



THE LEGACY OF SHAYKH AHMAD TIJANI AWELENJE:

**IMPACT ON ARABIC AND ISLAMIC SCHOLARSHIP
IN THE 21ST CENTURY NIGERIA**

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SHAYKH AWELNJE'S CONTRIBUTION TO THE LIBERATION AND GLOBALIZATION OF ARABIC INTELLECTUALISM IN YORUBALAND

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Abstract

This paper examines the role of Shaykh Awelenje's globalization of Arabic learning in the liberation process for Afro-Arabic learners in general and Yoruba in particular, using the internal and external experiences of this great scholar of the nineteenth century Nigeria as a case study. A distinct contribution of the paper to the current Arabic literature is many folds: 1) it conceptualizes Arabic learner's liberation at the global level as a process driven by and contingent upon globalization of Arabic learning whose success is hinged on Arabic intellectual and scholarly legitimation and justification; and 2) it recognizes and demonstrates the liberating potential of globalization and identifies the challenges and limitations of these liberating forces in any attempt to liberate Arabic scholars globally. Drawing on both the case study and the literature on globalization and globalization of Arabic learning the paper concludes that: 1) globalization, driven by al-ilm ḍālatu-l- Mumin, ayna ma wajadahu akhadhahu, has created favorable conditions and opportunities for a global expansion of Arabic learning, aimed at learner's liberation globally; 3) to achieve meaningful and realistic liberation of Arabic learners at the global level, liberation must be conceptualized as a long process that involves mutual understanding, education and ultimately, an intellectual revolution based on communicative events, triggered by literary scholarship of the type demonstrated in the life and works of Awlenje and 4) this process must identify and address specific differences among Arabic learners which stem, primarily, from culture, social class, ethnicity, race, nationality, religion, customs, tribal origin, social and political systems and the status of different nations within the so-called global intellectual society, as well as these nations status within the global, religion and political class systems

Introduction

According to Abubakre (2017: 1), Shaykh Ahmad At-Tijani was born in 1897 to Alhaji Mustapha Awelenje of Saki. Another report stated that the grandfather of Shaykh Tijani whose name is Habib was a native of Ilorin from Sarumi family who traveled to Shaki and settled there. This version seems outlandish considering the fact that his father was not a scholar and drum beating is not as popular in Ilorin as in the typical Oyo society. It was in Shaki that Sheikh Mustapha was born who later gave

birth to Ahmad Tijani Awelenje popularly called Alfa Saki (Arikewuyo: 1990: 1). He began his Quranic studies from Sheikh Musa's school at Isale Onikeke, Saki. Alfa Musa was the chief Imam of the town as at that time. Sheikh Awelenje had the opportunity to travel to Iseyin to seek for Arabic and Islamic education to further his learning career (Akorede. 2006). His external experiences gave him superiority among his contemporaries. He learnt and taught during his sojourn in Sudan, where he polished his Arabic language and was exposed to many Arabic texts that were not found in his Yoruba land, due to the long and far distance. Sheikh Awelenje has many students to his credits among whom was Shaykh Abdullahi Agbarigidoma of Ilorin. Alhaji Ahmad Tijani Awelenje died on the 9th of March 1968 after a brief illness on the day of idul-Kabir and was buried at Muslim Cemetery, Ikoyi, Lagos. The great scholar died at the age of 71.

Historically, some learners of Arabic language and literature, especially in Yorubaland in the early nineteenth century have been denied functional Arabic education by some scholars who made use of their students as maids or *Alimanji* primarily, through discriminatory and exclusionary practices and the impact on students has been well documented (Adekilekun, 1984:40). The crippling effect of this localization notwithstanding, Shaykh Awelenje has made great strides and continued to struggle to eliminate these denial and exclusionary practices in order to gain parity status at the cultural, social, political, economic and global levels. In this intellectual struggle, Alfa Shaki utilized several strategies. Prominent among these strategies were his method of teaching, social movements, political activism, and intellectual expression. The intellectual struggle has been wide-ranging, involving teaching of *Nahw (Syntax)*, *Sarf (Morphology)* and *Balagha (Rhetorics)*, , *Prosody ('Arūd)* and other Arabic subjects that seek to present the Arabic language reality by teaching some Arabic courses with Arabic without traditional method.

However, most of this scholarship, for many, appears to be new in Yoruba land because, historically, some scholars learnt through translation before Shaykh Awelenje which was later embellished by Shaykh Adam Abdullahi Al-ilory (Al-Ilory, 1990:17). The globalization of learners forced Sheikh Awelenje to venture beyond his contemporaries' academics endeavors. He became activist and in some cases radical in order to achieve the same liberation and globalization like his external counterparts from outside Yorubaland. This radical activism is precipitated as well as justified by his early student; Shaykh Agbarigidoma's status among the products of Awelenje in the Yorubaland. This chapter addresses the following two research questions:

1. What is the role of globalization and the globalization of Arabic learning in the process of students' liberation at the global level?; and
2. What are the challenges for and limitations of globalization and the globalization of Arabic intellectualism as catalysts in the process of Arabic learners' liberation at the global level?

The study focuses on these two questions to critically assess the liberation process for Arabic learners in general and that of Yorubaland in particular. A distinct contribution of the research to the current literature is twofold:

- 1) it conceptualizes learners' liberation at the global level as a long process driven by and contingent upon *al-ilm ʿālatu-l- Mumin, ayna ma wajadahū akhadhahu* whose success is contingent upon intellectual and scholarly legitimation and justification. Learners' liberation conceptualized as such, the paper starts by tracing the origin of globalization and Arabic intellectualism to key social forces, their impact and the responses of classical social thinkers; and
- 2) it recognizes and demonstrates the liberating potential of globalization and globalization of Arabic intellectualism and identifies the challenges and limitations of these liberating forces in any attempt to liberate Arabic learners globally. It highlights, particularly, challenges and limitations posed by differences among students which stem, primarily, from culture, social class, ethnicity, race, nationality, religion, customs, tribal origin, social and political systems and the status of different nations within the so-called global intellectual society. Before we turn our attention to the subject matter of the paper, it is necessary to provide operational definitions of globalization of Arabic intellectualism and liberation of students or learners of Arabic language as used in this paper.

Globalization of Intellectualism

Globalization, as used in this paper, is defined as "a set of institutional and ideological relations constructed by powerful social forces, e.g. managers of international agencies, states and firms, academic ideologues" (Habermas J. 1988:26). It is considered to be an unrepresentative globalist capitalist economic regime whose impact, although is limited in terms of the population it includes. (Habermas, J.1988:27). This definition, implicitly, underscores the important role globalization plays in providing the basic framework for the globalization of Arabic intellectualism.

Since the globalization of Arabic intellectualism, as used in this paper, is really an extension of expansion Arabic language and literature to a global level, any attempt to define it must start with a definition of intellectualism itself. Intellectualism, as used in this paper, combines the following two definitions: 1) in its narrowest sense, intellectualism is defined as a complex set of academic ideologies used by the scholars to advance the cause of learners' opportunity and put an end to ignorance and the denial of functional education; and 2) in a broader and deeper sense, intellectualism is defined as a variety of interrelated frameworks used to observe, analyze, and interpret the complex ways in which the truth and functional educational opportunities are obtained, taught and useful from the largest institutional

settings to the details of people's daily lives (Sabry Hafis 2006:56). The second definition implies as well as includes intellectual scholarship.

Globalization of Arabic intellectualism, as used in this paper, refers to a study of what Shaykh Awelenje employed to teach, analyze, and interpret the complex ways in which the Arabic language were taught in the early period among Yoruba scholars. The two definitions of intellectualism and the definition of globalization of intellectualism captured: 1) the essence of intellectualism, namely its praxis dimension; 2) the essence of intellectual scholarship, namely the theoretical, academic, and intellectual dimension of intellectualism; and 3) the essence of intellectualism and Arabic scholarship at the global level

Liberation of Arabic Scholars: The Mentors and the Mentees

Liberation of Arabic students, as used in this study, refers to the struggles by various Arabic literary scholars to students from the shackles and bonds of localization. The term, as used in this chapter, emphasizes the ongoing, conscious struggle, a process driven by Arabic scholarship, intended to bring about an intellectual awakening, an intellectual revolution or consciousness rising considered to be the catalyst for students' global intellectualism. As a process, liberation of learners involves the following two levels: 1) intellectual level which is orchestrated, spearheaded, and driven by Arabic scholars. This level is considered to be the driving force behind or the catalyst or the prerequisite for the liberation of students through what some Arabic scholars have referred to as consciousness-raising (Sabry Hafis. 2006:38). It is also viewed as the prerequisite for the second level; and 2) practical level which emphasizes the need for all learners to recognize and acknowledge the common interests and bonds they share and the need for them to work together toward achieving what is in their best interest, specifically the elimination of ignorance and the liberation of learners from all forms of dominance and oppression (Sabry Hafis 2006: 45). The realization of this level is viewed as contingent upon the first level. Since learners' liberation is conceptualized as a process, our assessment of the role of the globalization of Arabic intellectualism as depicted in the life of Shaykh Awelenje, as catalysts in this process and the challenges and limitations that confront them, starts with an examination of the intellectual and scholarly responses to the impact of Arabic language as a vehicle to understand Islam and Arab culture, (Abubakre 2004) with the main objective of demonstrating how these forces and the intellectual and scholarly responses to their impact contributed to the birth of intellectualism.

Many Arabic scholars have contributed to the birth of Arabic Intellectualism. However, our discussion here focuses only on the impact of Shaykh Awelenje to the spread of Arabic language and literature, which, we argue, were instrumental in creating the intellectual conditions that gave birth to modern teaching method and

contemporary Arabic intellectualism. We argue further that the globalization of Arabic in Yorubaland is logical extensions of modern intellectualism. We assume that a good understanding of the roots of globalization and globalization of intellectualism is essential to an assessment of the role of this great scholar of Yorubaland whose students spread beyond his territory and across the border of Sudan (Abubakre:2017).

Awelenje and the Globalization of Arabic Intellectualism

The activities of Shakykh Awelenje in contributing to education among the Yoruba Muslims were inspired, as it was the case for most of the early '*Ulama*' by the prophetic tradition which says: "The best of you is he who learns the Holy Qur'an and teaches it". Concerning his scholarship, Shaykh Awelenje was said to begin his teaching activities while he journeyed through different parts of Yorubaland. However, when he finally settled in Lagos he established a Qur'anic school. The school was not formally institutionalized nor was it given a specific name but at least teaching and learning activities were better programmed than hitherto and he had a larger number of students under him. Like other traditional Qur'anic schools, the school as informally established at the veranda of the Shaykh's residence was spacious enough to accommodate many students. The same place was also used as mosque where Shaykh himself was the Imam (Arikewuyo 1990: 22). It is pertinent to recall that early Qur'anic schools were found in or outside the mosques, private houses and under trees. Indeed, the oldest Muslim University, Al-Azhar in Cairo was established in a mosque (Fafunwa, 1974:57) and still operates largely from the mosque.

The school was not merely a Qur'anic school; it was rather a comprehensive Arabic school where all levels of Arabic and Islamic education were operated. There were both the Qur'anic and the '*Ilmiyyah*' sections the latter being an equivalent of the post primary and post-secondary levels of education in the Western system of education. In the first stage of learning, the students were taught some subjects like *tajwîd* (Science of reading of the Holy Qur'an), *Tasfîr* (explanation and meaning of the Qur'an), *Ahâdith* (Traditions of the Holy Prophet), *Sirah* (history) and *Fiqh* (Islamic Jurisprudence).

At the second stage, the learning was used to be more intensive, since it is like that of advanced level of education. The students began to learn Arabic language and literature. They were widely exposed into all areas of Arabic and Islamic studies such as syntax (*Nahw*), morphology (*Sarf*), composition (*Inshâ*) and Rhetoric (*Ilm al-Balaghah*) and Prosody ('*Arûd*) The learners were also exposed to advanced study of the Qur'an and the Hadith, Islamic theology (*Tawhîd*), Islamic Law (Shari'ah), philosophy, History, Geography, and other Arabic and Islamic Science (Akorede, 2006: 15).

The textbooks of study include the following: *Mukhtasar al- 'Akhdari*, *Muqaddimah al-in ziyyah*, *Jawâhir al-Ikîl*, *Sharîh Mukhasar Khalîl*, *Matn al- Alfîyyah*, *At-Tuhfah as-Siniyyah*, *Qawâ'id al-Lughghah al- 'Asmâwiyy*, *'Ahâdith al- Nabawiyyah fi 'Akhlaq wa 'ijtimai wa madaniyyah* (a collection from Sahihayn al- Bukhârî and Muslim), *Sunan Abu Nisâ'*. *Sittah al-Shuarai*, *Maqamah al-Harîr*, *Al- Darrah al-Yatîmah hi-Qasidah al-Burdah*, *Tasfîr al-Jalalâyn* and *Ruh al-Ma'ani*.

According to Akorede 2006, the number of Shaykh Awelenje's students number is between 350 to 500. This large number of students depicted the Shaykh's great erudition in Arabic and Islamic learning. Some of the products of the school who have made significant contribution to the development of Arabic and Islamic Studies in Yorubaland are: Shaykh Abubakr Garba Agbarigidoma of Ilorin. Alhaji Imam Muhammad Busari Arikewuyo of Ilorin, Alhaj Imam S.O. Oladele Missioner and Chief Imam of Ansar-ul-Deen Society of Nigeria, Oyo branch, Alhaj Tijani of Kishi, Alhaj Imam Umar Agbaji of Ilorin (d. 1971) to mention but a few. (Arikewuyo, 1990: 30)

It is pertinent to note that the contribution of Shaykh Ahmad Awelenje to learning was not confined to Yorubaland of Nigeria, his influence in the area of spreading of Arabic and Islamic education was far and wide. Thus, he had students from Dahomey in Benin Republic to study under him. Furthermore, he had the opportunity to teach at *Masjid al-Jami'*. (The Central Mosque in Port-Sudan between 1939 and 1941 when he was in transit there on his first pilgrimage to Makkah.

Right from Shaykh Awelenje's school age he proved to be a promising personality. His rate of learning and acquisition of knowledge became astonishing to his teachers and his fellow students. Hence, he was not regarded as a co-learner alone but also as a student "teacher" among his mates. It is reported that in each of the towns of Yorubaland that Shaykh Awelenje traveled to, many people flocked his residence to seek both Arabic and Islamic knowledge while some others who though, had acquired certain levels of Islamic education went to him to further their learning. For example, Late Alhaji Bushra Olagunju of Ede (d. 1962) and late Alufa Arikalamu of Osogbo were learned scholars of his time yet they strengthened their Arabic and Islamic knowledge under Shaykh Awelenje. Other contemporaries of Shaykh Saki were Shaykh Ahmad Rafai of Ibadan (d. 1971), Shaykh Rufai Nda Salati of Ilorin and Shaykh Ahmad Omo Ikokoro of Ilorin to mention but a few (Abubakre, 2017: 10).

By virtue of Shaykh Awelenje's learning and prominence, he had contact with Muslim scholars of various Arab countries. He played host to some of the scholars who paid visits to him in return. The visitors came from countries like Mali, Sudan, Morocco and Niger to mention but a few. Mostly, the visitors were Shuwa Arabs. Shaykh Awelenje used to keep company of the visiting scholars to the regional capital of Yorubaland. A specific example was that of Shaykh B. Umar al-Fazi who was supposed to be a personal guest of Shaykh Awelenje but because of the eminence

of the visitor, he was embraced by the Muslim community of Lagos and he was accorded hospitality under the auspices of the chief Imam of Lagos, Alhaji Liadi Ibrahim (Akorede 2006: 19).

More so, language advantage was a great factor that enhanced the relationship of Shaykh Awelenje with his foreign friends and visitors. Shaykh Awelenje was reported to have understood many languages like Yoruba (his mother tongue), Arabic, Baruba, Fulani, Hausa and English languages. With his ability to speak various languages, Shaykh Awelenje used to translate and interpret addresses of the visiting scholars to the Yoruba audience in the language they understood best.

Another factor that enhanced the relationship of the Shaykh with his foreign friends and enabled him to globalize Arabic scholarship was his pilgrimage to the Holy land-Makkah. He performed Hajj thrice in his life time. He made the first pilgrimage in 1939 and he did not return until 1941, after having performed the second pilgrimage. Between the first and the second pilgrimage, he sojourned in Sudan where he taught in *Masjid al-jami* (Central Mosque) port-Sudan, Shaykh Awelenje made his third pilgrimage in 1949 (Arikewuyo 1990:35).

Shaykh Awelenje later settled in Lagos, at Ojo Giwa Street around 1920. He became highly recognized and influential through his powerful and unbiased preaching. He played many bridge building roles both in Lagos and his home town – Saki. Although Alhaji Awelenje did not settle in his home town after his departure from there for Iseyin at his tender age, his contributions to the development of Arabic intellectualism and Islamic knowledge in Shaki cannot be underestimated. For example, when the *Zumratul-Hujjaj* was to be formed as an Islamic association in Shaki, he was consulted in Lagos by Alhaji Salah Adebayo, Alhaji Nafiu Olayiwola, Alhaji Tijani Mosa and others. He consented to the formation and gave it his support. He was always ready to give them useful advice as well as financial support whenever he was consulted. To the credit of the association, it was the first Islamic association to establish modern Arabic school in Saki in 1950 (Akorede 2006: 43).

Alhaji Awelenje performed his first pilgrimage to Makkah in 1939 as mentioned above. However, as part of his own contribution to the propagation of Islam, he took along with him some of his students like Alhaji Mustafa Adeleke, Alhaji Jimoh both from Iseyin, Alhaji Alaka (Igboho) and Alhaja Asma'u (his wife).

On the development of Arabic and Islamic studies in Nigeria as a whole, Shaykh Awelenje achieved a lot. He was the president of the United Muslim Council of Nigeria (1958) that influenced the establishment of the first pilgrims Welfare Board and he was the first Chairman of the Board which was formed by the Government of the then Western Region of Nigeria headed by Chief Obafemi Awolowo. He also led the Yoruba Mallams to mount pressure on the defunct Western Region Government and succeeded with the appointment of Arabic teachers into the

free primary schools in 1956. Moreso, in the year, he was awarded a national honour of M.B.E- Member of British Empire by the Queen of England , Elizabeth II.

Conclusion

Given the limitations of and challenges to globalization and globalisation of Arabic intellectualism as identified and discussed in the life and works of shaykh Awelenje, we conclude that: 1) in order to achieve meaningful and realistic liberation for students at the global level, this liberation must be conceptualized as a process like that of Ahmad Tijani Awelenje 2) this process must be based on and driven by Arabic scholarship that focuses on understanding the nature, sources, and causes of the challenges to and limitations of globalization of intellectualism as catalysts in the process of students' liberation at the global level; 3) this process must be a long one, involving mutual understanding, education and eventually an intellectual revolution based on what Sabry (2006, 139) refers to as communicative action and triggered by Arabic literary scholarship of the type demonstrated in the works of Ahmad Shawqi, Najib Mahfuz and Tawfiq Al-Hakim, Yusuf Idris, Jurji Zaydan 4) this process must identify and address specific differences among scholars of Arabic language which stem primarily from culture, social class, ethnicity, race, nationality, religion, customs, tribal origin, social religious and political systems and the status of different nations within the so-called global intellectual society, as well as their status within the global academic class system.

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