

THE SEARCH FOR A YORUBA ORTHOGRAPHY SINCE THE 1840S: OBSTACLES TO THE CHOICE OF THE ARABIC SCRIPT

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... the conference of 1875 did not by any means settle the problems of Yoruba orthography. Some of the problems that engaged the attention of the earlier scholars are still very much with us.¹

It is evident from the quotation above that the question of an orthography for the Yoruba language was all but settled by 1875 when the Church Missionary Society convened a conference to put finishing touches to the Romanized Yoruba orthography on which Samuel Ajayi Crowther and a host of others (Christian clergymen and specialist linguists) had laboured during the preceding 35 years. In spite of this seeming *fait accompli* status of the Romanized Yoruba orthography, a subdued feeling of resentment persisted among Muslim scholars, especially those of them who were not immersed in the Western education promoted by Christian missionary enterprise. This subterranean feeling surfaced time and again in form of direct and indirect attacks on the superimposition of Christian/British colonial education over Arabic, the primary tool of Muslim education, which preceded the entry of Christianity into Yorubaland in the early 1840s.² This submerged feeling has recently surfaced in form of a vigorous campaign for the promotion of Yoruba *‘ajamī* during the closing years of the twentieth century by a Sufi Muslim scholar based in Ilorin, a bastion of Islamic propagation and education in northwest Yorubaland. This article is intended

1 Ayo Bamgbose, ‘Yoruba Studies Today’, *Odu*, i, 1969, 87.

2 *Ādam ‘Abd Allāh al-Ilūrī, A ‘māl markaz al-ta‘līm al-‘arabī al-islāmī, Nayjīriyā, fī ‘ishrīn ‘āmmān 1952-1972*, Agege 1972, 6.

to document and evaluate that phenomenon.

The Yoruba people, their language and their geographical location

The term ‘Yoruba’ identifies the language, as well as the people who live mainly in Nigeria’s southwestern States of Lagos, Oyo, Ogun, Osun, Ondo, Ekiti, Kwara and Kogi and in part of Dahomey (now Republic of Benin). Because of the politicization of the population census in Nigeria during the second half of the twentieth century, it is not possible to say precisely how many make up the Yoruba today but the figure has been conservatively put at about 24 million.³ The various subgroups now known as Yoruba have not always been identified by this common name. The history of when, how and why the various subgroups forged a spirit of a common ethnic identity during the last three quarters of the nineteenth century has been adequately dealt with by many scholars.⁴

A point of interest that is worth mentioning here is that the origin of the name ‘Yoruba’ has been traced to Arabic writers such as Aḥmad Bābā (d. 1627 in his *Miʿrāj al-ṣuʿūd* and Muḥammad Bello (d. 1837) in his *Infāq al-maysūr*, both of whom were reportedly among the earliest to name this people ‘yarba’ or ‘yaruba’ or ‘yariba’ (y-r-b) at a time when they were still referring to themselves by their diverse ethnic identities.⁵ The earliest references to them by the British was

3 J. Gbenga Fagborun, *The Yoruba Koiné: Its History and Linguistic Innovations*, Munich: Lincom Europa 1994, 10.

4 Robin Law, ‘Constructing a ‘Real National History: A Comparison of Edward Blyden and Samuel Johnson’, in P.F. de Moraes Farias & Karin Barber (eds.), *Self-Assertion and Brokerage*, Birmingham: University of Birmingham, Centre of West African Studies 1990, 78-100, and M.R. Doormont, ‘The Invention of the Yoruba: Regional and the Pan-African Nationalism versus Ethnic Pronunciation’, in Farias & Barber, *Self-Assertion*, 78-100.

5 See *Miʿrāj al-Ṣuʿūd: Aḥmad Bābā’s Replies on Slavery*, ed. & trans. John Hunwick and Fatima Harrak, Rabat: Institute of African Studies

as *akus* or *eyeo*.⁶

It is pertinent, also, to make some remarks about the written Yoruba language, which is the subject of this article. The type of Yoruba that is taught today at school and used in the print and electronic media, in public places and in published literature, is a kind of koine spoken among educated Yoruba regardless of their ethnic or religious background. 'It is seen by some scholars as a mixture of historical dialects and foreign structures (plausibly from English and Hausa/Arabic using the Oyo-Ibadan and Lagos accents'.⁷ It has also been described as a 'Common Yoruba' that consists not of a single homogeneous dialect, but rather a number of dialects.⁸

The Yoruba and Islam

The history of Yoruba contact with Islam and the far-reaching impact that Islam has had on them and their language, is a subject that has received elaborate coverage in scholarly literature. While there is ample record of the massive spread of Islam among the Yoruba from the second decade of the nineteenth century as a result of the emergence of Ilorin as a frontier state which served as a springboard for propelling the *jihād* of °Uthmān b. Fūdī southwards, evidences from

2000, 39 (English) & 70 (Arabic), and Muhammad Bello, *Infāq al-maysūr*, Cairo 1964, 48. On colonialists' references to *aku*, etc., see James Africanus Horton, *West African Countries and Peoples*, Edinburgh 1868, reissue Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1969, 144, and P.E.H. Hair, *The Early Study of Nigerian Languages: Essays and Bibliography*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1967, 5.

6 Fagborun, *Yoruba Koiné*, 18.

7 Fagborun, *Yoruba Koiné*, 19. This book contains an exhaustive discussion of the evolution, components and usages of what is variously referred to as 'Standard', 'Literary' or 'Koine' Yoruba, which is what we mean whenever we mention 'Yoruba' in this article.

8 H.O.A. Danmole, 'The Frontier Emirate: A History of Islam in Ilorin', Ph.D. thesis, University of Birmingham 1980.

Arabic sources,⁹ and from the accounts of early European travellers and explorers in West Africa,¹⁰ as well as from the morphological features of Arabic loanwords in Yoruba, suggest that Yoruba contact with Islam dates farther back than the nineteenth century.¹¹ In the light of the symbiotic relationship between Islam and Arabic, it is to be expected that the Yoruba contact with Islam necessarily implied their contact with Arabic on account of the reading and recitation of portions of the Qurʾān, an obligatory feature of every practicing Muslim's daily worship. One consequence of this daily use of the Arabic language and the accompanying practice of establishing Arabic schools to teach new converts, was the gradual inroad of a considerable amount of Arabic-derived words and expressions relating to Islamic worship and other subjects into the Yoruba language. This aspect of Yoruba contact with Islam has also received adequate study, from doctrinaire scholars who have attempted to trace virtually all Yoruba words to an Arabic root,¹² as well as from those who have based their identification of Arabic loanwords on academically plausible analyses.¹³ It must be noted that contemporary Stand-

- 9 See above, note 5: Aḥmad Bābā and Muḥammad Bello's references to 'y-r-b'.
- 10 T.G.O. Gbadamosi, *The Growth of Islam among the Yoruba, 1841-1908*, London: Longman 1978, ch. 3; Sir Harry Johnston, *Pioneers of West Africa*, New York: Blackie & Son Ltd. 1912, reissue: Negro University Press 1969, 260.
- 11 Stefan Reichmuth, 'Songhay-Lehnwörter im Yoruba und ihr historischer Kontext', *Sprache und Geschichte in Afrika*, ix, 1988, 298.
- 12 M.A. Mazhar, *Yoruba Traced to Arabic*, Lagos: Ahmadiyya Muslim Mission 1976, and D. Salloum, 'al-Alfāz al-mustaʿāra min al-ʿarabiyyah fī lughat al-Yaruba', *Majallat Kulliyat al-Adab*, University of Baghdad, xx, 2, 1976; see also Ādam ʿAbd Allāh al-Ilūrī, *Aṣl qabā'il Yurubā*, Agege, n.d. (c. 1972), 34-8.
- 13 Reichmuth, 'Songhay-Lehnwörter', 272-91, and I.A. Ogunbiyi, 'Arabic Loanwords in Yoruba in the Light of Arab/Yoruba Relations from Pre-Historic Times', *Arab Journal of Language Studies*, iii, 1, 1984, 161-80; also: 'Of Non-Muslim Cultivators and Propagators of the Arabic Language', inaugural lecture delivered at, and published by, Lagos State University, Lagos 1987, 12-16.

ard Yoruba has an admixture of these Arabic-derived words (which feature prominently in Yoruba Muslim ‘dialect’) with Yoruba Christian religious ‘dialect’ consisting of loan-translations and innovative structures from English that have gained currency in written and spoken Yoruba as a result of the circulation of the Yoruba Bible. More will be said later about Crowther’s translation of the Yoruba Bible later.

The two forms of Yoruba writing: ‘ajamī and Romanized.

The reality of the existence of these two forms is confirmed in the following extract relating to the emergence of Romanized Yoruba orthography. The renowned Yoruba historian, Samuel Johnson states as follows in his book, which was completed in 1898 but published posthumously in 1921: ‘After several fruitless efforts had been made to invent new characters or adapt the Arabic which was already known to Moslem Yoruba, the Roman character was naturally adopted ...’¹⁴

Writing along the same line, another renowned Yoruba author, this time a conservative Muslim scholar, Ādam ‘Abd Allāh al-Ilūrī, ruefully lamented the activities of Christian evangelism which he dubbed ‘cold crusader wars’ in Yorubaland when he said of Samuel Ajayi Crowther:

... he worked assiduously to lay the foundation stones of evangelistic crusades in collaboration with colonialism, and he devised the Latin alphabets for writing the Yoruba language for translating the Gospels [Bible] in place of the Arabic alphabet with which the Muslims were accustomed to writing the Yoruba language.¹⁵

The feeling of disapproval and resentment at the displacement of the Muslim system of writing Yoruba in Arabic script, which is known among the Yoruba as *anjemi* or *anjami* is

14 Rev. Samuel Johnson, *The History of the Yoruba*, ed. Dr. O. Johnson, Lagos: C.M.S. (Nigeria) Bookshops 1921, xxiii.

15 Ādam ‘Abd Allāh al-Ilūrī, *al-Islām fī Nayjīriyā wa’l-shaykh ‘Uthmān b. Fūdiyū al-Fullānī*, Beirut: Dār al-‘Arabiyya 1971, 148.

clearly evident from this quotation. It is appropriate at this juncture to discuss the key players as well as the major landmarks in the evolution of the Romanized system of writing the Yoruba language.

Samuel Ajayi Crowther and Romanized Yoruba orthography

The development of an orthographic system for the Romanized transcription of the Yoruba language owes much to the labour and foresight of liberated Yoruba Christians from Sierra Leone, particularly Reverend Samuel Ajayi Crowther, the first African Bishop of the Church Missionary Society. Ajayi Crowther who hailed from Osogun in the heartland of Yorubaland, was captured and sold into slavery in 1821 but was rescued along with 187 others, freed and resettled in Freetown, Sierra Leone in 1822. He was educated in England and at Fourah Bay College, Sierra Leone between 1831 and 1841 and was ordained as a clergyman of the Church of England in June 1843. He devoted the last forty years of his life to Christian evangelism and to the task of evolving, in collaboration with a number of CMS clergymen and leading European philologists and linguists¹⁶ a Romanized orthographic system for the Yoruba koine which facilitated his translation of the Bible and other Christian religious literature.¹⁷ Between 1843, when he was ordained a priest of the Church of England, and 1844, Crowther translated the Bible 'Gospel of St. Luke' and 'Acts of the Apostles' into Yoruba using the Romanized script, and on January 9, 1844, he preached his first sermon using the text of St. Luke chapter 1, verse 35 as follows: *'ohung ohworh ti aobih ni inoh reh li aomakpe li Omoh*

16 J.F. Ade Ajayi, 'Bishop Ajayi Crowther: An Assessment', *Odu* (new series), Oct. 1970, 9.

17 I.A. Ogunbiyi, 'Arabic-Yoruba Translations of the Qur^ʿān: A Sociolinguistic Perspective', *Journal of Quranic Studies*, iii, 2001, 4-5, and J.F. Ade Ajayi, 'How Yoruba was Reduced to Writing', *Odu*, 8, Oct. 1960, 50-3.

Olorung'.¹⁸ This text, which will undoubtedly appear strange and unintelligible to a modern day Yoruba reader, is essentially that which was refined and modified between the time it was composed and the conference of 1875 referred to in the quotation initiating this article. It was the one used in translating the Bible into Yoruba and has been the one taught in the formal school system and that is in use until today in interpersonal conversation across dialect boundaries irrespective of the speakers' religious affiliation.

It must be noted, though, that prior to the 1840s, efforts had been made by a number of European travellers and missionaries to write Yoruba in Roman script as appendices to their travel accounts. Most of these were individual private initiatives and were not based on any system, but largely dependent on each compiler's perception of the Yoruba sound system in relation to the sound system of the European language in which the recording was made.¹⁹ One such effort was made by a Quaker educationist, Mrs. Hannah Kilham, who was reported to have taught *aku* vernacular lessons as far back as August 1831 to some of her pupils at a private school that she started for girls at Charlotte in Sierra Leone.²⁰

It is also worthy of mention that Crowther did not ignore the Yoruba Muslims and traditional worshippers whose religious 'dialect' had become part of the spoken Yoruba language of his time. It is reported that 'he had to seek out traditional priests and Muslims among the Yoruba in Freetown, study their practices and liturgies and through this build up a vocabulary suitable for the scriptures and the Prayer Book'.²¹ A cursory glance through his Yoruba dictionary published in 1852 will reveal the extent to which Arabic/Hausa loanwords

18 Ade Ajayi, 'How Yoruba was Reduced to Writing', 49; see also Fagborun, *Yoruba koiné*, 21.

19 Ade Ajayi, 'How Yoruba was Reduced to Writing', 49.

20 Hair, *Early Study*, 8.

21 Ade Ajayi, 'Bishop Ajayi Crowther', 8.

had permeated the Yoruba language in use at that time.²²

Crowther's endeavour and the Yoruba anjemi

We may now wish to explore the probable reasons why the Yoruba *anjemi* was not chosen in view of the references to it in Samuel Johnson and al-*Illūrī*'s books as one of the options available to the developers of the orthography for the Yoruba language.

The first answer would be that such a choice would have run counter to the tenets of the movement for a globalized, universal and standardized alphabet that was then in vogue among some of the missionaries, ethnographers, and linguists involved in reducing Asian and African languages to writing at that time. In reference to this movement, the renowned African historian Professor J.F. Ade Ajayi writes:

Beginning with the work of Count Volney [in 1795] the French philosopher to simplify the Oriental languages by replacing their complicated alphabets with European ones, a movement had grown up which, if it did not displace the existing alphabets, would at least prevent a wholesale increase of the diversity of systems.²³

This movement culminated in an international conference held in 1854 at which rival proposals were presented with regard to which European language writing system was most suitable for this purpose, but the conference could not agree on any particular one, although it reaffirmed the necessity for such an orthography. It is said about Rev. Henry Venn, the General Secretary of the C.M.S. from 1841 to 1872, that 'he had been an advocate of this [movement] for some years

22 Samuel Ajayi Crowther, *A Grammar of the Yoruba Language*, London: Seeleys 1852; cf. *adura*, (p. 10), *alafia*, (p. 20), *alebu*, *alubosa*, (p. 31), *aniyan*, (p. 36) to cite just a few examples.

23 Ade Ajayi, 'How Yoruba was Reduced to Writing', 50, where he cites Volney's 1795 *L'Alphabet européen appliqué aux langues asiatiques* and his *Discours sur l'étude philosophique des langues*.

and had required all his African missionaries to adopt an approximate Standard form in 1848'.²⁴ He was also one of the principal conveners of the 1854 international conference. Although no consensus was reached at the conference, some of the CMS functionaries and linguists who collaborated with Crowther on the Yoruba project operated with this mindset, and one of them, the German Egyptologist and philologist C.R. Lepsius, published a 'Standard alphabet for all languages of the world' in 1854.²⁵

Although the script of the Arabic language was unlikely to have been targeted for Romanization because of its antiquity and the religious attachment of Arab nations to it, it is still reasonable to speculate that the Asiatic languages whose scripts the movement sought to standardize using European alphabets would include such as Urdu, Persian, Malay, Turkish, and Kurdish, all having Arabic-based scripts. It is instructive that the well-known antiquity of the Arabic language and its script and their inseparability from Islam did not prevent Lord Frederick Lugard, the architect of colonial Nigeria in the first two decades of the twentieth century, from imagining that Arabic too could be Romanized.²⁶ If well-established Asiatic orthographies could come under the threat of displacement by Romanized scripts, a little-known script such as the Yoruba *anjemi* stood no chance of being selected *de novo* as a writing system.

The second obstacle to the choice of Yoruba *anjemi* was implicit in the very purpose for which the Yoruba language was being given a written form. The primary objective as

24 Sigismund Wilhelm Koelle, *Polyglotta Africana*, ed. P.E.H. Hair & David Dalby, Graz: Akademische Druck u. Verlagsanstalt 1963, 15.

25 Hair, *Early Study*, 16.

26 Letter from Lugard to Principal, Khartoum College, dated Aug 1905, labelled 'Secretary, Northern Provinces 7-2594/1907—Hausa Language—Conclusions arrived at by Residents with regard to transliteration of'; cited by J.E. Philips in his paper 'Hausa in the 20th Century: An Overview', presented at the ISITA colloquium, Northwestern University, 17 May 2002.

enunciated in the introduction to Crowther's *Vocabulary of the Yoruba Language* of 1852, was to facilitate the production of a 'Christian literature ... for the diffusion among the Yorubans in their tongue that Sacred Word'. If, therefore, the envisaged orthography was intended to serve as a tool to promote the spread of the Christian religion, it would be self-defeating or suicidal to adopt the Yoruba *anjemi* which was closely identified with the Islamic religion that the Christian religion was in competition with for converts. As a matter of record, the Christian missionaries were not unaware of the tenacious attachment of African Muslims to their faith, to the Arabic script and any writing system based on it. One of them, Sigismund W. Koelle, who worked on Kanuri language from 1848 to 1853 was almost persuaded to give it up because of what he called the 'fanatical Mohammedan character of the Bornuese'.²⁷ Similarly, both Rev. T.O. Bowen of the Baptist Mission and Rev. W.H. Clarke of the CMS had their separate requests to set up mission stations at Ilorin in 1855 turned down by Emir Shitta.²⁸

Another potentially negative side effect of this identification of the *anjemi* script with Islam was the resentment which its adoption was likely to generate among the new converts to Christianity, especially those who were previously averse to the Islamic religion. It is remarkable that up until today, this dichotomy in the perception of the Arabic language among Nigerians has persisted.²⁹

Closely related to this last point was the consideration of the convenience of the missionaries who were to teach and use this orthography in the field, and the printers who were to produce books in the language. These factors were sometimes alluded to, and sometimes explicitly stated in the

27 Hair & Dalby, *Polyglotta Africana*, 10-12.

28 H.A. Danmole, 'The Spread of Islam in Ilorin Emirate in the Nineteenth century', *NATAIS: Journal of the Nigerian Association of Teachers of Arabic and Islamic Studies*, ii, 2, 1981, 3.

29 Ogunbiyi, 'Of Non-Muslim Cultivators and Propagators of the Arabic Language', 2 & 3.

available sources. After referring to the options which confronted the developers of the Yoruba orthography, Samuel Johnson went on to add: ‘the Roman character was naturally adopted, not only because it is the one best acquainted with but also because it would obviate the difficulties that must necessarily arise if missionaries were first to learn strange characters before they could undertake scholastic and evangelical work’.³⁰ The missionaries were all educated in one or more European language and would therefore find it easier to use a Romanized Yoruba orthography than would be the case with one based on the Arabic script with which most of them were not acquainted.³¹

Since the printing would have to be done in England, it was also considered financially prudent to adopt an orthography for which there were technical facilities on ground rather than adopting an entirely new orthography which would have involved printing in the Near or Middle East where facilities for large-scale printing of Arabic materials existed. Rev. Henry Townsend who participated in Christian missionary work in both Sierra Leone and Yorubaland, has been referred to as a ‘printer’ who always kept his eyes on cost implications of font modifications of the adopted orthography.³² Reverend Henry Venn, the then CMS General Secretary, was equally keen on keeping down costs, hence the adoption of an entirely new orthography which would have involved higher costs was out of the question.

The point about facility or ease of acquisition of knowl-

30 Johnson, *Grammar*, xxiii.

31 However, some of the Missionaries were no strangers to the Arabic language. It is reported that the curriculum of Fourah Bay College was to ‘include a sound knowledge of the English language, Arabic and a study of local languages ...’ cf. D.L. Sumner, *Education in Sierra Leone*, London: Crown Agents 1963, 38; also: as at 1854, Koelle was reportedly saddled with ‘the study of Arabic at Fourah Bay Institute’, and this was a program which he had started from 1851; Hair & Dalby, *Polyglotta Africana*, 11 & 12.

32 P.E.H. Hair, *Early Study*, 16.

edge of the Romanized characters by learners is also explicit in the quotation from Samuel Johnson's book. This was in view of the fact that other school subjects, including the English language, were to be taught to the new converts in the English language script. The adoption of a different script for Yoruba, which constituted just one subject on the school curriculum, would have involved teaching two different writing systems. This was avoided by the choice of the Romanized alphabet, which was adapted largely from the Italian or continental model of pronouncing the vowels in order to avoid the chaos of the English language sound system in which some letters represent more than one sound.

Another factor which could have placed the Yoruba *anjemi* at a disadvantage was the doubt about the popularity of this system, even among the local Muslim population, unlike the situation of Hausa and Fulfulde both of which were extensively written in Arabic script long before the colonial period.³³ Although one comes across statements to the effect that *anjemi* was widely used among Yoruba Muslims prior to colonial rule,³⁴ it has not been possible to retrieve a substantial quantity of Yoruba *anjemi* material to support these claims. Searches by scholars, especially during the second half of the twentieth century, yielded only scanty results consisting of some folk songs by an Ilorin *waka* musician of the late nineteenth century,³⁵ and medicinal recipes and incantations purposely encoded in *anjemi* written by, and for, barely literate Muslim practitioners of the *khaṭṭ al-raml* divinatory system.³⁶ Also retrieved were a few short pieces of

33 Abdur-Razaq Alhaji Abdullahi, 'The Various Uses of 'Ajami Writing among the Muslims in Nigeria: Hausa and Yoruba as a Case Study', project written in part-fulfillment of requirement for the award of a B.A. degree, Dept. of Religions, University of Ilorin 1985, 5.

34 Abdullahi, 'Various Uses of 'Ajami', 85, and al-Ilūrī, *al-Islām fī Nayjīriyā*, 148.

35 Mashood Mahmood Jimba, *Ilorin-Waka: a Literary Islamic and Popular Art*, Ilorin 1997, 17-22 (Arabic)/11-13 (English).

36 P.J. Ryan, *Imale: Yoruba Participation in Muslim Tradition*, Missoula:

personal correspondence between individuals.³⁷ More will be said later about the characteristics of these pre-colonial *anjemi* writings. The pertinent point that needs to be made here is that if the late twentieth century searches did not yield substantial *anjemi* materials to support claims of its widespread use among the pre-colonial Yoruba Muslims, it is reasonable to suggest that the missionaries and linguists who opted for the Romanized script did so because they did not have sufficient material to convince them that the choice of Yoruba *anjemi* was a viable one.

In a recent discussion of this issue with a Muslim scholar, a scion of one of the long established Muslim families from Ede in southwest Nigeria, he opined that pre-colonial *anjemi* material owned by individuals was often split up and shared out by will executors to beneficiaries of deceased Muslim scholars, presumably because each such beneficiary would insist on having a portion of ‘Arabic’ material that was looked upon as sacred tokens of blessing and protection from their deceased testator-parents.³⁸ With no proper appreciation of the historical and intellectual value of the material nor any adequate preservation from the elements and the destructive tropical termites, it did not take more than one generation for it to be destroyed and completely lost. The passage of time is making the chances of retrieving more than we now have very remote. This article is one more call to anyone who has information on the issue of pre-colonial *anjemi* to assist in locating, collecting and preserving them for scholarly study and possible practical application.

Montana Scholars Press 1978, Ch. 4.

37 Abdullahi, ‘Various Uses of ‘*Ajami*’, 85, and al-Ilūrī, *al-Islām fī Nayjīriyā*, 148.

38 Discussion was with Dr. D.A. Tijani, lecturer in the Department of Arabic and Islamic Studies, University of Ibadan, Nigeria, Friday 3 May 2002.

Comparative table of Arabic/Yoruba, 'ajamī and Romanized alphabets

S/N	Arabic	Yoruba 'ajamī	Romanized Yoruba	S/N	Arabic	Yoruba 'ajamī	Romanized Yoruba
1	ب	ب	b	19	س	س	s
2	م	م	m	20	ر	ر	r
3	و	و	w	21	ش	ش	s/sh ¹
4	ف	ف	f	22	ي/ي	ي/ي	y
5	—	ب/پ	p/kp	23	ك/ك	ك/ك	k
6	—	ب/غ	gb	24	غ	غ	g ²
7	ت	ت	t	25	ق	—	-
8	د	د	d	26	ع	—	-
9	ث	—	-	27	ه	ه	h
10	ذ	—	-	28	ء	—	-
11	ظ	—	-	29	fatha	َ	a
12	ط	—	-	30	kasra	ِ	i
13	ض	—	-	31	damma	ُ	u
14	ل	ل	l	32	—	أ/إ/ع	e
15	ن	ن	n	33	—	و/ؤ/عوا	o ³
16	ج	ج	j	34	—	ي/أ/ع	e ³
17	ز	—	-	35	—	و/عوا	o ³
18	ص	—	-				

1. 'Sh' used by many writers until recently instead of 's'.
2. The Yoruba 'g' is pronounced like the Cairo ج .
3. Recent innovation/modification.

Yoruba sound system vis-à-vis the Arabic sound system

Since the written representation of Yoruba sounds in *‘ajamī* is dependent on a writer’s perception of the similarity between the Arabic and Yoruba sounds so as to represent each significant Yoruba sound with its equivalent Arabic symbol—and where there is no equivalent, to adapt the most approximate sound in the Arabic sound system—it is appropriate to take a brief look at a comparative table of both sound systems and their written representations. For completeness of comparison and to enable us identify and comment on the difficulties encountered in writing Yoruba in *‘ajamī* and Romanized scripts, a column for the written symbols of the Romanized Yoruba script is also added. We shall follow, although with some latitude, the phonetic arrangement of starting from the bilabial sounds.

*Comments and observations**1. On Yoruba consonants*

The Yoruba sound system has a total of eighteen consonants, fifteen of which have close equivalents in the Arabic sound system while one, the Yoruba ‘g’ (no. 24 in the table) is pronounced much like the Egyptian ج as in *gamal* *جمال* rather than like the Arabic غ as in ‘*ghazal*’, hence its representation by the Arabic غ is mere approximation. The two Yoruba sounds that have no equivalent Arabic sounds are the plosive bi-labials ‘p’ (kp) and ‘gb’ (nos. 5 & 6), which are respectively represented in Yoruba *‘ajamī* by three diacritical marks under the ‘b’, and three over the Arabic ع.

Although these two Yoruba sounds have no exact simple equivalents in Arabic, the phonemes, which are combined in pronouncing each of them are close to some Arabic sounds. For example, the Yoruba ‘p’ is pronounced by a subtle combination of the ‘k’ and ‘b’, in which a faint, almost imperceptible ‘k’ sound is overshadowed by a heavily plosive

‘b’ sound. Similarly, the Yoruba ‘gb’ sound is a subtle combination of a faint ‘g’ sound with a heavily plosive ‘b’ sound. It is noteworthy that only very few non-Yoruba, or speakers of related languages, are able to accurately realize these two sounds in pronunciation. It is the ‘b’ sound that is often substituted by such ‘foreigners’ for these two Yoruba sounds. In general, communication is not often impaired by such mispronunciation, especially when in context. Indeed, until the recent modification/reformation of the Yoruba ‘*ajamī*’ about which we shall discuss shortly, even Yoruba *anjemi* writers have represented both sounds by the Arabic ‘b’ (ب), as in: *عو سيب بكو* ‘a o si gbọ pooku’³⁹ and in *بتابتا* ‘patapata’.⁴⁰

2. On Yoruba vowels

Unlike the eighteen Yoruba consonants, all of which have close equivalents in the Arabic sound systems except two, four out of seven of the attested Yoruba vowels have no close equivalents in the Arabic sound system and *anjemi* writers have had to manipulate a combination of Arabic vowels and diacritical marks to represent these four. When it is realized that in Yoruba, vowels are of greater importance than consonants, and tones (a major peculiarity of the language) are of greater importance than vowels,⁴¹ we would appreciate the enormity of the difficulty which has confronted *anjemi* writers in accurately representing all the tonal nuances of the Yoruba language in writing. There are three tones in Yoruba, namely: the low tone, the medium and the high, approximately corresponding to the musical notes: ‘do re mi’, and the meaning of a monosyllabic word consisting of a consonant and a vowel may vary according to the tone of the vowel as in the following examples:

39 Jimba, *Ilorin-Waka*, 20 (Arabic)/20 (English).

40 Al-Ilūrī, *Aṣl qabā’il Yurubā*, Agege 1989, 38.

41 Johnson, *Grammar*, xxix.

- | | |
|---|--|
| (i) <i>bẹ̀</i> - to beg
<i>bẹ́</i> - to be forward
<i>bẹ̀́</i> - to be split open | (ii) <i>bà</i> - to alight upon
<i>ba</i> - to lay ambush
<i>bá</i> - to catch up with |
|---|--|

A further complication is the abundance of contractions and elisions in the language. All these complexities have remained an intractable source of worry to the developers, users and reformers of the Romanized Yoruba script for over a century,⁴² even though they were able, right from the days of Crowther, to agree on a partial solution to the three tones by writing a grave accent and an acute one on the low and high tones respectively while the medium tone carries no accent as in the examples above.⁴³

Yoruba anjemi until recently

As indicated earlier, the amount of pre-colonial *anjemi* material at our disposal is very scanty indeed. *‘Ajamī* material dating from the colonial period is even scantier, presumably because this was a period when the Yoruba Muslims were busy combating what they perceived as marginalization and peril to their children’s faith from colonialism and its educational system. They did this by either establishing their own primary and secondary schools to provide formal, western-type education for their children in what has been described as ‘Islamic environment’,⁴⁴ or by abstaining from any form of western education through the establishment of pure Arabic-medium Islamic education where they believed that Muslims would be shielded from being tainted by western

42 Ayo Bamgbose, *Yoruba Orthography*, Ibadan: Ibadan University Press 1976, 15-27.

43 Johnson, *Grammar*, xxx-xxxi.

44 Stefan Reichmuth, ‘Education and the Growth of Religious Associations among Yoruba Muslims: The Ansar-Ud-Deen Society of Nigeria’, *Journal of Religion in Africa*, xxvi, 4, 1996, 381-4.

education.⁴⁵ Consequently, much of what was written by Yoruba Muslims during this period, including the translations of the Qurʾān, was in English, Romanized Yoruba or Arabic language. Little or nothing was written in *anjemi* except the transliteration of Yoruba names and expressions into the Arabic script in Arabic language publications. No encouragement was given to the use or improvement of the ‘*ajamī*’ system of writing during this period.⁴⁶ However, the little that is available reveals the following basic features:

- (i) The Maghribī single dot under the loop of the *fā*ʾ.
- (ii) Representation of both Yoruba ‘p’ and ‘gb’ by the Arabic ب ; see examples in the table of consonants.
- (iii) Representation of Yoruba vowels as illustrated in the earlier table of Yoruba vowels.
- (iv) Occasional representation of the Yoruba ‘l’ by the Arabic ض as in تَضَ تَضَ - teḷeteḷe, as illustrated in the Ilorin musicians’ lyrics.⁴⁷
- (v) A general lack of uniformity and consistency resulting in lack of intelligibility other than by the author or anyone familiar with the author’s ‘*ajamī*’ idiosyncracies. This was what gave rise to the common Yoruba proverb: *alanjemi l’anjemii ye* ‘only the writer of *anjemi* can comprehend what he has written’. A testimony to the veracity of this proverb is the confirmation by the author of *Ilorin waka* that he needed the assistance of the grandson of the musician-author of the lyrics to comprehend the little portion that he was able to decipher and transcribe ‘on account of its difficulty’.⁴⁸

45 Al-Ilūrī, *A‘māl markaz al-ta‘līm*, 9-10.

46 Ogunbiyi, ‘Arabic-Yoruba Translations of the Qurʾān’, see n. 17 above.

47 Jimba, *Ilorin-Waka*, 18 (Arabic).

48 Jimba, *Ilorin-Waka*, 18 (Arabic); also Ogunbiyi, ‘Arabic-Yoruba Translations of the Qurʾān’, 27, 28.

*The recent movement for the revival, promotion and reform
of Yoruba ʿajamī*

The recent movement to revive and popularize the use of Yoruba *anjemi* is traceable to an Ilorin Muslim scholar, Alhaji Abubakar Yusuf, who is variously referred to in his different pamphlets as: ‘Alhaji Abubakar G. Yusuf’ (1989); ‘Alhaji Abubakar Yusuf’ (1991); ‘Malam Ibrahim Abubakar Yusuf Sufi A. Yusufu’ (1999) and ‘Shaikh Alhaji Abubakar Yusuf’ (2001). From the address on all his publications, ‘Madinah Faidah al Tijaniyyah, Abayawo, Ilorin’, it is apparent that he is a leader of the Tijāniyya Sufi order in his area of Ilorin. He has so far issued five primers and two posters setting out his ideas for the simplification and popularization of the ʿajamī script.

The first one, dated January 1989, is entitled on the cover *Writing Yoruba with Arabic Letters for Islamic Nursery and Primary Schools* and marked *Apa Kini* ‘Part One’ on the inside cover page. The second was published in 1991, with the title written in both ʿajamī and Romanized Yoruba as follows:

أَنْجَمِ: كِكُوَاتِ كِكِ دَارُورُنْ فُنْ عَنِتِ عُوبَا كِكُوَانْتِرِي تُوَا
سَمَا دَادَا

*Anjami: kiko ati kika di irorun fun eniti o ba kekọ inu tira yi
tosi maa dada*

The third, published in 1999, is a religious pamphlet on the Islamic *ṣalāt* written in ʿajamī and entitled:

الصَّلَاةُ عِكُو عَسْنُ أَسْنَلَا يُوَكَجِ فُنْ أَوْنُ عُمُومِ الْكُوُ وَالْأَاتِ
مَدْرَسَه

The fourth was also published in 1999 with the title written

only in ‘*ajamī*’ as follows:

أَنْجَمِ كَكَوْ عَدِي يُورُبَا كَالِي بَلْ أَنْجَمِ دِي أَرُونْ

For reasons which are not stated in this pamphlet, the authorship of this particular one is ascribed to a ‘Committee for the Establishment and Stabilization of Yoruba *anjemi* and its Popularization and Propagation’, and not to the sole authorship of Alhaji Yusuf like the earlier publications.

With regard to the two posters, the first contains a table of *anjemi* alphabets boldly written with passport photographs of Alhaji Yusuf and the Tijāniyya Kawlakhī leader at the top right and left hand corners respectively. Apparently, the photograph of the Tijāniyya order’s leader is intended to confer some degree of respectability, and put a stamp of authority on the subject being propagated.

The second poster is a public announcement and invitation to a two-week workshop on Yoruba *anjemi* writing held at Ilorin from 27 February to 14 March 2002. This second poster is written in both *anjemi* and Romanized Yoruba with a *ḥadīth* quotation in Arabic. Like the fifth pamphlet, the two posters are attributed to:

اللجنة الإثبات [sic] انجم يوربا ونشرها

The significance of Alhaji Yusuf’s publications lies not so much in the written symbols for representing Yoruba sounds (and his departures from the symbols previously in use have been highlighted in the table above), as in his pioneering effort to set out and standardize the rules. He also enumerates the rationale for, and the benefits of, the Yoruba ‘*ajamī*’. These are to be found in his pamphlet no. 4, pp. 10-13, and no. 5, pp. 12-18.

Unresolved issues in Yoruba 'ajamī' writing

As is to be expected, the most problematic aspects of Yoruba 'ajamī', as set out in these publications, are the Yoruba vowels and tones. As shown above, Alhaji Yusuf has suggested the following representations for the peculiar Yoruba vowels:

e (as in Engl. 'age'): عَ as in:

عَدَيَ *ede* 'language'

پَپَپَیَ *pepele* 'raised earth, platform'

o: (as in Engl. 'old'): عُوْ as in:

عُوْاْلُوْهَنْ *gbolohun* 'sound, voice, word'

عُوْاْغُوْاْ *gbogbo* 'altogether, total'

ē (as in Engl. 'red'): عِ as in:

عِغِغِیَ *gegebi* 'just like, such as'

جِیَ *je* 'eat'

o (as in Engl. 'bought'): عُوْ as in:

عُوْدُنْ *odun* 'year'

عُوْبَاْ *oba* 'king'

It is evident that the combination of a diacritical mark and vowel for 'e' and the combination of two Arabic vowels for 'ē' may need further modification and possible reversal to bring them closer to the existing Romanized symbol for both vowels whereby it is 'ē' that takes a dot below and not 'e'.

However, by far the greatest problem to which the new standardized *anjemi* has no solutions yet are the tones, the contractions and assimilations. An attempt in Chapter 10 of pamphlet no. 5 to grapple with these problems leaves more questions unanswered and ends up confusing the Yoruba contractions and elisions with the Arabic elongated vowel. His examples of elongated *alif*, *kasra*, and *damma* are: أَجَا, تَبِيْتِي, and آوْ respectively.

Although the author regards each as a single entry, each

word can have more than one meaning depending on the tones, as in the following examples:

أَجَا can be *ajá* ‘dog’, or *àjà* ‘roof’

تِيْتِي can be *títí* ‘until’, or *títì* ‘paved road’

أَلُو can be: *aálo* ‘we will/shall go’, or *aàlo* ‘we will/shall not go’.

Another instructive example is in Chapter 8, p. 14: أَجُو can be: *ajò* ‘sieve’, or *àjò* ‘assembly, gathering, contribution’. As observed earlier, the most interesting section of his publications is in his pioneering the distillation of *anjemi* rules by means of which the system can be standardized if it catches on.

Some of the problems identified above are still not yet completely resolved even in the Romanized Yoruba script which has been in regular use for over 150 years. In the same vein, it is hoped that the *‘ajamī* system can gradually find solutions to them if it is adopted and put into regular use.

But what are the prospects of this system being adopted? It would seem that Alhaji Yusuf himself realizes that he must make a strong case for the secular and religious utility of *‘ajamī* if he is to get people interested in it and this he has been doing as can be seen on pages 12 & 13 of his fourth pamphlet under the heading: ‘The Benefits of Learning the Yoruba *anjemi*’ where we find the following:

A quotation from a *ḥadīth* where the Prophet extols the love for Arabic language, after which the author lists the following as the benefit of Yoruba *anjemi*:

- (i) For use in interpersonal exchange of correspondence,
- (ii) can be used for official/governmental transactions,
- (iii) can be used to teach the tenets of Islam in the vernacular,

- (iv) helps to impress the Arabic letters/sounds more indelibly in the minds of learners and promotes a better understanding of them,
- (v) has the potential capacity to make a wider spread of the Yoruba language and make it international,
- (vi) creates an additional field of research for [university] 'doctoral students',⁴⁹
- (vii) will be a source of pride⁵⁰ for Yoruba people that their language is written with the script of the Qur'ān.

In the preface to this pamphlet written in Romanized Yoruba by one Alhaji Abubakar Siddiq Yusuf of Markaz Iḥyā' al-Islām, Abayawo Quarters, Ilorin, a stronger case is made: that many Arabic school products who are conversant with the Arabic letters and can read the Qur'ān fairly smoothly can still not use Arabic for interpersonal oral or written communication. These ones, the preface says, can utilize *‘ajamī* in meaningful written communication since it is their mother tongue. He therefore urges proprietors of Arabic schools to include *‘ajamī* writing lessons in their school curriculum.

It is evident from the foregoing that he realizes that his greatest challenge is to get the proposal accepted first by the Muslims. In pursuit of this objective, he has consulted a number of prominent Yoruba Muslim leaders in the field of Islamic education, and secular academics for support, and he gives the impression in the concluding part of pamphlet no. 5 that most of them have given him their support, some by writing a foreword or a preface to some of the publications, and others by simply sending him a written or verbal commendation. The fact that this system has been supplanted by Arabic language and the Romanized Yoruba script for

49 He means by this that the subject provides a fertile ground for research by university undergraduate and postgraduate students.

50 It is noteworthy that he uses here the Arabic word *fakhr* which has been identified by some scholars as the origin of the Yoruba word *faari*, pride.

such a long time makes this kind of appeal a necessity.

There is also the possibility that some Yoruba Arabic scholars may view this campaign as a disservice to Arabic language education while the Nigerian federal government and some state governments that have always taken pains to emphasize the secular nature of their governance will be wary to give open support or encouragement to the adoption of a writing system with obvious Islamic connection. Incidentally, the promoter himself advertises the scheme by a curious 50/50 mix of this Islamic connection with other secular benefits, as can be seen from the reasons he enumerates above. The on-going controversy in Nigeria over the constitutionality or otherwise of adopting the Islamic Sharīʿa legal system, especially in the Yoruba states of southwest Nigeria, means that the odds against a general acceptance of the Yoruba *‘ajamī* system is no less daunting today than they were in Crowther’s days.⁵¹

The non-Muslim Yoruba are apt to see such a call as one more ploy by their Muslim compatriots to entrench an emblem of Islamic identity without giving any consideration to the socio-cultural and educational potential of the system to broaden the scope of Yoruba literacy and contribute to Yoruba studies.

If the system is eventually adopted for regular use, the imprecision and rough edges highlighted above will be smoothed out. They are indeed no more chaotic than the situation in the English language today whereby the users, guided by rules and conventions evolved over the ages, know that letter ‘g’ in ‘gin’ and ‘gun’ are not to be pronounced the same way, neither should ‘a’ in ‘man’ and ‘name’; the ‘ea’ in ‘threat’ and ‘treat’; or the ‘ch’ in ‘archangel’ and ‘archbishop’. This confirms the fact that the written representation of any language is no more than a set of arbitrary symbols

51 H.M.A. Ajetunmobi, ‘Intellectual Perspective on the Practice of Islamic Law among the Yoruba Muslims of Nigeria’, *NATAIS*, v, 1, 2000, 69-75, and Ogunbiyi, ‘Arabic-Yoruba Translations of the Qurʾān’, 32.

conventionally learned and agreed to by its users. In the same way, the seemingly complex symbols for the Yoruba vowels in *‘ajamī* will, with time, be appropriately pronounced once the conventions and rules are agreed upon and some practical solutions may one day be found to the problem of tones. It is instructive to note that many Romanized Yoruba publications today including some complete translations of the Qurʾān do not carry any tone marks and yet readers manage to read them fluently and correctly.⁵²

Right now, the Yoruba *‘ajamī* is like a baby with a lot of potentials, which Alhaji Abubakar Yusuf and his Committee for the Propagation of Anjemi are still persuading its kith and kin, who are the Muslims, to accept. Without such an acceptance at the ‘home front’, so to speak, it will be difficult to persuade the generality of the Yoruba community to accept it. Will he succeed? Time will tell.

Acknowledgements and appreciation

The major part of this study was completed with the aid of a Senior Fellowship awarded me by the Institute for the Study of Islamic Thought in Africa (ISITA), Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois, USA, from 13 May to 5 June 2002. I will like to dedicate this humble article to Professor John Hunwick, the ISITA Director who has consistently shown keen interest in my academic career from October 1964 when he first taught me the rudiments of Arabic language, and who has devoted his whole lifetime to the study and preservation of the Arabic/Islamic heritage of Africa. My deep appreciation also goes to his co-director Professor Seán O’Fahey, to the amiable and agile ISITA coordinator Rebecca Shereikis and her predecessor, Matthew Censer, to Muhammad Sani Umar the 2001–2002 ISITA Preceptor, LaRay Denzer of PAS and to all the ISITA junior fellows who made my brief stay at NU academically rewarding and pleasant. At the Nigerian end, I will like to thank Professors Yasir Quadri, M.A. Ajetunmobi and Z.A.K. Oseni, Messrs M.T. Salisu and Semiu

52 Ogunbiyi, ‘Arabic-Yoruba Translations of the Qurʾān’, 32.

Ajani who facilitated the collection of the *‘ajamī* publications from Alhaji Abubakar Yusuf. All others have been appropriately acknowledged in the body and footnotes of the article. I also thank the authorities of the Lagos State University, especially the Acting Vice-Chancellor, Professor Olabode for granting me the leave to utilize the fellowship award.