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CONTENTS

Responses to Gender Based Violence (Best Practices) in Some Selected Jurisdictions Bala Babaji and Abdullahi Shehu	1
The Legal Status of Hermaphrodite on His/ Her Right of Inheritance in Maaliki School Sheikh Uthman Danladi Keffi	22
The Role of Weights, Measures and Distances in the Administration of Justice, Under Islamic Law. Sa'ad Musa Abubakar	42
A Comparison of the Standard of Proof Under Islamic Law and the Nigerian Evidence Act, 2011 Umar Saidu Gumi	71
An Insight into the Practice of <i>Sulhu</i> in Katsina State of Nigeria Habiba Saddiq	88
The Position of <i>Taglid</i> (Imitation) Under Islamic Jurisprudence and the Attitude of Nigerian Muslim Imitators (<i>Muqallidun</i>) Yaaqub A.A. Wakili , ...	102
The Impact of Islam on Nigerian Arabic Poetry Musa A.M. Abikan, Ahmad, Muhammad Kamel and Aliyu, Muhammed Jamiu, ...	113
An Analysis of <i>Hisba</i> Legislation in Nigeria Ibrahim Barkindo	127
Legal and Institutional Challenges in the Governance Framework of Islamic Financial Institutions in Nigeria. Ibrahim Muhammad Ahmed and Musa Muhammad Audi	156
An Evaluation Of The Incompatibility Of The Child's Right Act, 2003, With The Islamic Legal Regime In Nigeria Dije Mohammed	170
An Examination Of <i>Hadana</i> (Child Custody) In Islamic Law Hafsat Salalman	182
Procedure for Execution/Enforcement of Judgment in Sharia and Area Courts. Yusuf Ali SAN	199
Gateway to the Understanding of Mukhtasar Khalil Bashir Imam Ali	218

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The Impact of Islam on Nigerian Arabic Poetry

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Abstract

The introduction of Arabic language as an academic discipline into the Nigerian educational curriculum was not accidental. It was in recognition of its significance as a language of Islam and diplomacy. Centuries before the advent of Europeans on Nigeria soil, Arabic had been used for religions, social and cultural purposes. In West Africa as a whole and Nigeria in particular, poetic themes in Arabic language have remained within the framework of the interest of Islamic religion.

Key words: Islam, Arabic, Impact, Africa, Poetry , Nigeria

1.0 Introduction

Arabic literature originated in pre-Islamic Arabia, with the advent and spread of the Islamic religion, it became the literature of all the religions that comprised the Islamic world, irrespective of native language or race. While the Islamic religion has no doubt provided the essential element in effecting a kind of homogeneity which Islamic culture has evidenced, the spread of the Arabic language over wide areas of time and space helped to effect that homogeneity.

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Thus Islam has played a very important role in the dissemination and durability of the standard literary Arabic.¹

The aim of this paper therefore, is to look at the Nigerian Arabic Poetry generally and new innovations that were introduced to Arabic poetry by Nigerian poets at present.

1.1 Poetry to Africans

Poetry has been part of the life of Africans since the existence of man on the continent. It evolves the cultural values of the African society. At the traditional stage of Africa, poetry unites and solidifies the cosmopolitan nature of the various societies that make up the continent. In some countries, different types of poetry conventionally form a living tradition and constant reminders of other true origin and highest artistic expression.²

Poetry is a natural gift that could be endowed on any member of the society. The society is made up of the individuals, but a balance is expected between the individual and the society.³ Poets have faced issues in ways that not only explain how indigenous cultures are absorbed by Western standards but also, how limiting in vision their leaders have been towards addressing the religion's social problems and the issue of governance. Therefore, West Africa poetry becomes protest and radical in nature⁴ as a reaction to the various forms of injustices meted out on Africans by the colonial masters and later by the post colonial lords.⁵

1.1.1 Importance of Poets to Africans

The history of Arabic literary composition in Nigeria extends over a period close to eight hundred years in this region. The first known writer in Arabic was a grammarian and poet of Kanem, Abu Ishaq Ibrahim al-Kanemi.⁶ At

¹ Malik, S.H.A., "The Impact of Islam on Classical Arabic Literature", *Journal of Arabic and Religious Studies*, University of Ilorin, Vol. 5, 1988, p. 39.

² Killam, G.D., "African Writers on African Writings", (Ibadan: M. Oladapo: 2001), p. 95.

³ Obaje, A.A., "The Voice and Vision of the Masses in Newspaper Poetry in Nigeria", *Anyigba Journal of Arts and Humanities*, Vol. 7, 2009, p. 123.

⁴ A quite number of odes by Arabic Nigerian Poets depicting bad governance in the region.

⁵ Obaje, A.A., "The Radical Temper of Modern African Poetry: A Study of Selected Works of African Poets", Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation submitted to the School of Postgraduate Studies, Kogi State University, Anyigba, 2015, pp. 83-84.

⁶ John, O.H., "The Writings of Central Sudanic Africa", (E.J. Brill, Leiden, New York, 1995), p. 1.

the present time, scholars are still using Arabic as the language of their Islamic teaching and of the poetry they so frequently write in praise of the Prophet Muhammad, in praise of Sufi leaders, and to elegize departed friends, colleagues and patrons. Indeed, in the second half of the twentieth century in Nigeria in particular, usage of Arabic as a literary language has become more widespread.⁷

It is on record that Arabic is the first language that brought its rich heritage of reading and writing to the African continent long before the incursion of the colonialists and before a single indigene of West African knew a word of English or French.⁸

1.2 Writing of Poetry

Writing of poetry in Sokoto Caliphate was an outstanding literary practice because of the Jihad leaders found it efficacious in conveying the message of Islam to their followers. The poems were therefore written in Arabic and the vernacular notably Hausa and Fulfulde.⁹

The disciples easily memorized the poems. Married women also used to sing the poems in their matrimonial homes especially when undertaking some domestic chores.

At the early period of the Jihad movement when the Jihadists were primarily concerned with teaching Islam to the people, the poem addressed fundamentals of the faith (*al-Iman*).

Arabic poetry provided additional opportunity for excellence in the literary tradition of the Caliphate. The women in the household of Shaykh Usman also contributed in the writing of poems.¹⁰ The most notable among them was Nana Asma'u.¹¹

Poetic productions have been taken as part of Islamic education and culture in the Sokoto Caliphate. This has encouraged the scholars to study Arabic

⁷ John, O.H., p. 1.

⁸ Lawal, A.R., "Of a Tongue and its numerous "Faces": The Story of Arabic in Nigeria" a Lecture delivered at 36th Inaugural Lecture, Lagos State University, pp. 3-4.

⁹ Usman, M.T., "The Sokoto Caliphate Literature in the Era of Globalization", *Degel: The Journal of the Faculty of Arts and Islamic Studies*, Vol. VII, 2007, pp. 83-84.

¹⁰ Usman, M.T., "The Sokoto Caliphate Literature", p. 84.

¹¹ Nana Asma'u is a daughter to Shaykh Usman. She wrote almost thirty books in Arabic and Fulfulde Languages. Part of these books were written in Arabic Poetry.

literature meticulously side by side with Islamic studies and to make many efforts as to imitate the scanty literature works at their disposal.¹²

In another words, Islam has been the secret behind the style and main features of the Sokoto literary output. This is because Arabic and its literature had never been a goal in itself in the Caliphate but only a means to a goal. The goal of course was the understanding and propagation of Islam and the Muslim's welfare. It is, for that reason, that Islam was explicably able to imprint its mark on Arabic writings in such an environment.

1.2.1 Versified Works on Islamic Law

Works on Islamic law in verse by Nigerian and foreign authors in order to get the Islamic law known and familiar with are quite impressive in quality and quantity. The most common book in this regard, is *matn al-Asimiyyah*¹³ among the traditional schools that were established centuries ago by renowned Islamic schools in their respectful houses and centers of learning.

The book contains different areas of Islamic law; such as criminal law under the Shariah, Islamic law of succession under Maliki School of thought, marriage, divorce, *Khul'u*, reconciliation, law of representation in legal rights, law governing transactions and loans, testate and intestate succession, law of pledge and guaranty etc. are composed in Arabic poem for easy memorization in one thousand and seven hundred and sixty three lines.

Arabic/Islamic students usually study the book among other works under an

Islamic jurist who is well versed in Shariah law. For instance, it says in verse while explaining conditions of inheritance to whom is due with exception of unbeliever, slave and hermaphrodite:

الكفر والرق لإرث منعا	وإن هما بعد الممات ارتفعاً ¹⁴
ومثل ذاك الحكم في المرتد	ومطلقاً يمنع قتل العمـد

¹² Lawal, A.I., "A Study of Thematic and Stylistic Features in the Arabic Works of Waziri Junayd, & Muhammad Al-Bukhari" Unpublished Ph.D Thesis Submitted to Department of Arabic, University of Kaduna, 1995, p. 58.

¹³ One of the authors was a retired judge in Shariah Court of law. His experiences and wide knowledge in Arabic and Islamic law help the fertilization of the book.

¹⁴ *Matn al-Asimiyyah*, p. 128.

وارث حنثى بماله اعتبر
وما بدا عليه في الحكم اقتصر

Translation

- 1-Disbelif (in God) and slavery are hindrances in Islamic law of succession. Suppose the case is brought, even, after the death.
- 2-Similar to that, is apostasy and killing inadvertently.
- 3-And the case of hermaphrodite (who is neither a man nor a woman) shall be considered with the organ he uses for urine.

1.2.2 Major Themes in their Productions

It is not unexpected that only those themes that had no conflict with the Islamic teaching could be welcome or flourish in an environment like Nigeria . It is indeed unthinkable to expect any one among the scholars of the Caliphate to imitate poets like ‘Umar b. Abi Rabi‘ah, Abu Nuwas, Abu’l- ‘ala al-Ma‘arri, Jarir and Farazdaq because of the messages which a good deal of their poetic works conveyed which are inimical to the ethics of Islam.

Instead, they all preferred to play the role of Hassan b. Thabit who defended Islam with the poetic talent or the role of Ka‘b b. Zuhayr who also contributed to the promotion of Islam through his literary production.

The most common themes include the panegyric (*al-Madh*) particularly on the Prophet Muhammad and notable scholars, the elegy (*al-ritha‘u*) most of which are on leaders of the Caliphate, scholars of repute and boasting (*al-fakhr*) especially, those composed on their Jihad victories.

1.2.3 Innovations to the Arabic Poetry by Nigerian Poets

Nigerian Arabic scholars since the advent of Islam have been recognized worldwide for their versatility in the areas of Arabic studies. Libraries, archives and centres for research and learning in Nigeria are replete with a considerable number of such legacies.¹⁵

In Arabic language, to be precise local scholars have studied and written invaluable works in prose and poetry in the past centuries and the exercise continues today.

Nigerian poets have written on nearly all the popularly known poetic themes among the Arabs from pre-Islamic period across the ages of Arabic literary. They produced odes on eulogy, satire, description, erotic and

¹⁵ Olaguj, H.I., “Polemical Poetry in Arabic as Composed by Some Scholars in Nigeria”, *Jars’ Journal of Arabic and Religious Studies*, Ilorin, 2000-2001.

philosophical ways of life in verse. On this assertion, a renowned scholar of Arabic, Shaikh Adam Abdullahi Al-Illuri¹⁶ has rightly observed that:

"... فلقد ترك علماؤنا من الشعر ما لا يستهان به إذا عرض على ضوء النقد الأدبي بحيث لو اطلع عليه العربي القح أو الناقد التريه لما وسعه إلا أن يطاطيء رأسه إعجابا بالقريحة التي جادت بها رغم بعد الدار وعدم توفر الأسباب"¹⁷

Translation:

Our (Nigerian) scholars have left behind a considerable number of legacies of poems: If a real Arab or sincere critic has access to them he will nod his head in admiration for such a high scholarly outputs, despite the long distance (of this place from Arab countries) and lack of enough facilities.

There are three areas, among others, seem to be innovative to the Nigerian Arabic Poetry. They are:

1. Poetry in prose
2. English words in Arabic poem
3. The independence erotic poems received by the contemporary Nigerian poets.

1.2.4 Poetry in Prose

The works of Nigerian Arabic poets began to witness a dramatic change as they wore a new outlook both in form and content. For instance, new literary genres like drama,¹⁸ short stories and free verse which were hitherto unknown in the history of Arabic culture in Nigeria were introduced. Of particular interest, here is a recent anthological work entitled: *Al-Layl Al-Abyad* (The Luminous

¹⁶ One of the greatest Nigerian scholars in the twentieth century (d. 1993) he left behind almost sixty books on different fields mostly on Islamic Studies, Rhetoric and Literature.

¹⁷ Al-Illuri, A.A., "*Misbau ad-dirasat al-adabiyya fi diyari an-naijiriyyah*, (Dar al-Kitabi Cairo: 2012), p.18

¹⁸ In spite of the booming theatre in Nigeria, scholars of Arabic have not taken advantage of the situation. The reason for that is probably because of some aspects of the theatre which Islam frowns at, e.g. indiscriminate mixture of men and women, and the polytheistic contents of the plays which makes them attractive to the West but unattractive to Arabic and Islamic audience. The only area where drama was developed had been in the private and government Arabic schools. Short Arabic plays were staged by these schools during festivities like Laylatul Qadr (27th night of Ramadan) and Mawlid al-Nabi (the birthday of Prophet Muhammad).

Night). This literary work is far from the conventional Arabic poetry in all ramifications.¹⁹

Evidences show that anthologies written by the Nigerian poets in the recent time are quite imaginable in quality and quantity. Some of these poets continue publishing their creativity works in sequence, while some could not do so due to financial constraints.

It is on record that few of them had their collections published. The contents of these works differ while some of them go along with the conventional themes in their artistic productivity and some injected new trends to the works.

Professor Hafeez Ayinde Oladosun, a lecturer at the Department of Arabic and Islamic Studies, University of Ibadan- Nigeria appears to be the first scholar of Arabic prosody who introduced new ideas/trends into the Nigerian Arabic Poetry in his popular book entitled *الليل الأبيض* (The Luminous Night).

An example of free poetry in his book reads thus, when he was explaining the struggle Nigerian students used to face before gaining admission into Nigerian universities:

وداعاً ! ووداعاً !!²⁰
وداعاً من الجامعة !!!
مرحباً ! ومرحباً !!
مرحباً بالجامعة !!!
وداعاً لهذه المدينة
الحياة داخل الجامعة .
حياة بعيدة عن الحقيقة .
حياة كلها ترف وحلم .
حياة كلها الدعة والراحة .
راحة تعقبه الجد والذاب .
مرحباً ! ورحباً !!

¹⁹ Abdullah, M.J., "The Modern Trends in Nigerian Arabic Literary Culture: A Critical Examination of Oladosu's *Al-Layl Al-Abyad*" Book of Abstracts, 1st International Conference held at the Department of Arabic and Islamic Studies, Kogi State University, Anyingba p.112.

²⁰ Oladosuo, A.I., "Al-Layl Al-Abyad", First Edition, Mukhtar's Company for Publication and Distribution, 2012, pp. 20-22..

مرحبا بالجامعة !!!
وداعا ! ووداعا !!
وداعا للجامعة .
مرحبا ! ومرحبا !!
مرحبا بالطلاب .
الطلاب في تلك الجامعة .
أكفاء
أكفاء في رمي ضد الخرافات .
و سعي وراء اللذات .
جاءوا كما جئت .
جئت عقب الحصول على القبول .
القبول عقب السنوات والطموح .
وأيام الأوهام والأحلام .
وهموم .
قبلت كطالب بالقسم .
قسم الدراسات الإسلامية والعربية .
قبلت بعد الجهد والاجتهاد .
بعد سهر الليالي .
والجلوس في قاعات الامتحانات .
والتغلب على العابر .
يا ويح " ربيك " و " الجنب " .
مرحبا ! ومرحبا !!
مرحبا بالجامعة !!!

Translation:

Goodbye! Goodbye!!
Goodbye to the University
Welcome! And welcome!!
Goodbye out of this town
Life inside the University!
A life out of sincerity
A life full of rest
Seriousness shall come after rest
Welcome! Welcome!!
Welcome to the University
Goodbye! Goodbye!!
Goodbye from the University!
Competent
Competent at throwing against falsehood!
And walking after enjoinderment.
They came the way through which you came.
Arrived having gained the admission.
Admission after years of aspiration.
Days of fictions are phantoms
And agonies
I was admitted as a student in the Department
Department of Arabic and Islamic Studies
Admitted after handwork and seriousness
After days of sleeplessness.
After sitting in the halls of examinations.
Overcome the foe!
Damn to WAEC and JAMB
Welcome! And welcome!!
Welcome to the University

Above is an extract of free verse by Oladosu. The poet did not adhere to the fundamental principles of prosody. There is no particular meter used out of conventional sixteen meters. In addition to that, no specific feet applied in the entire work against the rules and guidelines laid down by Khalil bn. Ahmad al-Farahidi (the founder of Science of Prosody).

Although, some of the widely acclaimed international Arabic poets in Egypt, Iraq etc. kick against free verse in the name of expansion for prosody and the freedom the radicalists are clamouring for would not help the advancement of Arabic poetry rather will spoil it.²¹

An example quoted above, represents new trend in the history of Nigerian Arabic poetry, the ancient Nigerian poets did not use it in their anthologies simply because it was seen as an attack on the conventional Arabic poetry known to them for centuries.²² An Ode composed with known guidelines gives more attraction and makes it acceptable to the lovers of poetry than have it unmeasured. *Al-layl al-abyad* stands to be the first work to be known in this regard.

1.2.5 English Words in Arabic Poetry

The influence of English language on Arabic language among Nigerian elite cannot be undermined. Yoruba, Hausa, Fulani, Ibo²³ and Igala peoples for instance, borrowed extensively from English language directly or indirectly.

The influence is reflected on our daily conversations and writing skills. English words that were *arabised* into the Arabic lexicographies are uncountable, let alone the other means of communications we hear or read in Arabic journals/magazines, and from television and radio broadcasters.

Such influence is seen later in Arabic literature as an innovation and modernization. The late Waziri Junaid²⁴ of Sokoto for example, composed an innovative and attractive piece of Arabic poem on the bitter experience he had during his visit to Lagos. In the piece, some lexical items were used without having adverse effect on the meter, the meaning and the rhyme. The English words include: Today, Yesterday, was ready, somebody, custody, and a day. He writes thus:

²¹ Al-Maslut, A.M., *Al-adab al-Arabi Bayna al-Jahiliyyah wal Islam*, First Edition, Libyan University, 2002.

²² Abikan, M.A.M., *An-Nawadir Fi Shi'ir al-Arabi an-Naijiri*, Book of Proceeding published by International Council on Arabic Language(UAR), Dubai, 2013, Vol.1 pp. 236-251.

²³ Nigeria as a heterogeneous society possesses about four hundred indigenous languages of this number only Yoruba, Hausa and Igbo are been raised to the status of national languages.

²⁴ Junaid is one of the most prolific Arabic Poets. His output including a number of poems on social, religious, elegy, complaint and praise on Prophet Muhammad. He also wrote accounts of his journeys to various countries in both prose and poetry.

- | | |
|---|---|
| ٢٥ وكل امرئ ما سوف يلقاه <u>وَزَرِيْدِي</u> | ١- وما الدنيا إلا <u>ثُدِي</u> بعد <u>يَسْتَدِي</u> |
| ولست أرى ممن تعودت <u>سَمْبَدِي</u> | ٢- وليس مقامي وسط لاغوس يسرني |
| بلاغوس وصارت لي شبيها <u>بِغَسْتَدِي</u> | ٣- ولولاك عبد الله ما طاب مسكني |
| ٢٦ يكون عطائي ألف ألف بها <u>أَيْدِي</u> | ٤- ولست لأختار المقام بـها ولو |

Translation

1. Life is nothing but today after yesterday and what shall happen to every individual was ready
2. I was not pleased with my stay in Lagos and I did not see somebody with whom I was familiar.
3. Had it not been for you. Abdullah, my stay in Lagos would not have been pleasant. It would have been to me like a custody.
4. I would never choose Lagos as a place of living even if offered a million Naira a day

The poet here chooses letter Dal (د) as admirable letter as is seen in the quoted verse. Those words are not originally taken from Arabic but English words. Incorporating those words into the poem did not truncate or break the prosodic rules. The most fascinating area in that piece is "*at tasr'i*" ²⁷ that was successfully applied.

Junaid by this work seems to be the initiator of this type of poem, examples of innovative works are found in his artistic works.

1.3 An Independence to Erotic Poetry

The environment in which a poet writes his poetry constitutes the major determinant of the native and orientation of his themes. In the pre-Islamic era, tribal interest made some themes to flourish while religious and political interests helped some themes to attract the attention of poets. ²⁸

Erotic poetry has never been an independent theme on its own among themes dwelled in by Nigerian scholars particularly in the nineteenth century

²⁵ He composed this Ode during his trip which he undertook to Lagos in 1952.

²⁶ Junaïd, M., "An Anthology of the Poet", Manuscript, A copy of the anthology can be found in the private library of the authors, p. ١١.

²⁷ A situation where the two hemistiches must look alike both in rhyming and meter.(Internal Rhyme)

²⁸ Lawal, A.I., "A Study of Thematic and Stylistic Features in the Arabic Works of Waziri Junaid B.M. Al-Bukhari, P. 274.

except in a few cases where a few Nigerian erudite scholars penetrated into it out of desire.

The reason is that they don't want to be known or associated with popular poets that were familiar with it across the literary Arabic ages. The few scholars who contributed to it presumably did it on the basis of imitation to the art itself.

However, the anthologies published by our young Nigerian poets these days had a number of erotic poetry in different forms. Some of them are sincere with the contents of those verses while some composed it in passion for the theme. Nothing seems to underrate a Nigerian Arabic scholar than having poems in this direction.

Dr. Isa Alabi Abubakar²⁹ of Department of Arabic Language, University of Ilorin had a number of erotic poems in his two collections entitled: *ar-Riyad* (meadows) and *as-Shubaiyyat* (the seventh verses) a representative of such poem. An example from *ar-riyad* reads thus:

رأيتها فاخترت الرشد	حسنا تتعب بالسهاد ³⁰
لها جمال يفوق وصفا	تختال كالغصن في امتداد
نظرت منها وجها كبدر	فقام مني غي الفؤاد
يفوح منها عطر الشباب	تسبو بسحر مخ العباد
مليحة قدّها رشيق	لحسنها ينبض الجساد
تصطاد لكن بغير فسخ	والفخ وان في الاصطياد
مشيت طول البلاد لكن	لكفوها يصعب ارتياد

Translation

- 1 – I saw a beautiful woman and senses disappear causing one to sleeplessness.
- 2 – A beauty beyond description moving (in pride) like branch in Straightness.

²⁹ An indigene of Ilorin, he studied Arabic and Islamic Studies in different places. In Ilorin and outside Ilorin. He is at present, an associate professor of Arabic and one of contemporary Nigerian popular Arabic poets. His poems covering a wide range of religious, political, praise of prophet Muhammad, etc.

³⁰ Abubakar, A.I., *Ar-Riyyah* First Edition, Alabi Printing Press, Ilorin, (2005), p. 182.

- 3 – I looked at her face that is resamblous to moon and my mind go astray.
- 4 – A scent seems to be of youthfulness being spread capturing the scene of Worshipers in fascination.
- 5 – A pretty woman of sprightly nature. Her beauty moves the body.
- 6 – She hunts with no trap. The trap is weak beside her in terms of hunting.
- 7 – I traveled throughout the cities searching for her match, but difficult to Finds.

This ode is undoubtedly composed on erotic. The bard made us to understand that his loved one is one of the most beautiful women outside there. Naturally gifted. An extra-ordinary beauty that could not be described in words.

The piece also represents numerous odes that were deposited in different anthologies by different poets of contemporary Nigerian versifiers. The celebrated Nigerian Arabic poets before this period avoid the theme deliberately.

The reason for the modern trends could be traced to the following points:

- 1- The exposure some of the contemporary poets had outside the country while studying Arabic language at different levels opened the potentials in them to this direction.³¹
- 2- The contacts some Nigerian academics made with their counterparts of native speakers during international conferences, workshops and seminars burst out this trend in their creativity writings.
- 3- The unlimited Arabic text books recently published and deposited in public and private libraries, archives and centers for documentation in Nigeria also paved ways for the Nigerian Arabic poets to this idea.

However, one shall not blame any versatile poet who wants to flourish this art of knowledge provided that the modesty is maintained.

1.3.1 Conclusion

Islamic scholars, sometimes use poems in Arabic to convey their messages in verse. Some Nigerian Arabic/Islamic poets deliberately produced a number of works in poems in order to disseminate the teaching and understanding of Islamic law among their students. Books on Islamic law in form of versification were, therefore, written to serve the purpose and have them circulated in not only Nigeria but also all Arabic speaking countries.

³¹ During the interviews and interactions conducted with some of them in June, August and October, 2015.

The Impact of Islam on Nigerian Arabic Poetry

In Nigeria, Abdullah bn. Fodio is leading in this direction, because, he left behind several Islamic books on jurisprudence, criminal law under Shariah law, sciences of *Quran*, *Tafsir*, *Hadith*, in verse. The reason for these didactic works by erudite scholars is to see that Islam is spread all over the regions and poems written in poetic forms are easily learnt and memorized.