

## Arabic Language In The Face Of Multiple Challenges In Nigeria: A Case Of *Boko Haram* Insurgency

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### Abstract

The introduction of Arabic Education in Nigeria is long before the advent of modern education system in the area. It is a known fact that the first medium of formal education was Arabic language. Although, Arabic has since been replaced by English language right from the colonial period as a means of education and general communication, but it is given a special attention in the Nigerian education system because of its historical antecedents and its relationship with Islam. However, there are numerous challenges militating against the teaching of Arabic language in Nigeria. Some of these challenges could be social, economic, political etc. Recently, the Boko Haram insurgency has contributed negatively to the development of Arabic language in Nigeria because of its direct effects on the Nigeria Arabic Language Village (NALV) Ngala, Borno State; an institution responsible for the cultural and language immersion for Arabic students in Nigerian Higher institutions. Therefore, this paper aims at evaluating the impact of this insurgency on the development of Arabic education in Nigeria. Qualitative method of data collection was used as the basic research tools for this work. The paper relied mainly on interview to ascertain some of the facts mention therein. Focus is on the effects of Boko Haram on Nigeria Arabic village and the spillover effects on Arabic language in Nigerian Universities.

*Keywords:* Challenges, boko haram, arabic language, immersion.

## **1.0 INTRODUCTION**

Arabic language as a school subject studied in Nigeria in the formal education system is facing numerous challenges. Some of these challenges are local while others are global. Globalization has been accompanied by the English language, viewed by many as the language of colonialism and the ‘Neoliberal Empire’, which has become, according to Graddol, “one of the few enduring facts of global modern life”. Being one of these ‘enduring facts’ of the modern world, high emphasis has been placed on it in school curricula and the work place in almost all parts of the world. This emphasis resulted in sidelining some native languages, a fact that has not gracefully been accepted by many. And, after decades, we see a resurgence of discussions, debates and controversies about native languages, cultures and cultural identities of those who identify with them. Some of the regions that have witnessed such resurgence are the Middle East and Africa, especially West Africa. There are many reasons that spurred such resurgence, but one of the major causes was the imported education. This education, with its heavy emphasis on English and French, was in ways, sidelining the native languages and Arabic, relegating them as ‘non-useful’ and casting its culture as ‘foreign’. This has been seen as a threat by those who identified with this language and caused concern at many levels. To consolidate some of these daunting challenges is the insurgency and counter-insurgency campaigns in these regions. Nigeria is not left out of the problem because of the Boko Haram insurgency in recent years. This has greatly affected the socio-political as well as economic wellbeing of the people which in turn result to weak education systems in the region.

## **2.0 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM**

The structural characteristics of Arabic as compared to other languages studied in the school system in Nigeria, the sociolinguistic context within which Arabic is studied and the language teaching competences of the Arabic language teacher in Nigeria are some of the problems facing the language in Nigeria. In view of the numerous challenges facing the subject, Abukakre (2002) contends that Arabic in Nigeria is struggling for survival in a difficult terrain. In the same vein, Oladosu (2012) asserts that the trend in the study of Arabic in formal education settings in Nigeria has been fluctuating between 2000 and 2011. He posited that the stiff competition which Arabic faces with English and French as first and second official languages respectively and with Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba and other indigenous languages as Nigerian Mother Tongues offered as school subjects places Arabic within a matrix of the daunting challenges. Sirajudeen and Adebisi (2012), however, emphasized that the haphazardness that characterizes the teaching-learning process has inexorably resulted in the circle of the production of Arabic teachers who lack requisite pedagogical competencies for teaching a foreign language. The challenge of Boko Haram insurgency and counter insurgency further compressed the fortunes of Arabic since the war on terrorism in Nigeria started in the North-eastern part of the country in 2013. This is so because Borno State which hosts the Nigeria Arabic Language Village (NALV) is the epicenter of the insurgency. Consequently, the NALV, an institution for language immersion and allied program for Nigerian higher institution students of Arabic and Islamic studies has been under serious and continuous security threat.

## **3.0 OBJECTIVES**

The current study aims at analyzing the roles and effects of Boko Haram menace and the counter-terrorism campaign of the Nigerian and regional governments to the development and decline of Arabic language in Nigeria. To achieve this end, the paper discusses the effects of Boko Haram insurgency and counter-insurgency on education in Nigeria in general and Arabic

language in particular. The study became necessary for the fact that the area ravaged by the insurgency has direct bearing on Arabic education in Nigeria. The Nigerian Arabic Language Village, an institution for Arabic language immersion and acculturation program for Arabic students in Nigerian higher institutions is located in Gamborou Ngala area of Borno State. The paper does not discuss the origin of Boko Haram or its ideologies but reference is made to works of various scholars on the subject matter. The paper focuses on the insurgency and counter-insurgency activities that have posed a great security threat to the lives and properties of people living around this areas as well as the survival of Arabic language in Nigeria.

#### **4.0 METHODOLOGY**

The quest for insight and depth of information made the qualitative methods of investigation a basic information gathering tool for this study. The main tool used in this research is the interview method considering the fact that the operation is still ongoing at the time of this research. Some individual who have direct encounter with the sect form Borno State were interviewed in order to ascertain some of the fact obtained from the print and online media concerning the insurgency and counter-insurgency activities. It basically examines the Boko Haram attacks on schools and education structures between 2012 and September 2013 in north-eastern Nigeria especially the Nigeria Arabic Language Village in Borno state as reported in both print and electronic media. It draws on Amnesty International research carried out between April 2012 and September 2013, and highlights specific cases of attacks carried out by suspected members of Boko Haram. The study benefited from a variety of research works in the field of Islam in Africa, modern politics as well as international relations. Several scholarly articles as well as internet sources were consulted. Prominent among them are works of Murray Last on Boko Haram. These include: *Boko Haram: Militant Political Network or Criminal Calling Card?* In *Royal African Society*, July 2011. This offers a bit more information on Boko Haram's increasing radicalization following the Nigerian government crackdown on the sect in 2009. *Patterns of Dissent* offers a historical background, both over the past 200 years and over the past decade. It offers good insights into Nigerian politics, Christian-Muslim struggles over political hegemony in the country in recent times, and inter-Islamic tensions as well. Most of the works on Boko Haram are either political or economic and sometimes religious. Either discussing the causes of Boko Haram from political perspectives or economic view point. This paper, however, discusses the effects of the insurgency on education in general and Arabic language in particular.

#### **5.0 FINDINGS**

The Nigeria Arabic Village in Gamborou Ngala area of Borno State came under several attacks from the insurgency and counter-insurgency activities. Consequently, the Institution for the Arabic immersion and acculturation cannot continue to operate under such state of insecurity which had had a spill-over effects on Arabic education in Nigerian universities in particular and the country at large. Prospective teachers of Arabic language need specific language proficiency in language skills such as writing, reading, speaking and listening. The acculturation program is designed to cater for some of these significant ingredients in language teaching and learning especially proper communication skill which is always lacking as a result of non-availability of conducive language acquisition environment. Students normally interact with each other, especially colleagues from other departments in their various universities and colleges of education, using English language or their immediate local languages. However, there is enormous opportunity for students to improve on their communication skills during the

acculturation and immersion program. However, since the institution was is down for over two years, candidates who were to be admitted for the immersion programs from various universities and colleges of education could not do so. Hence, the improved communication skills usually acquired during the immersion and acculturation program is drastically affected.

### **5.1 Boko Haram And Global Terrorism**

Boko Haram could be seen as a local fragment of the contemporary global terrorism ravaging Nigeria as a nation, especially the north-eastern part of the country in recent years. Although Boko haram means different thing to different people especially Nigerians. While some people, especially non-Muslims, see it as a group of Muslim extremists trying to impose the implementation of Islamic law in Nigeria (as been reported by the media), others, especially Muslims, are of the opinion that it is a conspiracy to dent the image of Muslims and Islam. Some even went further to say that it is an international conspiracy to divide Nigeria and so on (Murray Last, 2012). However, we may not rely wholly on media reports to know the details about this phenomenon because careful independent research are not always conducted; the reality of the matter is still vague at the moment since the acts of terrorism and counter-terrorism continue.

The *Boko Haram* phenomenon is usually described as acts of 'terrorism or insurgency'. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, "insurgent" is a person fighting against a government, a rebel or revolutionary while "terror" is any act or method use in inflicting terrible fear into people's mind. This includes the use of terrorizing method of governing or resisting government of a tyrant or even that of a just government. The Encyclopedia Britannica on the other hand, described terrorism asa systematic use of terror or unpredictable violence against government's policies, or individual to attain a political objective (Webster's Collegiate Dictionary 2004). The period of the French Revolution between mid 1793 and 1794 when the ruling Jacobin faction, dominated by Robespierre, ruthlessly executed anyone considered a threat to their regime. Also called reign of terror (Oxford Dictionary). This method, though now contestable, was said to have been used by Hitler, to kill about six million Jews during the World War II. While Stalin used similar approaches by eliminating the enemies or opposition groups and uproot them to their family level. Likewise, during Spanish Civil War, General Quiapo de Liana ordered that "anyone caught inciting others to strike or striking himself shall be shot immediately. Do not be frightened if someone tries to force you, kill him like a dog and you will be free of all responsibilities" (Harun, 2002)

Terrorist activities are more prevalent in modern days in Europe and America than in other Continents. This is perhaps due to the influence these Continents exert on both political and economic systems of other Continents in the World. Terrorism today is expressed through elimination or frightening opponent through sponsorship engaging in the act to force religious views on others, murder, kidnapping, hijacking airplanes and setting off bombs (Muhibbu-Din 2006).

### **5.2 Concetualizing Boko Haram**

*Boko* in Hausa language means western education, while *Haram* is an Arabic word adapted in Hausa which means forbidden or prohibited. So the simple definition of *Boko Haram* is western education is forbidden. However the word *Boko* has a loaded meaning in Hausa language. A western educated person is called "Dan Boko" which literally means (the son of Boko) or "Yar

Boko” (the daughter of Boko). Among Hausa people, to be associated with *Boko*, means a person has a strange behaviour compared to other members of the community. This could be in terms of dressing, eating habit, socializing with people etc. Tilde (2009) discussed the origin of the word Boko in the words of Professor Mahdi Adamu Ngaski, a celebrated historian and author of *'The Hausa Factor in the History of West Africa'* thus;

In Hausa, *'boko'* simply means 'fake'. Before it was largely consigned to western education, *boko* was often used to connote the “fake bride”, *amaryar boko*, who rode the horse in place of the real bride as the convoy of celebrants escorted her to her new home. The real bride would secretly be carried earlier by two or three women to her home. So when western education came to Hausaland, the learned rejected it and gave it a derogatory connotation, *ilimin boko*, 'fake education.' Sadly, this name has remained the standard translation of 'western education' among all Hausa speaking people of West Africa and I have never heard of any effort to change it, except the *ilimin zamani* that is sparsely applied. To date, there is no alternative nomenclature for *makarantar boko*, 'fake school' that connotes modern schools for western education.

This is not the only view on the meaning and origin of “boko”. Ibrahim (2009) suggests that the word “boko” originates from the English word “book”, so “boko” is a corrupted version of the word “book” in Hausa. The reason for this according to Ibrahim is that when the colonialists came to Hausa city states, they came up with an educational system that is different from the traditional system where people learn by using wooden slate. So people who learn from a book are referred to as ‘yan boko’ (people learning from a book).

Here it will be important to make some clarifications. If we accept the version that sees the origin of “boko” from the English word “book”, it doesn't mean there are no books in Hausaland. Contrary to that, there was abundant literature on Islam, theology and even science education that are taught at *Madaris* “Makarantun ilmi” (Islamic Religious schools). Perhaps the reason for seeing it that way was because pupils were taught by using the wooden slate “allo”, until they mature, and join “makarantun ilmi” (traditionally being the post primary and tertiary schools), so it looks unusual for pupils at an early stage to be using books in place of wooden slate.

Another important thing to note from the contribution of Ibrahim (2009) is that “Boko” is not restricted to western education, rather any form of knowledge that is taught in a modern setting using classrooms and an organised school structure, including Islamic education is also part of “Boko”. Going by this, all the Islamic scholars in Nigeria, Like Sheikh Abubakar Mahmoud Gumi or Sheikh Adam Ilori who attended the School for Arabic Studies in Kano, and later studied in other universities around the world are all “yan boko”. This could explain why it is difficult for the Muslim community to accept the views of the group that “Boko” is bad or forbidden. So the “Boko Haram” group have simply taken a one sided view of knowledge either due to ignorance or some selfish motives or both.

Despite this, it is still important to note that the resentment to western education is not a new phenomenon; it is a historical issue which can be traced back to the arrival of Christian missionaries and British Colonial administrators in Nigeria. Muslims especially those from northern Nigeria who were under the auspice of Sokoto Caliphate and Borno empire saw the western aspect of education or ‘ilmin boko’ as a way of diluting their cultural and religious values with foreign ones. Another factor that contributes to the continuation of resentment towards western education is the colonial policy of the British in denying Muslims access to western

education. This created an imbalance between Muslims and Christians throughout Nigeria in terms of the acquisition of western education.

Lemu (2002) contends that, in South-western Nigeria, the colonial government allowed Christian missionaries to establish schools. Part of the criteria for admission was conversion to Christianity. This made it difficult for Muslims to enroll in these schools. Therefore Muslims have to establish their own private schools in which the students are taught in Arabic. An atmosphere of uneven competition was created because those who studied in missionary schools had the advantage of learning English which has become the language of administration. In Northern Nigeria few 'western' schools were established in predominantly Muslim areas, while the minority ethnic groups within Northern Nigeria established many missionary schools. This imbalance is still prevalent in Nigeria economically between Muslims and non-Muslims.

It is noteworthy to mention that there were many young people who are impressed by Boko Haram's proven ability to scare the Nigerian government and agrees in principle with Boko Haram that the everyday behaviour of the country's governing elite is far from being properly Islamic. For them, the "boko" in Boko Haram refers not to 'western education' (as all the western media repeat unthinkingly) but to the westernized lifestyles, the materialistic ethics of a governing elite that have for decades systematically 'stolen' the revenues from the nation's account, and left the common people, despite the nation's huge wealth, persistently poor without proper schools, clinics, jobs. With 40% of the Nigeria's youth out of work (according to the Government's own Minister for Youth), the potential scale of popular anger at the grass-roots is immense. 'Boko' thus comes also to mean sham or fake, standing for all that's pseudo, or simply lies, in a westernized 'modernity'. In a strongly religious milieu where truth is all important, repeated lies are indeed 'haram': anger against 'liars' then seems righteous, even when that anger finds expression in un-Islamic bombs and gunfire (Murray Last, 2012).

With this background, it is easier to understand the context for the resentment towards "western education" by the group named "Boko Haram". There are different versions about the exact time in which the group was formed. Some saying in 2002 and others 2004 (Oriyomi, 2009; Mahjar-Barducci, 2010). However, the group became prominent in July 2009 due to the violent clashes between members of the group and Nigeria security forces. There are different versions to the origin of the crises as reported by the news media. Some versions had it that the group was attacked by the police during a funeral procession in which members of the group retaliated. Other versions had it that the group attacked police stations as part of their mission against anything western, which they see as evil and responsible for the predicament of Nigeria.

"It is important to view the current campaign as both political and religious; though there is a religious dimension, it would be wrong to write off Boko Haram (BH) as religious 'cranks'. There is also an insurgency against the local Nigerian state, which, in the eyes of BH, is secular (or at least not properly Muslim). It is their politics that make them dangerous. The majority of those assassinated in Borno and Bauchi have been agents of governments at all levels – local dignitaries or their less protected younger brothers (Renolds J, 2014). Boko Haram is one of several organizations which have called for "true Islam" as a means of ending the poverty and corruption, which some in the North see as a result of a political system corrupted by greed and corruption (this is more the "Boko" of which the popular nickname of the group refers). The group does not actually reject all "Western Education" -- more so it rejects what it sees as the corruption of the political class who have been driven by their desire for wealth to exploit the masses. It is worth noting here that in Northern Nigeria, one is not considered an adult until married, and it is impossible to get married unless one has amassed enough capital to set up a

household. Groups like Boko Haram thus play upon not only the financial, but also the social, marginality of young men who feel frustrated by the broader economic and political situation. (Renolds J, 2014)

What is interesting to this research, however, is how the insurgency that originated from the activities of this group later affected, and continues to affect the teaching and learning of Arabic language especially in the higher institutions of learning throughout the country.

### **5.3 Arabic Language Village**

The institution offers acculturation programme for students of Arabic and Islamic Studies in Nigeria. Established in 1992, the institution, which is based in Gamboru-Ngala, a border town between Nigeria and Cameroon, is meant to serve as a professional training ground for students of Arabic, Islamic studies and allied programs in Nigeria's higher institutions.

Just like the Nigerian French Village in Badagry, Lagos-Nigeria, established by the Federal Government in 1992 for students of French, the Nigeria Arabic Village is the only school offering the acculturation programme for students of Arabic in Nigeria's tertiary institutions.

Although French, (prior to its current status as second official language) and Arabic were elective subjects on the secondary school curriculum, both junior and senior, the government is fully aware of the problems that are sure to attend to the teaching of both languages in the nation's schools for which pupils will not readily find models to interact with on a daily basis. Accordingly, it established these two special language villages, one for Arabic in the north-east of the country, and another for French in the South-West, where students can, over periods ranging from six months to one whole year, experience full immersion in those two languages.

The immersion program is part of an academic pre-requisite for all students of Arabic languages in any higher institution of learning to attend a mandatory acculturation exercise at the Arabic village, Ngala; for one year in the case of university undergraduates, and a semester for students of colleges of education, before they are awarded their desired certificate. This approach to the teaching of Arabic has the unexpected benefit of proficiency and mastery of the language.

It is located in Ngala, Borno State, North-eastern part of Nigeria where Arabic is predominantly spoken as mother tongue (MT). This is why some researchers assert that Arabic language should not be referred to as foreign language but indigenous minority language. This argument could not be proved wrong since foreign language is a language which is not spoken as a mother tongue by any ethnic group in the country where it is taught (Alfa & Abubakar, 2014; Festus, 2001). Prior to the Village's establishment, all Nigerian students offering Arabic Language as a major course in universities "were compulsorily required to go for the one-year-abroad proficiency course in their 300 level, in Egypt, Sudan and other countries. Its emergence finally put a stop to the practice of sending Nigerian students to other countries, with its attendant expenses of hard currencies. Looking at the fact that going to the Arab world would be more expensive, an alternative was created locally to accommodate the growing number of Arabic language students from Nigerian higher institutions including universities and colleges of educations.

However, a Federal Government's white paper, derived from the recommendations made by a Visitation Panel constituted by the Federal Ministry of Education (FME) in 2011 to examine the Village, came to the conclusion that many of the country's universities offering

Arabic Language and Literature have not been sending their undergraduate students to the Nigeria Arabic Language Village (NALV), Ngala, Bornu State for the mandatory one-year language immersion course, maybe due to lack the passage of the law establishing the inter-university center for Arabic studies. For example Only the Universities of Maiduguri and Jos have been sending their students to the village since 1997 and 1999 respectively; while the University of Ilorin sent students from 2000 to 2003 only; Lagos State University (2001 only); Kogi State University (2003 only) and the Umaru Musa Yar'Adua University, Katsina (2010) only. The panel also revealed that besides the lack of an enabling law, one of the reasons why universities have been reluctant to send their students to the village is the low quality of the recruited academic staff. The public awareness of the village is low and sufficient attention had not been given to the village in terms of application of concerted efforts to galvanize the resources available for productive results. Some other reasons might be due to the remote location of the village and its specialized nature characterized by the desert environment.

#### **5.4 Effect Of Boko Haram Insurgency On Arabic Education**

There is no doubt about the fact that the menace of Boko haram has contributed a vacuum in Nigeria education. Since the beginnings of 2012, according to Amnesty International's research, at least 70 teachers and over 1001 school children and students have been killed or wounded. At least 50 schools have either been burned or seriously damaged and more than 60 others have been forced to close. Thousands of children have been forced out of schools across communities in Yobe, Kaduna, Adamawa and Borno states. Many teachers have been forced to flee for their safety to other states. The highest number of attacks was in Borno state. According to the National Teachers' Union (NUT), more than 1,000 teachers have been forced to flee from areas in the north since 2012.

The insurgency had greatly affected the teaching and learning of Arabic in Nigerian universities as most of these attacks were in Borno state where the Arabic language village is located. This village has also witnessed some bloody attacks from the insurgents in 2014. It was reported that more than 500 people lost their lives while many others got injured in one of the attacks. The area finally fell under the control of Boko Haram for several months before it was liberated by a coalition of the Nigerian and Chadian Army in February 2015, through a joint military effort.

The effects of Boko Haram on Education in Nigeria in general is conspicuous. The killing of 29 students of the Federal Government College, Buni Yadi Yobe State, while they slept in their dormitories in 2014 was evidenced. The same and other high schools in that part of the country were attacked several times with planted and suicide explosions. To corroborate the groups' acts of violence against education or 'western education' as they may put it, was the kidnap of over 200 "Chibok girls" also from their school on April 14<sup>th</sup> 2014. This sparked the popular global "bringbackourgirls" campaign to urge the Nigerian Government to act on their release. Some of the girls were later released in batches through military operations and majorly through negotiation by the Government. Several attacks were also carried out on other education institutions.

Since the onslaught of the insurgency, several towns and villages have been affected. Most especially the North-Eastern part of Nigeria which is the battle ground of the insurgency. Unfortunately, the Nigeria Arabic Language Village is situated in the remote part of Borno State. Gamborou Ngala, the host community of the institution has been attacked several times by the



insurgents. Therefore, there was every justification to close down the institution indefinitely for some times. According to one Mohammed Al-Bulaturee, the Chairman of the Governing Council of Nigeria Arabic Language Village, over 9,000 Arabic students have been unable to graduate from various Nigerian institutions between 2012 and 2014 due to the Boko Haram insurgency that has caused numerous deaths and loss of properties in Borno State. Most of the 9000 students have finished their academic programs but could not get their certificates issued because they were unable to accomplish the acculturation programme at the Arabic Village (Ola A, 2014).

This implies that about 9000 trained teachers who are supposed to be in the primary and secondary schools are not there; thereby making Islamic studies and Arabic subjects in such schools to suffer. In the past two years, due to the heightened Boko Haram insurgency around the NALV, Arabic students have been unable to attend the mandatory acculturation programme prescribed for students of colleges of education studying Arabic in Nigerian institutions.

Apart from that, Language learning is generally considered to be more demanding than language acquisition. While the later involves a gradual process of imitating speakers of a language through verbal interactions, the former entails the conscious mastery of the vocabulary and grammar of the target language. Thus, the level of communicative proficiency of users who passed through an acquiring experience tends to be stronger than those with a learning experience. Some of the intricacies involved in foreign language learning is encapsulated in Akmajian , (2008) submission that: One needs only study a foreign language, or take a course in linguistics to begin to appreciate the enormous complexity of human language. At every level - phonetic, phonological, morphological, syntactic, semantic and pragmatic- human language is an intricate system of abstract units, structures, and rules, used in a powerful system of communication.

## **Conclusion**

A cursory look into the Boko Haram insurgency and counter-insurgency revealed that a lot of harm has been done to human development. There is no doubt that the post trauma effects of the insurgency and counter-insurgency on the psychology of future students of Arabic in the institution, which is tantamount to student apathy to attend the immersion program. Therefore, the complication in the language proficiency that form part of the graduation requirements of a diploma or degree in Arabic language in Nigerian Higher institutions which is the language immersion and acculturation program might be lacking. Therefore, special measures should be taken to make up the loss in the general education of the people around the areas ravaged by the insurgency while machinery should be set in place to cater for the post trauma effects of the insurgency. It may take several years to reintegrate people, especially students from other parts of the country into this area for the language immersion program. Hence, a temporary alternative of the immersion program may be designed for the students for the time being.

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