

PROCLIVITY FOR RELIGIOSITY IN THE STYLES AND MOTIFS OF THE ARABIC WRITINGS OF YORUBA ‘ULAMĀ’

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Abstract

Of the notable features of the Arabic writings of the Arabic literati of Yoruba extraction is their propensity for religiosity. A closer examination of the Arabic writings of Yoruba ‘Ulamā’ (scholars) reveals the influence of Islam on the style as well as the themes of their literary productions. Arabic works of these scholars exhibit a strong predilection and preference for styles that are embedded in Islamic religious tradition, law and lore. This paper employed historical, sociological and ideological approaches to assess and appraise the common features of the Arabic works of the Arabic literati of Nigerian provenance, whose propensity for religiosity influenced their texts. The paper examined the predisposing factors as well as the extent of the religious influence. Of the factors identified, the most culpable are the symbiotic nexus between Arabic and Islam, influence of the literary heritage and religious revivalism of the 18th and 19th centuries in Hausaland as well as the influence of literary productions of the ‘decadence’ era of Arabic literature. The paper identified and presented specific illustrations exhibiting the extent of proclivity for religiosity in the literary productions of Yoruba ‘Ulamā’. Findings from the study could serve as veritable pointers to the significance of the Arabic literary productions of the Arabic literati of Yoruba ancestry.

Keywords: Yorubaland, ‘Ulamā’, Arabic, Proclivity, Style

1. Introduction

Yorubaland is situated in the South-western part of Nigeria. The name Yoruba is applied to a linguistic group numbering millions, which occupies a large area extending through the Kwara, Kogi, Lagos, Oyo, Ondo, Osun, Ekiti and Ogun States of the Federation of Nigeria and Republics of Benin and Togo (Abdul Rahmon, 1989, p.13). The proclivity of Yoruba ‘Ulamā’ for adherence to religious tradition, which manifests significantly in their writings, is a remarkable aspect of their style. Style has been defined by Cuddon (1979, p.191) as the arrangement of words in a manner which at once best expresses the individuality of the author and the idea and intent in his mind. It is an adaptation of one’s language to one’s idea. In so far as style is the expression of personality, Abdul Rahmon (1995, p. 315) observes that there will be as many different styles as there are individuals who write. More important is the fact that each type of mind will find its own manner of expression and its own style.

The subject matter of style is equally central to Arabic literary production no matter the time or clime to which it is affiliated. In fact, the whole Arabic literary tradition from the classical to the modern times is circumscribed by such an eclectism in style to the extent that

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it could even be proposed that style has become the doxa. A cursory reading of Arabic literary writings of Yoruba ‘*Ulamā*’ accentuates this assertion. In the latter tradition does not image the self, the personality and the vision of ordinary Yoruba poet. Rather, it partakes of the wider religious outlook of the poet-an outlook that derives strength from Islamic *weltanschauung*. In other words, the Arabic works of Yoruba ‘*Ulamā*’ essay a strong predilection and preference for styles that are embedded in Islamic religious tradition, law and lore.

Religious influence is apparent in the literary productions of Yoruba ‘*Ulamā*’. The opening and closing of their writings feature religious doxologies in contrast to the writings of the classical period, the *Nasīb* of which exhibited no traces of religiosity. Except for few of the writings of the Yoruba ‘*Ulamā*’, their works generally feature Islamic expressions and the reason for this becomes understandable considering the fact that the writings are intended to project the ideals of Islam. These doxologies are not the same in length; while some are considerably long, others are relatively short. Also observable is the logical relevance of the contents of the doxologies to the themes of the works. This paper attempts an examination of the usage of this style in the writings of Yoruba ‘*Ulamā*’. The focus of the study embraces both their prose and poetry.

Thus the gap which this paper seeks to fill becomes clear. It explores the dialectics and contours in the styles of Arabic writings of Yoruba ‘*Ulamā*’, prose and poetry, with a view to discovering how the former has assisted them in achieving their literary goals and objectives. The paper draws illustrations mainly from the randomly selected Arabic oeuvres of Yoruba ‘*Ulamā*’. These oeuvres are significantly useful for what I referred to above as eclecticism in the styles employed by Yoruba ‘*Ulamā*’ in Arabic literary writing. What follows is a review of religious factor in Yoruba Arabic poetics, a discussion of *Nasīb* (opening) and closing formulae

2. Religious Discourse as Recurrent Leitmotif

An exploratory analysis of the themes of the Arabic writings of Nigerian authors in general, and the Yoruba writers of Arabic in particular, reveals that religious themes gain prominence in their literary works, as the basic necessity for these writings is to teach the value of Islam, their religion. Their works, whether in prose or verse, cover such purely religious and pietistic themes as *Wa’z* (exhortation), *Fiqh* (jurisprudence), *Hikmah* (gnomic), *Tawhīd* (theology) or *Ta’līm* (instruction), composed to teach an aspect or more of the religion of Islam. The other themes discovered in their writings are *Tārīkh* (history), *Khitābah* (oration) and *Murāsalah* (correspondence).

The advent of Islam was a landmark in the history of Yorubaland, because, there developed some incentives for Arabic learning. The Yoruba began to embark on learning of Arabic which is the vehicle of Islamic religion with zeal and enthusiasm and gradually, the language began to serve as the medium of communication and correspondence among the few Muslims and even among some traditional rulers in Yorubaland.

The premium position occupied by religion in their writings ignites no surprise as religiosity was actually a catalyst which spurred the early Arabic literati to engagement in literary activities. Abdul Azeez (2016, p. 406) notes that Nigerian scholars saw themselves, first and foremost, as scholars of Islam, which give Arabic language the place of honour it occupies in their mind. So, in whatever they write religion influences them. In buttressing this, we are beholden to Abdul Rahmon (1995, p. 316), who strengthens this argument by submitting further that:

The Nigerian Arabic poets saw themselves, first and foremost, as scholars before being poets, and Islam, which earned the Arabic language the place of honour it occupies in their mind, took precedence over all other considerations. This explains why the Islamic cultural background plays in their poetry exactly the same role played by *Ayyām al-Arab* in the Arabian cultural background of the *Jāhiliyyah* and the later periods of Arabic literature

3. Religion as Style and Style as Religion

While we discover that the Arabic writings of the Arabic literati of Yoruba ancestry are greatly influenced by religion, specifically Islam, it is apposite to note that the imbrication of literary writings with religious themes is not peculiar to Yoruba '*Ulamā*'. The same trait has been observed even in English poetry. Stressing this, Ridler (1963, p. 273) observes that;

...since the expression of man's deepest feelings is always in rhythmic form of some kind we should expect to find a close connection between the religious and poetic impulse...if we look back to the primitive beginnings of any race, however, we see that poetry starts with some practical purpose in mind that can be called religious whether of praise, propitiation or incantation...

Writing on secular poetry in African literature while expressing views that are equally relevant to Arabic poetry and prose writings as discussed in this paper, Finnegan (2012) states that:

There are three main ways in which poetry can be regarded as being religious. Firstly, the content may be religious, as in verse about mythical actions of gods or direct religious instruction or invocation. Secondly, the poetry may be recited by those who are regarded as religious specialists. Thirdly, it may be performed on occasions which are generally agreed to be religious ones (pp. 165-166)

Our attention has further been drawn by Ogundokun (2014, pp. 24-28) to religious manifestations in the writings of a prominent prolific French writer, Sembène Ousmane. In this study which analyse the motifs of some of his writings, Ogundokun discusses the enrichment of selected works of Sembène Ousmane namely; *Les bouts de bois de Dieu*, *Le Mandat*, and *Guelwaar*, with Islamic lexical items and expressions, as well as copious quotations from Islamic scriptures. In his more recent work, Ogundokun (2019:110-120) more propensity for religiosity in the literary texts of Sembène Ousmane, especially *Les bouts de bois de Dieu*, *Le Mandat*, and *Guelwaar* and Ferdinand Oyono's *Le vieux nègre et la médaille*. It is remarkable that Ferdinand Oyono is also a prominent French writer.

In a recent study entitled '*Morpho-phonological and Semantic Analysis of Language of Islam in the Novels of two Francophone African Writers: Sembène Ousmane and Ahmadou Kourouma*'. Folorunso (2021, p. 139-) identifies and justifies the proclivity for religiosity exhibited in the French works of *two Francophone African Writers: Sembène Ousmane and Ahmadou Kourouma*. In the prologue of this study, Folorunso (2019, p. 139) says:

Islam and Christianity are the two major religions in Africa. These two religions have a lot of influence on the way of life of Africans and this reflects in the writings of some of the African writers in the colonial and postcolonial periods. The influence is felt either as themes in these writers' works or in the style they adopt in their works through their use of the language of these religions. For instance, it is not rare to find in the works of Ferdinand Oyono and Mongo Béti, two Cameroonian writers, the influence of the Catholic mission just like one feels the presence of Islamic religion in

form of words and expressions, names and practices of this religion, in the works of the Senegalese novelist, Sembène Ousmane and his Ivorian counterpart, Ahmadou Kourouma. As a matter of fact, these two writers adopt the use of code-switching and code-mixing as one of the styles they use in most of their works; mixing some words and expressions used in the Islamic religion with the French Language.

It has rightly been established that the Arabic literary productions in Yoruba milieu were intended to project Islam and issues that had bearings on Muslim affairs (Abdul Rahmon, 2012, p. 18). Islam has been identified as one major feature or characteristic, of literary works of Nigerian 'Ulamā'. This explains why most of the Arabic writings of Nigerian provenance (both in prose and in verse) discuss mainly Islamic themes. (Sirajudeen, 2009, p. 230). This corpus of literature was primarily written to teach the ideals of Islam. While corroborating these assertions, 'Al-'Ilūrī (1967, p. 5) observes that:

It should be noted that literary production at all the times and places depend on the literary competence, educational standard (of the people) in the linguistic sciences and their memorized poetry... Muslims only learn Arabic language in order to understand the principles of their religion. The study of Arabic language for literary production is secondary to them...

Another possible factor is the dominance of Islamic texts in the curricula of the traditional Arabic settings, a system that has found patronage among contemporary Arabic centres. Attempting to justify this observation, Raji (1994, p. 89) notes that

Since Arabic poetry among the Arab Muslims cannot completely free itself from religious tradition, no substantial degree of modernization of it may be expected from the non-Arab Muslims among whom it has remained from time, and integral part of Islamic scholarship tradition.

From the above analysis, it becomes understandable why the writings of Yoruba 'Ulamā' exhibit religious traits. This is also true of Arabic writings of the other parts of the country, especially the northern Nigeria.

Furthermore, another notable significant factor for the religious predilections in the style of writing of Yoruba 'Ulamā' are the works of the 18th and 19th centuries Sokoto *Jihād* leaders which left greater influence on the latter scholars, who got enticed and copied the styles and motifs of such works.. This was facilitated through the contacts of the Yoruba 'Ulamā' with the latter through Ilorin, the frontier emirate. Ilorin had earlier been under the Sokoto caliphate, as noted by Reichmuth and Abubakre(1995, p. 39):

The emergence of an Arabic literature in Yoruba region is a recent phenomenon by comparison with northern Nigeria ... the beginnings of this literature were closely related to the *Jihād* movement in the north and to the establishment of an Islamic emirate in Ilorin, which became part of Sokoto caliphate.

Folorunsho(2012, p. 140) observes that this influence of Sokoto *Jihād* writers and scholars on Yoruba 'Ulamā' becomes more evident when one compares some of their writings with those of the 18th and 19th centuries literary works of Hausaland. Such writings as *Nasīh 'al-ikhwān* and 'Allāhu lī both by 'Ahmad Tijānī Salāh 'al-Dīn, a prolific Arabic poet of Yoruba provenance, were modelled after the popular 'Al-Karīm *yaqbal of* Al-Sayyidah Ruqayyah 'Al-Fulātiyyah, the grandmother of Shaykh 'Uthmān b. Fūdī and 'Allāhu lī 'uddah of Shaykh Muhammad Fūdī b. 'Uthmān b. Sālih respectively. Thus a close scrutiny of these works of Yoruba authorship shows an inter-textual connectivity with those of the Hausaland.

The influence of the so-called '*Asr 'al-'inhiāt*' has been seen in the Arabic works of Yoruba '*Ulamā*' (Abdul-Rahmon, 1995, p. 315). In tracing the history of Arabic literature, there was a period called '*Asr 'al-'inhiāt*', the period of decadence. It commenced with the fall of Baghdad in 1258 (C.E) and got terminated with the Napoleonic invasion of Egypt in 1798 (Oseni, 2004, p. 173). Whether literary productions declined in quality or not during this period did not matter to the '*Ulamā*' in Yorubaland. These were scholars who found the prodigious works produced by Arab and Arabized writers of the 'decadent' period worthy of emulation and imitation. The works of the former consequently became mirror images of the latter-literary works that were full of excessive quotations from the Qur'an, allusions, dating, and numbering with letters, opening and closing of writings with doxologies, puns and playing on words.

4. The Epilogues and the Prologues

4.1 Prose

I have previously alluded to the influence of Sokoto Jihad scholars on the literary works of Yoruba '*Ulamā*'. Here I wish to expound on this further by looking at the opening styles of the prose works of these scholars. This usually features Islamic traditional doxology and linguistic embellishment. These are evident in at least five main topoi of their works. According to Lawal (1995, p. 53), the topoi include *Basmalah*, *Hamdalah*, *Salsalah*, *Tahqīr 'al-Nafs* and '*al-Saj*'. Also included is '*Iqtibās*'. The Arabic prose writings of the Yoruba '*Ulamā*' equally exhibit these features. The prologue of prose writings of the Arabic writers in Yorubaland usually features a diversity of styles as noted in the following table:

/N	Literary Text	<i>Bas malah</i>	<i>Ha mdalah</i>	<i>Sal salah,</i>	<i>T ahqīr 'al- Nafs</i>	<i>al- Saj</i>	<i>'I qtibās</i>
	<i>Miftāh 'al-hadīth</i> of Shaykh Mustafā Zughlūl	X					
	<i>'Al-Mawrid 'al- 'adhb fī fann 'al-'arūd wa 'al-qāfiyah</i> of Shaykh Bashīr Hasan	X		X			X
	<i>'al-Qittāf 'al dāniyah fī tārikh 'al- 'allāmah 'Ādam 'Abd 'Allāh 'al-'llūrī</i> of Shaykh Mustafā Adewale		X	X			
	<i>'al-Fawz 'al-kabīr fī 'ulūm 'al-Tafsīr</i> of Shaykh Hamzah Husayn	X	X	X			

From the foregoing it would be correct to submit that the Arabic prose writings of Yoruba '*Ulamā*' cannot be identified with a particular style of opening, as each writer adopts what he considers suitable. A style that is common to them, however, is the expression of doxology. Closing of prose writings with religious doxology is one other common feature of

the literary legacies of Sokoto Jihad writers. This style is also employed in Yorubaland by the ‘*Ulamā*’. It must be stressed that lack of doxology at the end of literary works that are meant to further the ideals of Islam is usually considered a departure from convention and tradition

4.2 Poetry

Nasīb, an amatory preamble occupies a vital position in the Arabic literary compositions of the classical Arab-Islamic period. Describing the opening of the classical poems, Lichtenstadter (1976, pp. 23-24) writes:

The Arabic poem characteristically begins with an introduction professing love, followed by a lamentation over the ruins left behind by loved ones, such as traces of a ditch and tent pegs, dry camel dung, and ashes from the cooking pit of an old campsite. The poet recognizes the spot as one where he once enjoyed a love relationship with a maid from a friendly tribe that had pitched its camp in the same camping grounds.

The quotation above vividly describes the prevalent style of the prologues of the poems prior to the emergence of Islam in Arabia. This style later found patronage among later poets during the succeeding epochs of Arab-Islamic history. Consequent upon the influence of Islam, the use to which poets put this type of opening later changed. It became dedicated to stimulating the interest of their audience with a more logical opening rather than invitation to mourning for the relics and traces of the beloved one’s habitation which characterized the openings of the literary productions prior to the emergence of Islam.

The Yoruba ‘*Ulamā*’ look at their literary compositions from the religious point of view so their poems are distinguished from the classical and medieval types. The features of their poetry show the replacement of the traditional *Nasīb* (amatory prelude) of the classical Arab poetry with religious doxology. They also give information about the themes of their poetry especially in the threnodies and they always pray for the deceased to whom the poem is dedicated

In other words, in opening their poems, as noted by Abdul Rahmon (1995:315). Nigerian ‘*Ulamā*’ adopt a religious approach in form of expression of self-abnegation and doxology. Another style introduced to the opening, which was actually not known during the classical period, is that of giving information about the theme of the poem and the poet. These styles are common in the writings of Yoruba ‘*Ulamā*’. Yoruba ‘*Ulamā*’ adopt a variety of modes which are not divorced from religious influence in prologues of their poems. Some adopt a prose preamble, while others adopt versified ones, without formal openings reminiscent of some of the writings of the classical era. Extracts from their prose prologues include

-
بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم، الحمد لله الذى يحيى ويميت وهو على كل شئ قدير والصلاة والسلام
على سائر الانبياء والمرسلين وعلى اممهم اجمعين. وبعد، فقد قدمت هذه الكراسة الصغيرة
لتتقف على خلاصة تاريخ الحاج يعقوب

In the name of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful Praise be to Allah Who gives and takes life, He is Powerful on all things. May the peace and blessing (of Allah) be upon the Prophets and messengers (of Allah) and their entire followers. I am presenting to you – my dear reader- this small pamphlet for you to be acquainted with a summary of the biography of late Alhaj Ya‘qūb... (Extracted from a manuscript entitled ‘*Arā ‘l-mawt*)

One of their works with versified prologue is an unpublished manuscript entitled, *Shi'r 'al-wa'zwa 'al-'irshād*, composed by Shaykh Bashīr Hasan. The prologue goes thus:

- بسم الله ذى المن ابتدائى
رحيم عبده نزل المثنائى
على الهادى صلاة الله دوما
ورازق نورنا أعلى المكان

I commence the composition in the name of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful towards His servant Who sent `al-*Mathānī* (`Al-Qur`ān)

I seek for continuous blessing of Allah, on the guide (Muhammad) , the one who provided us illumination to higher height

A close reading of these extracts reveals the presence of some features of the traditional prologues earlier identified with Arabic prose writings. The expression of humility, *Tahqīr 'al-nafs*, which is conspicuously absent in the prologues of their prose writing is observable in the openings of the poems. In addition to that, some of the Yoruba writers of Arabic poetry are equally fond of apologizing to their readers for any mistakes that may be found in their compositions, and even request their readers to make necessary corrections. Extracts from some of the closings exhibiting the style mentioned are the following, as extracted from a poem entitled *Safīru 'l-bulbul* of a Yoruba Arabic poet, Abdul Mū'min Adegoke

- شويعر كم قال هذا الصفيرا # لمدح النبى كثير الرماد
ختمت القصيده بقولى صدت # عليه السلام وهذا اجتهادى

This whistling was composed by your poetaster, in praise of the Prophet

I concluded this composition with SDT, may Allah be pleased, and this is my humble attempt

- اسائل علما وعناية ربنا # وذيلتها طرا بلفظ الحميدات
وانظمتها بحرا طويلا فدونكم # فعولن مفا عيلن فعولن مفا عيل

I seek for more knowledge and assistance from our Lord, I rounded it up with thanks to (Allah).

It is composed on *Tawīl* metre, take it *Fa 'ūlun mafā 'īlun fa 'ulūn mafā 'īl*

An examination of these extracts shows that they are characterized with supplications, reference to the metres adopted, expression of self-abnegation, religious doxology and chronogram which according to Gwarzo(1976:116-123) is the style of numbering and dating with letters. Commenting on the presence of religious coloration in the prologues and epilogues of their works, Abdul Rahmon ((1989, p. 325 &1995, p. 320) notes:

The closing parts of their poetry contain, in addition to the doxology with which they open the poems, information about the number of the lines in the poem and the metre adopted. The date of the composition is also not left out. Their response to the Islamic guidelines on beginning and ending every human endeavour is only logical; The Qur'an specifically enjoins believers to seek blessings for the Apostle and to offer thanks to Allah. The traditions of the Prophet Muhammad himself exhort Muslims to begin and end all things by seeking blessings for him and emphasize the magnitude of the rewards that await those who do so.

4.3 Usage of 'Iqtibās

The Arabic works of Yoruba '*Ulamā*' are embellished with rhetorical devices known as '*Al-Muhassināt*' '*Al-Balāghiyah*. Their works are replete with various aspects of '*Al-Balāghah*' (rhetoric). An aspect of rhetoric mostly explored by the '*Ulamā*' is '*Iqtibas*', a device defined as the adaptation of Qur'ān or Hadith expression in prose or poetic compositions (Wizārat, 1975, p. 186).

The Qur'ān and the Hadith, the principal scripture of Islam provided idioms and motifs from which scholars could draw in literary practice (Sanni, 1998, p. 136). Sanni has further drawn our attention to the various modes of '*Iqtibās*' that writers have experimented with. These include quoting Qur'ānic verses fully or partially; by paraphrasing or rephrasing them; deploying the denotative meaning of the Qur'ān into literary writing rather than its wording or alluding to specific motifs of reports from the Qur'an into literary work. The operation of our '*Ulama*' within religious milieu has impacted on them with the adoption of this device in their literary pieces. An observation of the percentile level of the usage of this device shows that is it mostly used in their poems than prose writings. Few samples of the usage of '*Iqtibas*' from their works are hereby cited:

:

١ - بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم. رب اشرح لي صدري ويسر لي امرى واحلل عقدة من لساني
يفقهوا قولي وصل وسلم على منير الهدى رسولك محمد وعلى آله واصحابه والتابعين لهم بإحسان
الى يوم الدين

The underlined expression is a direct quotation of from the Qur'ān where Allah says:

قال رب اشرح لي صدري ويسر لي امرى واحلل عقدة من لساني يفقهوا قولي

(Q.20:25 - 27).

5. Conclusion

Opening of writings with religious doxology and closing with same is a style commonly adopted in the Arabic writings of Nigerian provenance. Writings of the ‘*Ulamā*’ in Yorubaland are in conformity with this style which is an adaptation of one’s language to one’s idea. This paper highlighted the effects of the religious background of the Arabic writers in Yorubaland on the motifs and styles of their writings. The style of Yoruba ‘*Ulamā*’ is influenced by some major factors. The first factor is Islam, which manifests vividly in the opening and closing of their writings. The openings are characterized with religious expressions in place of invitation and mourning for the relics and traces of the beloved one’s habitation as obtained in the classical writings. Religious expressions also feature prominently in their closings. Another prominent factor is the influence of the literary productions of the Decadence Period of Arabic literature. The last notable factor is the influence of the literary heritage of Sokoto Jihad of eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in Hausaland on our ‘*Ulamā*’.

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