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The Arabic Language: an Integration and Developmental Tool for The Enhancement of Nigeria's Foreign Policy and Economic Relations

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ABSTRACT

The paper takes a critical look at the position of the Arabic language and the potential benefits it could accrue to national interests if adopted as one of the languages in which Nigerian representatives are trained before they are dispatched to Nigerian foreign offices in the Diaspora. It also entails confessions by foreign diplomats to the inevitability of languages in meaningful international diplomacy. This is followed by a discussion of the low-level diplomatic and economic ties which Nigeria is currently maintaining with the Arab world. Moreover, the impact and the influence of foreign language competence in business-related activities as well as strategies to be taken by Arabic experts to strengthen diplomatic ties between Nigeria and Arab countries and measures which could sustain mutual economic cooperation between them are discussed in the paper.

INTRODUCTION

None of the members of the Semitic family of languages has endured the storm of time as Arabic. It has left an unfolding mark on all spheres of life, including world history, culture and civilization.¹ Translations of most of the Greek philosophy as well as summaries, commentaries and other independent works of Arabic philosophy into Latin were reportedly made possible from Arabic versions.²

Moreover, scientific records in Europe namely: Chemistry, Alchemy, Algebra, Physics, Medicine, Astronomy, Geography, Optics and Mathematics were of initial documentations in Arabic.³

As a language of the Islamic faith, thousands of millions of Muslims all over the world including Nigeria often use Arabic.⁴ As a result they voluntarily learn it alongside Islamic Studies. Wherever there is Islam, the Arabic language resonates and reverberates therein.⁵ Their unique attraction to its knowledge and acquisition is borne out of their quest to intelligibly recite and understand the Quran as well as other Islam related courses.

Prior to the emergence of the Europeans in Nigeria, some diplomatic contacts with the Arab world were conducted in Arabic. Scholars of high repute, people of high profile in government and judicial personnel found it easy to use Arabic as their official language due to the esteem associated with it as a language of erudition as well as the significant inroads it made into social, educational, and literary activities.⁶

In West Africa, the use of Arabic for religious, social, economic, administrative and cultural undertakings antedated the emergence of the Europeans in the continent. It was through the language that facts and ideas among citizens of West and North Africa were recorded. According to Professor Dike, invaluable knowledge documented in Arabic from the raw materials of research work in the field of West Africa, Islamic Studies and African history abound in libraries, archives, universities and museums in all West African countries.⁷

On the African continent, the administrative, political, diplomatic and economic relations between the Arab and the Ancient kingdoms of Old Ghana, Mali and Songhai were reportedly conducted in Arabic for almost seven hundred years.⁸ The focus of this paper shall be on the significance of Arabic being a developmental and integration tool for the promotion of political, diplomatic, economic and social ties between African countries which use Arabic as mother-tongue.

Arabic as a language of diplomacy

On the African continent, Arabic is spoken as a native language and as lingua franca in Algeria, Chad, Djibouti, Egypt, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Somalia, the Sudan, and Tunisia. In Asia, it is the official as well as the mother tongue in Bahrain, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Kuwait, Oman, Palestine, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Qatar, the United Arab Emirate and Yemen. In Israel, it has an official status alongside Hebrew. In other words, Arabic is a language spoken by twenty-two Middle Eastern countries.⁹

As the home language, it is spoken in Ethiopia, Mali, Nigeria, Niger, Turkey, Iran and Afghanistan. In addition, the language is utilized as a vital spiritual component of myriad of people. It is also an important immigrant language in France, the United States of America and Canada.¹⁰

Politically, Arab countries play consequential roles in both continental and international organizations. For instance, there are ten Arabic-speaking countries as members in the African Union (AU), many of them are members of the

Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), and they are members of the United Nations Organization (UNO) and its several agencies. Owing to its inevitability in the global economic and financial institutions, Arabic has assumed an official status in all the afore-mentioned organizations.¹¹

Therefore, it is not surprising to witness an influx of Europeans and Americans into the study of Arabic up to the university level. Students of international business, political science, international law, and the humanities benefit tremendously from the study of Arabic. Ancient archaeology and monuments such as the pyramids, the sphinx and other sites in Egypt and other Arab countries as well as a vast body of literature adds to the significance of Arabic.¹²

Based on the growing importance of the use of Arabic in many world affairs, Nigeria's status in contemporary continental and international politics warrants the adoption of Arabic alongside the European languages such as English and French on which she relies most for contacts with African and Middle Eastern Arabic-speaking states.¹³

Despite the imposing status of English, many people do not speak it, yet they contribute to the socio-economic development of the world. Nonetheless, we should always be aware of the fact that we live in a multi-lingual market place. The more languages you know, the easier it is to travel and do businesses. Therefore, it is high time for Nigeria to make use of the numerous Arabic experts it possesses so as to enhance its diplomatic relations with the Arab nations. A failure to do so would make Nigeria's continental political hegemony futile.¹⁴

The Nigerian government and its foreign policy designers are exhorted to make sure that Nigerian diplomats undergo rigorous and intensive language courses before they are dispatched to its foreign offices. This policy is being adopted by the United States of America and other developed countries in the world. According to the Foreign Service Institute of the U.S. States Department (FSI), the United States diplomats go for intensive language courses prior to their posting to foreign lands. The length of time needed to achieve a high degree of mastery of a language varies owing to difference in difficulty of various languages.¹⁵

According to the FSI list, 44 weeks is said to be the maximum length of intensive language course of Arabic. However, Oxford and Rhodes stated that it will take 92 weeks to reach a high level of proficiency in Arabic, Chinese and Japanese.¹⁶

As a leading member of the African Union (AU), a prominent black African member of the United Nations Organization (UNO) and an influential member of the OPEC, it is very unwise for Nigeria to reduce its international contacts to the use of English alone. Being the most widely spoken African language in the world, Arabic has been one of the three African Union (AU) official languages since its inception on the 25th May 1963, the other two languages being English and French. Furthermore, in 1975, Arabic was made the sixth official language of the United Nations. The other five are English, French, Spanish, Chinese and Russian.¹⁷

Elaborating on the global importance of the Arabic language, Brenham remarks that:

It is still today the main, and in most places the only language of this whole area. In addition, as the language of the Koran and rich literacy inheritance, as the language of learning and of the law, it is the classical language of the religion and the educated through the whole Islamic world that stretches far beyond these boundaries. It is without question one of the greatest languages of the world.¹⁸

In Asia, countries like China, the most populous country in the world; India, the world largest democracy; Indonesia, the most populous Muslim country; Malaysia, Pakistan, Brunei, Thailand, the Philippines, Japan, and South Korea conduct both their diplomatic and commercial contacts with the Arab world in Arabic.¹⁹ According to an American University in Cairo credible source AUC today,²⁰ the Indian, the Japanese, the Belgian, and the US embassies in Egypt dispatch some of their staff to the AUC every year to study Arabic and then post them to different Arab countries. In the same vein, in a conversation with one Japanese diplomat on the significance of language acquisition to their job, the diplomat said that:

How can we deal with people of any given country with which we do not share the same language and culture? Diplomats are more in need of the major languages spoken in their working country. We should know how to deal with people that come to our ways whether at the embassy or elsewhere. If we cannot speak or understand Arabic, it implies that we should hire translators. By hiring translators, we would have some sensitive secrets of our country revealed to our translators who might not be from our country. In a concise manner, hiring translators would not serve our strategic interests whatsoever.²¹

As for Nigeria, there is no need to send any of its diplomats to study Arabic anywhere. There are experts in Arabic who are ready to be utilized when it is time.

Arabic Language and Economic Relations

In the ever-growing world of multi-dimensional cooperation, it is axiomatic that no country on its own can successfully tackle the problems of its economic development. The solution to economic problems lies in economic cooperation among nations. Hence, Nigeria and the Arab world should be aware of their common interests and the fact that they have much to gain from each other in the various fields of human endeavours.

Interactions between Nigeria and the Arab world should not be circumscribed to the traditional framework of official and governmental contracts. Non-governmental and the corporate bodies should be encouraged to enter into contacts. To that end, the official contacts with the Arab world in Arabic should be one of the Nigerian foreign policy makers' priorities.

Studies have shown that linguistic similarity does much in fostering confidence between trading partners. In other words, by using common language, tremendous transaction costs reduction in business activities occurs. This is because the lack of a common language often appears to act as a barrier to both local and international trades. To corroborate the above claim, the linguistic heterogeneity between West African Anglophone and Francophone member countries of the Economic Cooperation of West African States (ECOWAS), since its inception in the mid 1970s, has been responsible for the relative trade flows among the states of the region.²²

Commenting on the merits of linguistic similarity in boosting business activities, Grin notes that "Just as money makes exchange easier than in a primitive barter system, the use of one common language between trading partners facilitates the circulation of goods and services".²³

The waning popularity of Arabic in diplomatic, cultural and economic activities of non-Arabic speaking African states are ascribed to the neglect of those states by the Arab countries. This policy has made the role of Arabic to be strictly restricted to religious activities. Addressing the issue in question, Boutros Ghali

points out the potential reviving strategies of the ailing Afro-Arab multi-faceted cooperation by stating as follows:

Arab countries should pay more attention to Africa and more visits at the leadership levels should take place to African countries. They should be receptive to African requirements. Only then will the truth of Arab moral and political support become apparent to confirm the axiom that not by bread alone does man survive.²⁴

In terms of economic cooperation and trade exchanges, according to Faiq, the entire Arab world's imports from Africa is far less than a half of African exports to a single European country like Spain, while the whole Arab countries' exports to African states relatively exceed its entire imports from Spain.²⁵

On the other hand, there has been a growing expansion in the volume of trade and commercial contacts between Israel and many African countries. According to Peter, in the early 1980s, Israel exports to Africa witnessed an expeditious growth of almost 60 percent, a trade relation improvement ever enjoyed by Israel in the world. In 1981, Nigeria alone imported from Israel nearly half of Israel exports to the whole black African countries.²⁶

It is high time for Arab countries to take the initiative of empowering economic ties with the other African countries. A good opportunity to strengthen such relations has been created by the change of policies towards Africa by Western donor countries that used to influence many African states during the Cold War era. A huge financial aid given out to Africa at that time for strategic purposes has been halted.²⁷

The current financial assistance to Africa is limited to humanitarian emergencies. The donor countries have shifted their investments and financial assistance to Eastern European countries. This presents a good opportunity for the Arab World. The lost historic relations with Africa can now be restored via Afro-Arab joint investments in some emerging stable African countries such as Nigeria, South Africa, Senegal, Mali, Kenya, Cameroon, Togo, etc. A good starting point towards that end is the recent establishment of Afro-Arab Bank. But much remains to be done.²⁸

Although there are other two famous Arab investment projects in Nigeria, the Arab Bank, a textile factory owned by a Syrian businessman, their presence in the country is of little influence compared to the heavy presence of Israeli companies

in Nigeria engaging in building infrastructural projects like roads and house construction.²⁹

Interestingly, the presence of the Arab contractors in Nigeria is another development in the right direction of business contacts between the Arab world and Nigeria. At this juncture, the Egyptian economic policy towards Africa is worth emulating by other Arab countries. According to Faiq, Egypt has recently established numerous projects such as textile factories and cotton plantation farms for the consumption of these factories in Uganda. These investments would serve both countries' interests and consolidate their relations.³⁰

The present writer is of the suggestions that Arab companies situated in non-Arabic speaking nations in Africa should partially predicate their employment policy on linguistic factor. This is because languages mean encounters with people and other cultures. The companies should look for employees who are proficient in the required languages to provide them with language assets along with a valuable insight into foreign cultures and practical examples of day-to-day intercultural communication. In other words, citizens of host countries who are well versed in Arabic should be given preference when employees are to be recruited.

Professionals should be engaged for official documents, a legal context and after-sales service to maximize the end results. Translating website or promotional material also calls for linguistic skills and cultural knowledge. Cultural briefings are highly beneficial for staff in contact with people from foreign cultures and also enable one to prepare thoroughly before entering a new market or travelling abroad. At the same time, they can also act as a staff motivator. Such policies would foster more confidence between the often-time neglected Arabic experts in their countries. It would also boost their emasculated morale and encourage others to learn the language.

Recommendations:

Having discussed the significance and advantages of Arabic language in the international diplomacy and business, it is now appropriate to proffer some valuable suggestions which could boost and promote the course of Arabic language and Arabic experts in the official arena. Below are the suggestions:

i) Branches of the Nigerian Association of Teachers of Arabic and Islamic Studies (NATAIS) nationwide should establish cordial relationship with official media houses to initiate different Arabic programmes on the radio and television as it is currently practiced in Kwara State.

- ii) Maintaining strong relationship with Arab embassies in Nigeria is of great significance to the development of NATAIS. This will certainly facilitate the establishment of lasting relationship with their governments, as well as promote Arabic Studies in the country.
- iii) NATAIS members should awake their curiosity by engaging in and aspiring political offices. By so doing, Nigerian Embassies in the Arab world would be manned by a considerable number of Arabic experts.
- iv) NATAIS national body should set up a pressure group which would create rapport with those at the corridor of power such as the governors, the ministers and Muslim members of the national house of Assembly. This will definitely culminate in the official recognition of the Association and accrue valuable benefits to it.
- v) NATAIS members at the state level are exhorted to promote and sponsor programs on the radio and television during the month of Ramadan. This will at least sensitize the public on their social role.
- vi) NATAIS should establish strong ties with the Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs which is recognized by the government. This will enhance its relationship with the Federal Government of Nigeria.

Conclusion

The importance of language in promoting world political and economic orders as well as protecting national interests cannot be over-emphasized. Language plays a very significant role in international relations. In the case of Arabic, its incorporation into the working language in which Nigerian foreign representatives are trained is of paramount significance.

If national interests are the parameter for which the success of international relations are measured and foreign policies are shaped, the Nigerian foreign policy makers should take into account the positive impacts of languages on diplomacy and economic ties with nations of the world. At the time that international focuses are on the Middle East and the Arab world in particular, advanced and many developing countries in the world use Arabic language experts for economic and diplomatic relations.

Unlike other countries that dispatch their diplomats to study Arabic in their respective locations in the Arab world, Arabic experts who can be recruited to foreign services and enhance Nigeria's relations with the Arab world abound in Nigeria. This policy, if adopted and properly implemented, would assist Nigeria to consolidate its political, diplomatic, economic and social presence in the Middle East, thus consolidating regional hegemony.

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30. Ibid

APPENDIX

The following list details out the maximum lengths of intensive language courses at the Foreign Service Institute (1985) of the U.S. State Department:

<i>Language</i>	<i>Number of weeks</i>
Afrikaans	24
Amharic	44
Arabic	44
Bengali	44
Bulgarian	44
Burmese	44
Chinese	44
Czech	44
Danish	24
Dari	44
Dutch	24
Finnish	44
French	20
German	20

Greek	44
Hebrew	44
Hindi	44
Hungarian	44
Indonesian	32
Italian	20
Japanese	44
Korean	44
Lao	44
Malay	32
Norwegian	24
Pilipino	44
Polish	44
Portuguese	24
Rumanian	24
Russian	44
Serbo-Croatian	44
Spanish	20
Swahili	24
Swedish	24
Thai	44
Turkish	44
Urdu	44