



ARABIC: THE MOST SPOKEN INDIGENOUS AFRICAN LANGUAGE IN THE CONTINENT

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Abstract:

The number of languages natively spoken in the fifty four (54) African states is variously estimated at between 1,250 and 2,100,⁽¹⁾ and by some counts at over 3000.⁽²⁾ These languages belong to many distinct language families. Of all these languages, five (5) are the most used by their speakers in terms of population within the African continent. The five are Arabic, Swahili, Hausa, Oromo, and Yoruba. Each of these languages is spoken by multiple African countries by small or large population. They are the leading African languages attested to by scholars and researchers and confirmed by different and rigorous studies conducted thus far.

Keywords: Indigenous languages, native tongue, African languages, Languages of Africa.

Introduction:

Africa is one of the world's populated continents. It has been home to thousands of ethnic groups, cultures and languages. There are up to 2000 native and active languages in the continent. Among these languages are official, national and local ones. According to One World Nations Online, these languages belong to four major groupings: Afro-Asiatic, Nilo-Saharan, Niger-Saharan (Niger-Congo), and Khoisan.⁽³⁾ Afro-Asiatic, which contains almost 200 languages that covers approximately the entire Northern Africa in addition to the horn of Africa, Central Sahara of the Nile. Nilo-Saharan, which covers 140 languages spoken by eleven million peoples found in Central and Eastern Africa; Niger-Saharan (Niger-Congo) which covers the two third of Africa alongside the Niger-Congo which is the major branch that contains 1000 languages plus spoken by approximately 200 million people.

As a sub-group of the Niger-Congo branch, there are the Bantu languages of Central, Southern, and Eastern Africa. Moreover, as to Khoisan, there exist almost thirty languages in Western part of Southern Africa.⁽⁴⁾ In his own submission, Lodhi (1993) states that "Of the estimated 6,200 languages and dialects in the world, 2,582 languages and 1,382 dialects are found in Africa. Some languages in Africa are spoken by more than 20 or 30 million people". In addition, Lodhi affirms that 50 out of those languages have been strongly called for its support by the Organization of African Unity (OAU) alongside Arabic and Swahili as the only endorsed native African working languages.⁽⁵⁾ The focus of this paper is a thorough examination of the most spoken five languages of all the African languages in terms of populations in the African continent.

1. Arabic Language

Being one of the five most spoken in the world, as well as the most widely spread used African language, Arabic is the number one African native language spoken in the continent by at least nineteen countries with divergent statuses ranging from its being an official as majority language, official as minority language, co-official as majority language, co-official as minority language and not official as minority language.⁽⁶⁾

Elaborating further on this, it is said that:

Arabic and its different dialects are spoken by around 422 million speakers (native and non-native) in the Arab world as well as in the Arab diaspora making it one of the five most spoken languages in the world. Currently, 22 countries are member states of the Arab League (as well as 5 countries were granted an observer status) which was founded in Cairo in 1945. Arabic is a language cluster, comprising 30 or 50 modern varieties.⁽⁷⁾

It has been argued that Swahili is the most spoken African language having been successfully supplanted by and replaced the former colonial language south of the Sahara. It has been the national and official language in Tanzania, and the national language in Kenya and Uganda, as well as one of the six national languages of Zaire (The Democratic Republic of Congo). Furthermore, Swahili has crept successfully into the Comoros, Mozambique, Rwanda, Burundi, part of Somalia, Malawi, and Zambia.⁽⁸⁾ Nevertheless, the presence of Arabic in the African continent is more prominent than that. Arabic enjoys all statuses in Africa more than other native languages. In other words, it is an official tongue in countries like Egypt, Mauritania, Sudan, Tunisia; a co-official language in nations such as Algeria, Chad, Comoros, Djibouti, Mali, Morocco, Somalia, Southern Sudan; a national/working language in countries like Eritrea, Niger Republic and Senegal; a language of a special status according to the constitution in countries like South Africa; territories or countries where Arabic was an official or de facto official language and later replaced or repealed like Kenya, Niger, Nigeria South Sudan, and Tanzania.⁽⁹⁾

In what follows is the list of five (5) sovereign African countries and territories where Modern Standard Arabic is an official language as of 2025 and population.⁽¹⁰⁾

1. Sovereign States where Arabic is an official language

No	Sovereign State	Population	Sovereign states where Arabic is an official language	Member state of the Arab league
1	Egypt	117,646,764 ⁽¹¹⁾	Official language	Yes
2	Tunisia	12,330,274 ⁽¹²⁾	Official language	Yes
3	Libya	7,437,496 ⁽¹³⁾	Official language	Yes
4	Mauritania	5,264,596 ⁽¹⁴⁾	Official language	Yes
5	Sudan	51,107,673 ⁽¹⁵⁾	Official language	Yes

In table 1 above, those Arabic countries are all members of the Arab League whose first and official language is the Arabic language. They have other languages in circulation in their respective states, but all government business and education are run in Arabic.⁽¹⁶⁾

**2. Some Countries where Arabic is a co-official language⁽¹⁷⁾**

No	Sovereign state	Population	Sovereign states where Arabic is a co-official language	Member state of the Arab league
1	Algeria	47, 275, 803	Co-official language alongside Berber	Yes
2	Chad	10, 329,208	Co-official language along with French	Observer Status
3	Comoros	876, 748	Co-official language, alongside Comorian and French	Yes
4	Djibouti	1, 178,555	Co-official language alongside French	Yes
5	Mali	21, 259, 722	Co-official language alongside 12 other languages	No
6	Morocco	38, 329, 254	Co-official language along with Berber	Yes
7	Somalia	19, 278, 275	Co-official language alongside Somali	Yes

Although not a primary language, there are five (5) independent states where Arabic enjoys a national/ working language status as of 2016. In what follows is the list of sovereign states and territories where Arabic is a national or a constitutionally recognized minority language:

3. Countries where Arabic is a national/working language or a recognized minority language.

No	Sovereign state	Population	Sovereign states where Arabic is a co-official language	Member state of the Arab league
1	Eritrea ⁽¹⁸⁾	6, 380,803	Working language	Observer Status
2	Niger	22,314,343	National language	Observer Status
3	Senegal ⁽¹⁹⁾	16,209,125	National language	Observer Status

There is sovereign state in Africa where Arabic is conferred a special status according to the constitution. Here is a table elaborating that:

4. A country where Arabic has a special status according to the constitution

No	Sovereign state	Population	Sovereign states where Arabic is a co-official language	Member state of the Arab league
1	South Africa	60, 142973 ⁽²⁰⁾	Recognized language	No

According to the constitution of South Africa, Arabic is mentioned therein. It declared in Chapter1 (Founding Provision) Section 6, Languages that "A Pan South African Language Board established by national legislation must (b) promote and ensure respect for-(i) all languages commonly used by communities- and (ii) Arabic ...for religious purposes in South Africa⁽²¹⁾

5. Non sovereign entities and territories where Arabic is an official or de facto official language

No	Non sovereign entity/ Territory	Population	Notes	Continent
1	Azawadu Arab Movement of Azawad	1,300,000 ⁽²²⁾	Co-official language with Somali	Africa
2	Galmandug	1,230,000	Co-official language along with Tuarag	Africa

3.	Hirshabeile	1,8000,000	Co-official language alongside Somali	Africa
4	Jubaland	1000,000	Co-official language alongside Somali	Africa
5.	Khatumo	2,000,000	Co-official language alongside Somali	Africa
6.	Puntland	1, 285,000	Co-official language alongside Somali	Africa
7	South west State of Somalia	2,000,000	Co-official language alongside Somali	Africa

Furthermore, there are countries and territories where Arabic is an official language but later supplanted and replaced. Those countries are as follows:

6. Territories where Arabic was an official or de fac to official language and later replaced or repealed⁽²³⁾

No	Countries/ Territories	Current language	official	Current languages	spoken	Historical language and Period	official
1	Kenya	Swahili, co official along with English		Swahili, others	various	Arabic 1696-1858	
2	Niger	French, Arabic, Hausa, Zarma, various others		Arabic		Classical Arabic, 1804-1908	
3	Nigeria	English		English, others	various	Classical Arabic, Hausa, Yoruba, Fula, 1804-1908	
4	South Sudan	English		Juba Arabic, various others		Juba Arabic, 1863-2011	
5	Tanzania	Swahili, co-official language along with English, Arabic in Zanzibar		Swahili, Omani Arabic in Zanzibar	various	Swahili, Omani Arabic, Yemeni Arabic, 1696-1856	

In a nutshell, Africa comprises 54 countries with a huge number of languages and cultures. Of these, Arabic only assumes the rank of international status having been adopted by the United Nations Organization one of its tongues in 1973. It is also the most spoken indigenous African language in Africa as a whole. Attesting to this fact, it is stated that:

Of the 1 billion African (in 2009), about 17 percent speak an Arabic dialect. About 10 percent speak Swahili, the lingua franca of Southeast Africa, about 5 percent speak a Berber dialect; and about 5 percent speak Hausa, which serves as a lingua franca in much of the Sahel. Other large West African languages are Yoruba, Igbo, Akan and Fula. Major horn of African languages are Somali, Amharic and Oromo. Lingala is important in Central Africa. Important South African languages are Sotho, Tswana, Pedi, Venda, Tsonga, Swazi, Southern Ndebele, Zulu, Xhosa and Afrikaans⁽²⁴⁾.



2. Swahili Language

Swahili is the second most spoken African indigenous language in the continent. According to Naveed, ⁽²⁵⁾ "There are up to 200 million speakers of this language, among which 18 million are native speakers. Kiswahili is the local name of the language. It is a Bantu language from the Sabaki branch native to the people settled in Tanzania, Kenya and Mozambique. Speaking at this, Tanzania is said to have the most native speakers of Swahili language"⁽²⁶⁾ As a language widely spoken in Africa, Swahili language extensively borrowed from Arabic, Portuguese, German and English language. From Arabic alone, there is almost 15 percent loanwords into Swahili.⁽²⁷⁾ In countries like Tanzania, Kenya, Uganda, Burundi, South Sudan, Somalia, Mozambique, Malawi, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Comoros and Zambia, Swahili is spoken as either official or national languages. It is also spoken in some Middle Eastern countries. ⁽²⁸⁾

7. Sovereign Countries where Swahili is an official language ⁽²⁹⁾

No.	Countries	Speak Swahili	Swahili as official language
1	Burundi	Yes	No
2	Comoros	Yes	No
3	Democratic Republic of Congo	Yes	No
4	Kenya	Yes	Yes
5	Mozambique	Yes	No
6	Malawi	Yes	No
7	Rwanda	Yes	Yes
8	Uganda	Yes	Yes
9	Somalia	Yes	No
10	South Sudan	Yes	No
11	Tanzania	Yes	Yes
12	Zambia	Yes	No

It is said that these four afore stated sovereign countries have the population of 50 million Swahili speakers. ⁽³⁰⁾ Here is the status of the Swahili language in some of those countries:

i) Democratic Republic of Congo:

The Democratic Republic of Congo, formally known as Zaire , is one of the countries with a large population of Swahili speakers. Few people in DR Congo speak Swahili as a first language. Lingala is more commonly found as a mother tongue in the country. However, it is common for people in DR Congo to speak Swahili when trading with people from other tribes or even other countries. Swahili is one of the government-recognized languages of the DR Congo ⁽³¹⁾.

ii) Kenya:

Swahili is also widely spoken in Kenya. The usage of Swahili in Kenya is similar to that in DR Congo. It is rarely the mother tongue of Kenyans. However, they often use it when speaking with people who have different tribal languages. Swahili is popular enough in Kenya that it has been named one of the country's official languages. ⁽³²⁾

iii) Tanzania:

Swahili is an official language in Tanzania. It is one of the most commonly used languages in the country. In fact, Tanzania is the country with the highest percentage of Swahili speakers. This is the reason it often the first answer to the question "What countries speak Swahili?" Tanzania often speak Swahili when trading with merchants from Kenya, Uganda and other East African nations. Swahili is widely taught in schools in Tanzania, making it more popular among educated people.⁽³³⁾

iv) Uganda:

Uganda is the last country on our list that has named Swahili an official language. Swahili is commonly taught to school children of all ages throughout Uganda. Ugandan business people often communicate with business people from other East African countries. Ugandans also communicate with other citizens from different tribes in Swahili.⁽³⁴⁾

v) Somalia:

Swahili is not an official language in Somalia. It is considered to be a minority language in the country. However, it is spoken or understood by large numbers of people in certain coastal regions of the country. Most of the Swahili speakers in Somalia can be found in the southern part of the country. More specifically, Swahili speakers in Somalia are concentrated in the Banjuni Islands.⁽³⁵⁾

vi) Comoros:

A dialect of Swahili known as Comorian is spoken throughout the Comoros, a small island nation off the coast of mainland Africa. Some experts actually consider Comorian to be an independent language, though most linguists consider it to be a dialect of Swahili.⁽³⁶⁾

3. Hausa Language:

Hausa language speakers are not circumscribed to Nigeria alone, they are also found in other African countries.⁽³⁷⁾ Hausa language is a Chadic group of Afro-Asiatic family. It is tonal. In other words, the meaning of each word is determined by the pitch involved. This language is native to and well spoken in other African states: Nigeria, Ghana, Chad, Sudan, The Republic of Benin, The Republic of Niger, Cameroon, The Gambia, Burkina Faso, Central African Republic, Eritrea, Togo and Sudan.⁽³⁸⁾ At this juncture, Good Data states that "Hausa is not the official language in any country, but is spoken in several countries in West Central Africa in Benin, Burkina Faso, and Ghana. It is considered a commercial language, but has no native speakers. It is most widely spoken in Nigeria with 54.7 million speakers. The total number of speakers is estimated at around 80-85 million people. However, the exact number of pure native speakers is not known"⁽³⁹⁾ According to the Voice of Africa, Hausa is spoken by 120 million speakers in these countries. It is the third most spoken indigenous African language in the continent.

8. Population distribution of the Hausa speaking People in Africa

No	Country	Official	Total
1	Nigeria ⁽⁴⁰⁾	No	71,000,000
2	Niger ⁽⁴¹⁾	No	13,8000.000
3	Ghana ⁽⁴²⁾	No	203,000



4	Ivory Coast ⁽⁴³⁾	No	1000,000
5	Sudan	No	664,000
6	Cameroon	No	400,000
7	Benin ⁽⁴⁴⁾	No	36,360,000
8	Eritrea ⁽⁴⁵⁾	No	30,000
9	Togo	No	21,900
10	Gabon ⁽⁴⁶⁾	No	17,000
11	Algeria	No	12,000
12	The Gambia	No	10,000
13	Central African Republic	No	33,000

In the end, Hausa is widely used as a lingua franca across much of West Africa and is spoken by people from various ethnic and cultural backgrounds across Northern Nigeria and Niger.

4. Oromo language

There are 109 languages spoken in Ethiopia.⁽⁴⁷⁾ Out of these languages, there are official, national, regional and recognized. Of all these languages, Oromo speakers are the majority numbering more than 36 million ; followed by Amharic speakers numbering 31,800,000; Somali speakers numbering 6,720, 000; Tigrinya speakers numbering 6, 390,000; Sidamo speakers numbering 4,340,000; Wolaytta speakers numbering 2, 380,000; Sebat Bet Gurage speakers numbering 2,170,000; and Afar speakers numbering 1, 840,000;⁽⁴⁸⁾ in addition to Arabic language which is also spoken by some people in some areas in Ethiopia owing to their religious belief.⁽⁴⁹⁾ In what follows, is the distribution table of languages of Ethiopia: (2007).⁽⁵⁰⁾

No	Language	Percentage
1	Oromo	33.8%
2	Amharic	29.3%
3	Somali	6.2%
4	Tigrinya	5.9%
5	Sidamo	4.0%
6	Wolaytta	2.2%
7	Gurage	2.0%
8	Afar	1.7%
9	Hadiyya	1.7%
10	Gamo	1.5%
11	Gedeo	1.3%
12	Silt'e	1.2%
13	Kafa	1.1%
14	Other languages	8.1%

According to Gabremichael,⁽⁵¹⁾ "Amharic is recognized as the official working language of Amhara Region, Benishangul-Gumuz, Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples' Region, Gambela Region, Addis Ababa and Dire Dawa." Furthermore, "Oromo language serves as the official working language and the primary language of education in the Oromia"⁽⁵²⁾ "Harar and Dire Dawa and of the Oromia Zone in the Amhara Region. Somali is the official working language of Somali Region and Dire

Dawa, while Afar, ⁽⁵³⁾, Harari, ⁽⁵⁴⁾ and Tigrinya⁽⁵⁵⁾ are recognized as official working languages in their respective regions". "Recently, the Ethiopian government announced that Afar, Amharic, Oromo, Somali, and Tigrinya are adopted as official federal working languages of Ethiopia." ⁽⁵⁶⁾ ⁽⁵⁷⁾.

No	Official language	National language	Regional language
1	Amharic	Yes	Yes
2	Afar	Yes	Yes
3	Oromo	Yes	Yes
4	Somali	Yes	Yes
5	Tigrinya	Yes	Yes

5. Yoruba Language:

The Yoruba people are spread across several countries in West Africa. Yoruba is primarily spoken in Nigeria, Benin, Republic, and parts of Togo, Sierra Leone, and Ghana. Explaining further, Ingrid ⁽⁵⁸⁾ states that

"The cultured region of the Yoruba people is known as Yoruba land. It encompasses the modern-day countries of Nigeria, Togo, and Benin. With a total land area of 142,114 square kilometers, Yoruba is home to an estimated 55 million people, the majority of whom are ethnic Yorubas. The cultural and historical significance of this region cannot overstated, as it has shaped the identity and heritage of the Yoruba people over countries,"

In the following table are the eight (8) African countries wherein Yoruba speaking people settle in the African Continent:

Total Population: Regions with significant population

No	Countries	Population
1	Nigeria ⁽⁵⁹⁾	42,600,000
2	Benin Republic ⁽⁶⁰⁾	1,600,000
3	Ghana ⁽⁶¹⁾	425, 600
4	Togo ⁽⁶²⁾	342,500
5	Cote d'voire ⁽⁶³⁾	115,000
6	Niger Republic ⁽⁶⁴⁾	80,700
7	Sierra Leone ⁽⁶⁵⁾	16, 578
8	The Gambia ⁽⁶⁶⁾	8, 477

i) Nigeria

Yoruba language is primarily spoken in Southwestern and Central Nigeria. Roughly 47 million use this language in the country, this include about 2 million second language speakers (2) "As a pluri-centric language, it is primarily spoken in a dialectal area spanning Nigeria, Benin, and Togo with smaller migrated communities in Cote d'Ivoire, Sierra Lean and The Gambia"⁽⁶⁷⁾ Yoruba language is full of literature, including books, newspapers and it is used in radio and television broadcasting. It is also a language firmly entrenched in primary, secondary, tertiary and university levels⁽⁶⁸⁾



ii) Benin Republic

Ketu is a historic Yoruba kingdom spanning parts of modern -day Benin. The city of Ketu, its capital, is considered one of the oldest Yoruba settlements. Founded by Sopasan, a descendant of Oduduwa (a legendary Yoruba ancestor), Ketu boasts a rich history deeply intertwined with the Yoruba people. The rulers of Ketu, known as Alaketu, held a prominent position, within the Yoruba hierarchy and maintained close ties to the revered city of Ile-Ife.⁽⁶⁹⁾

iiiv) Togo

Approximately 90,000 people in Atakpame, Togo, speak the Ife dialect of Yoruba. These residents primarily descend from Yoruba migrants who originated from Ija-Oku in what was once Dahomey. They settled in Togo and established the city of Atakpame. The Ife dialect preserves many characteristics of the original Yoruba language, including its tonal system.

Unlike modern Nigerian Yoruba, which has lost the distinction between mid-tone words, the Ife dialect continues to use and recognize this tone. This is evident in both spoken and written forms of the language.⁽⁷⁰⁾

iv) Cote d'ivoire

The Yorubas in Ivory Coast are known as Ejigbo, and they came from Osun State. The Ejigbo people have a long history of migration, starting with settlements in Benin, Togo, and Ghana before eventually arriving in Cote d'voire. In 1902. Initially drawn by trade opportunities, the Ejigbo migrants primarily engaged in farming and trading in local goods. Over time, they established a substantial community in Cote d'voire, with their descendants continuing to reside there today.⁽⁷¹⁾

v) Sierra Leone

The Oku people, also known as Aku Marabout or Aku Mohammedans, are an ethnic group primarily residing in Sierra Leone. Their origins trace back to the 19th century, when Yoruba people were liberated from the horrors of the slave trade. Many freed individuals, often Islamic scholars or marabouts, were resettled in Sierra Leone as Liberated Africans. Others joined them as voluntary settlers. Over time, their descendants formed the district Oku community.⁽⁷²⁾

vi) The Gambia

The Akus, a minority Gambian ethnic group that speaks the Aku language, are a mix of freed slaves, many of whom were of Yoruba descent. Their Yoruba ancestry is evident through their language. For instance, the word "ashobie" is used to describe group outfits worn on special occasions. The Yoruba also call it "aso ebi."⁽⁷³⁾

Conclusion

In spite of tens of hundreds of indigenous African languages spoken in all the 54 African nations by hundreds of millions of the African people, there are five languages that are largely spoken in the continent. These five enjoy superiority by virtue of their numerical strength of their users. They are: Arabic, Swahili, Hausa, Oromo and Yoruba. These languages have been good linguistic ambassadors of the African continent on the world map representing their their speakers.

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