

Yoruba Islamic Verse in ajami: a Literary Genre Awaiting

Exploration in Arabic Manuscript Studies

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Introduction

The Yorubas are largely to be found in southwestern Nigeria although a sizeable number of the ethnic group can be found in varying demographic quantities in other West African states. Their contact with Islam is to be traced to the second half of the 16th-century. Ajami refers to the script in which the Arabic alphabet is used for languages other than Arabic, and this scripting tradition had started since the 10th-century with Persian and other languages with which Islam, hence the Arabic language, had come in contact. Oral poetry had been a feature of cultural expression among the Yoruba before Islam, and the same tradition was sustained under Islam in the enterprise of spreading the message of the faith and teaching its ideals among the natives from the 19th-century. The remarkable familiarity of the Yoruba Muslims with the Arabic language from this period inspired the employment of its alphabet for their language, and the earliest, surviving, representation of this in the form of a paraenetic Islamic verse is to be attributed to Badamasi bin Musa Agbaji (d. circa 1891). The exemplars from this author demonstrate the strong influence of the classical Arabic poetical prototypes (qasida and rajaz), and indeed the impact of the Hausa waka model which had been popularized by the Sokoto jihad tradition of the 18th–19th centuries. Some codices of these exemplars which I have had the opportunity of examining reflect a remarkable demonstration of interest by copyists, and perhaps literate chanters and public performers of them, to enrich the corpus through glosses, intra and/or interlinear comments, and marginalia. This phenomenon certainly offers a fecund area of investigation for

those interested in the function of subtexts in literary efforts other than “serious” or “technical” religious and historical texts. An inestimable quantity of Yoruba ajami materials are known to be available in private holdings of scholarly families in Yorubaland, and the variety of topics and subject matters treated in them should be of interest to scholars and explorers in intellectual and cultural history. Some of the subjects treated include didacticism, history, medicinal and therapeutic prescriptions, contract agreements, incantations, and other forms of “bastard science”, to borrow Goody’s characterization of magical practices.

A significant by-product of the Yoruba Islamic verse, albeit in its oral mode is the appropriation of its model in other sub-genres such as seli, madahi, were, fuji, and senwele, the last being currently appropriated by Christian gospel musicians and wrap artists among the Yoruba. However, the written form of some these sub-genres, which are not totally lacking anyway, may have been distantly inspired by the chirographic waka as introduced by Badamasi Agbaji. While efforts at evolving a standardized orthography of Yoruba ajami are still on, although the process is far from nearing conclusion, it is to be hoped that scholars interested in archival and original indigenous works of literary and aesthetic value will harness efforts and resources to unearth the large “deposits” of Yoruba ajami materials while institutions of learning encourage their students to learn ajami in general and materials written in them in particular.

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