الشكر يا أمير*
بوشى على ما استنا من هدية
وأسال ربي ان يقيكم من الردى **
وسوء مصير وانتياب رزية

Meaning:

The moons of greatness, who are of pure origin appeared to visit the great school. They are the ruler of Ilorin and the visiting ruler of Bauchi of great honour. He was accompanied by Waliy i.e. Attorney, may God protect him. He was also accompanied by the upright Chief Judge. So was Imam

Mahmud. I thank you for your gifts and pray God to grant you journey mercies.⁷

To his credit was the revolution in the approach to teaching and learning Arabic from the traditional method to introduction of textbooks, classes, examination e.t.c. He introduced the reforms in Lagos in his school Az-Zumratul Adabiyyah in 1926 and later established its sister school at Ilorin in 1938.

The appraisal of his contribution is best given in the words of Alhaji Adam Abdullahi who said:

نبح محمد كمال الدين في علوم العربية حتى
أدهش جميع معاصريه ورزق الفصاحة في الوعظ
والمحاضرة حتى أعجز من قبله وأتعب من بعده.
وبقى في ذلك الميدان نحو ربع قرن من الزمان
ولم ينازعه واحد ولا اثنان في جميع بلاد يوربا بل

صار مثلاً يحتذى ولم يبق من معاصريه من لم يتأثر به
أو لم يقتبس من أساليبه في بلده.

Meaning:

Muhammad Kamalud-deen attained the height of the knowledge of Arabic in such a manner that he became a challenge to all his contemporaries. He was endowed eloquence in preaching and delivering lectures that those who had been in the field before him could not excel him. He gave big challenge for those who came after him. He maintained that status for about a quarter of century. He had no rival throughout the length and breadth of Yoruba land. He became a model for his contemporaries that there was no one that he did not influence as there was no one from his town who did not learn something from him.⁸

Sheikh Adam Abdullah Al-Ilory

It is enough to say that substantial materials I used to prepare this paper were collected from the works of the third personality of our focus, Alhaji Adam Abdullahi Al-Ilory. His full name is Shaykh Adam Ibn Abdullahi Al-Baqiy Ibn Habibullahi Ibn Abdullahi. His grandfather, Habibullahi came to Ilorin from Oyo in

the company of Atiba. He finally settled around 1820 at Omoda to join hands with Olomoda to build Olomoda Mosque. He was its first Imam. Abdullahi gave our personality his name to seek the blessings of Shaykh Adam Alanamu who was his maternal grandfather. His father was Itinerant Mallam who travelled as far as Benin Republic. His wife, the mother of our figure, was a princess in Benin Republic. The sage was brought to Ilorin in 1929. His father took him to big Muslim scholars in Ilorin, Bida and Benin Republic to seek God's blessings for him. His teachers included Salihu, the son of the teacher of his father, Alhaji Umar Agbaji who was based in Lagos and Shaykh Adam Namaj. He had interactions with Arabs who visited Nigeria then.

Shaykh Adam Abdullahi was substantially self-made personality as it reflected in his written works. He was not only a prolific author of several books in history, philosophy, mysticism and evangelism but also an imposing and buoyant personality, strong character with the gift of eloquence and courage. His father, himself a scholar spurred him to develop interest in history. The home base Ilorin challenged him to be bold and frank speaker as the love for writing can be traced to his most popular teacher Adam Namaj that he often quoted. His books mostly in prose

numbered over seventy according to one of his students in whom I have confidence.⁹ This is not in doubt because he personally wrote the text books on all the fields for the Markaz at Agege which has turned out hundreds of thousands of distinguished scholars of Arabic and Islamic Studies, who passed through his hands and through the hand of his products. The mother centre, Markaz Ta'lim Arabiy an Islamiy, Agege has produced similar centers all over Yoruba land disseminating Arabic.

A close study of over 70 books of Alhaji Adam Abdullahi will reveal that his interest was in the following:

- i. Learning and teaching Arabic as depicted by the text books on learning and teaching, of Arabic which he wrote for Markaz Agege which was established since 1952 and continues to produce Arabists till today.
- ii. History is reflected by his book on the distinguished scholars of Ilorin right from inception. Other books included his book short History of Islam in Nigeria and The History of Islamic Evangelism.
- iii. Philosophy represented by ***Athar Falsafah Tasawwuf and Ilm.***
- iv. **As-Sawma Wal Fitr.**

- v. **Tarikh Da'wah Illallahi**, partly history and partly evangelism.
- vi. Politics, *Islam Alyaom Wa Gada Fi Nigeria* talks mainly of politics of Northern and Southern Muslims in Nigeria.