

The role of the spread of the Arabic language in strengthening cultural ties between the Maghreb countries and sub-Saharan Africa during the 10th century AH / 16th century CE.

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Abstract:

This research paper aims to highlight the role of the spread of the Arabic language in strengthening cultural ties between the Maghreb countries and sub-Saharan Africa during the 10th century AH / 16th century CE. It is considered the key to understanding the secrets of the sources of Islamic law and to delving into its depths to discover its treasures. Arabic became the official language of the region and influenced local languages such as Hausa and Fulani. Mastery of Arabic was essential for a proper understanding of the pillars of Islam. Africans did not stop at mastering the language; they excelled and created in its arts and literature, as evidenced by African works rich in various forms of the language - both poetry and prose. The brilliance of the scholar Ahmad Baba al-Timbukti in his writings is a testimony to this.

Keywords: Arabic language, Sub-Saharan Africa, Maghreb, cultural links, Western Sudan.

Introduction:

There is no doubt that the spread of the Arabic language in various parts of the Islamic world, especially in sub-Saharan Africa, is closely linked to the spread of Islam. The value of the Arabic language therefore becomes clear as it serves as the great vessel that carries Islam. If its arrival in sub-Saharan Africa was early, dating back to the first century AH / 7th century CE, then the arrival of the Arabic language was around the same time. Its spread necessarily implies the spread of Arabic as a language of worship, communication, interaction and

writing. It spread through the Holy Qur'an in a way that no other language in the world can match, because the Qur'an can only be read in Arabic, and prayers must also be performed in this language. Mastery of Arabic is therefore essential for anyone wishing to delve into the mysteries of Islam, leading to its widespread adoption in all aspects of life in sub-Saharan Africa.

A) The spread of Arabic:

The influx of Arab migrations into sub-Saharan Africa continued after the Islamic conquest, and Islam, along with Arab culture, began to spread among the populations of West Africa¹. The impact of Islam and Muslims on the African continent was evident in the social, political and educational changes among its inhabitants². The peoples of Western Sudan were influenced by the peoples of the Maghreb and Egypt in all aspects of life, be it trade, religion, culture and especially the Arabic language³.

The influence and cultural exchange between the Arabic language and the Hausa language was evident as the Islamic call was a purely spiritual one⁴. The Muslim caller followed the conqueror to complete the leadership of the people⁵. The early Muslim pioneers succeeded in bringing people into the religion of God in large groups, and the presence of Arabs in the Kingdom of Ghana played a role in the development of civilisation and the spread of the Arabic language⁶.

To understand the influential ideas in the lives of Muslims, their beliefs, principles and morals, it was essential to learn the Arabic language, as prayers are performed five times a day in Arabic, without which the understanding of Islam would be incomplete⁷. Muslims established Qur'anic schools in these areas and exchanged ideas with the local people, which was well received and led many in the region to convert from paganism to faith after a short time⁸.

¹- Muhammad Jalal Abbas: "Islamic Education in Africa: The Role of Origin and Flourishing - The Era of Sufi Orders," an article in Al-Azhar Magazine, No. 37, 1385 AH, p. 321.

²- Omar Ahmed Said: "The Spread of Islam in Africa between the Sword and the Pen," published by the International University of Africa, International Conference on Islam in Africa, November 26-27, 2006, p. 347.

³- George W. Ellis, K.C.F.R.G.S.: Negro Culture in West Africa, New York: The Nea Ale Publishing Company, 1914, p. 23.

⁴- Muhammad II Abu Bakr: "The Civilizational and Cultural Impact of the Arabic Language on the Hausa Language (Nigeria as a Model)," an article in Federal Education Magazine, Nigeria, pp. 5-6.

⁵- Abdullah Abdul Razak: "Means of Spreading Islam in West Africa," an article in Encyclopedia of Islam and Muslims in Africa and Asia Dar Al-Fikr Al-Arabi, 2008, p. 6.

⁶- George W. Ellis, K.C.F.R.G.S.: Op. cit., p. 24.

⁷- Al-Jilani Jibril: "The Arabic Language: Its Importance and How to Teach It," an article in Journal of the Islamic Call College, No. 4, 1987, p. 343.

⁸- Moteer Saad Ghaith Ahmed: "The Arab-Islamic Culture and Its Impact on the Society of Western Sudan during the Tenth and Eleventh Centuries of Migration (Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries CE) - A Study in Arab-African Civilizational Communication," Dar Al-Madar Al-Islami, Libya, 2004, 1st ed., p. 176. See: Abu Bakr Bilarabi, "The Arabic Language in Nigeria from the Middle Ages to Today," Arab Journal of Cultures, Tunisia, 1987, Vol. 7, No. 12, p. 19.

The spread of Islam to the communities of Western Sudan resulted in profound changes in people's behaviour, interactions, cultures and relationships. The cities and ports of North Africa played an undeniable role in the transmission of cultural influences to the peoples of Western Sudan¹, facilitated by the Sahara Desert, which was not a factor of separation but rather an important link in the cultural communication between the regions to the north and south of it within the territory of Western Sudan².

These interactions led to a blending of Arab culture with the diverse cultures of the peoples of Western Sudan, resulting in a distinct Arab-Islamic-African culture. The peoples of Western Sudan found in this mixture a basis for building their political and social future³.

The Arabic language has prevailed in the region since its people embraced Islam in the seventh century AD, spreading with the growth of Islam. Educational centres and a class of teachers⁴ developed, as it was necessary for anyone who converted to Islam to learn at least a small part of the language of the Qur'an in order to fulfil their religious duties. This is confirmed by Ibn Battuta when he visited Western Sudan and described the punishment of children for their shortcomings in memorising the Qur'an and its language⁵.

The Arabic language is intrinsically linked to the Quran, and in Islamic thought, it is required that scholars of Islam be proficient in Arabic, as it is the language of Islam and the language in which the Quran was revealed. Mastery of Arabic is essential because, in reality, it is the linguistic backbone of Islam⁶. The Quran emphasizes this in various verses, such as:⁷ "Indeed, We sent it down as an Arabic Quran so that you may understand" (Surah Yusuf: 3).

Since the foundations of the Arabic language gradually established themselves and reached their peak among African peoples, they began to blend with local

¹- Shawqi Attaullah Al-Jamal, Abdullah Abdul Razak:History of Muslims in Africa and Their Problems, Dar Al-Thaqafa for Publishing, Cairo, 1997, p. 107.

²- Jamal Zakariya Qasim:"The Historical Roots of Arab-African Relations," Dar Al-Fikr Al-Arabi for Publishing, Alexandria, 1996, p. 9.

³- Moteer Saad Ghaith Ahmed:Op. cit., p. 217.

⁴- Uthman Sayyid, Ahmad Ismail Al-Bili:"Some Aspects of Islam in Africa," British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data from the British Library, p. 49.

⁵- Muhammad ibn Abdullah ibn Muhammad ibn Battuta:The Gift of Observers in the Wonders of Cities and the Marvels of Travels, edited by Muhammad Abdul Rahim, Cultural Books Foundation for Publishing and Distribution, Beirut, undated, Vol. 2, 1st ed., p. 376.

⁶- Ibrahim Arfida: "The Quran and the Arabic Language," an article in Journal of the Islamic Call College, No. 2, 1985, pp. 39-45

⁷- Omar Al-Toumi Al-Shaybani: "The Philosophy of Teaching the Arabic Language and Islamic Religion," an article in Journal of the Islamic Call College, No. 3, 1986, p. 330.

languages¹. Consequently, the African desert, as some refer to it, became an African Islamic entity that embraced the Quran².

The spread of the Arabic language was facilitated by its proximity to certain African languages in many phonetic and lexical aspects. Words from Arabic became intertwined with local tribal languages. Thus, after the advent of Islam, Arabic became a language of religion and a sophisticated civilization, spoken alongside native languages, and served as a cultural attraction for Islam³. This was due to the interest that kings themselves took in it, with West African peoples speaking Arabic⁴.

Their worship and religious rituals cannot be properly fulfilled without sufficient knowledge of Arabic. An African Muslim cannot perform prayer without reciting the opening chapter of the Quran in Arabic, nor can they enter into the state of ihram during pilgrimage or respond to the call of Hajj without using Arabic, or recite the Quran, which is considered an act of worship, in any language other than Arabic⁵.

The spread of the Arabic language and Islamic schools has been significant in West Africa⁶, thanks to the presence of Islamic families that contributed to the development of cultural relations with the Maghreb and the surrounding regions⁷. With the spread of Islam, simple African families worked to memorize the Quran, and all tribes began to follow the prophetic way⁸.

The increasing number of students eager to learn Arabic led to connections with the Islamic world, reaching as far as Egypt and Hijaz⁹. Consequently, Arabic spread among the tribes, and scholars traveled to West Africa, where centers of knowledge were established¹⁰. Mansa Musa would send students to schools in North Africa and attract scholars to his land¹¹.

¹- J.C. Frelench: *Les Musulmans d'Afrique Noire: Lumières et Nation*, Editions de l'Oronte, Paris, 1962, p. 268.

²- Ahmed S. Bangura: "Islam and the West African Novel: The Politics of Representation," *Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data*, 1960, p. 47.

³- Dr. Zain Khalaf Nawaf: "The Kanem State and Its Efforts in Spreading Islam in Central Sudan," an article in *Anbar University Journal of Humanities*, No. 2, 2011, p. 59.

⁴- George W. Ellis, K.C.F.R.G.S: *Op. cit.*, p. 60.

⁵- Omar Al-Toumi Al-Shaybani: "The Role of Education in Affirming African Cultural Authenticity," an article in *Journal of the Islamic Call College*, No. 14, 1997, p. 120.

⁶- Yushau Sodiqi: "History of Islamic Law in Nigeria: Past and Present," *Islamic Studies*, Vol. 31, 1992, p. 86.

⁷- Thomas Hadgkin: "Islam, History, and Politics," *The Journal of African Studies*, Vol. 1, 1963, p. 93.

⁸- Ahmed S. Bangura: *Op. cit.*, p. 19.

⁹- Othman Sayyid, Ahmad Ismail Al-Bili: *Op. cit.*, p. 57.

¹⁰- Muhammad Abdul Ghani Saudi: "The Arabic Language, Its Status, and the Challenges Facing It in Africa," an article in *African Studies Journal*, No. 1, 2006, p. 57. Basil Davidson: *A History of West Africa (1000-1800)*

¹¹- with E.K. Bush and the advice of J.F.A. Ajayi, *New Edition*, p. 51.

Thus, the African Muslim, in turn, advocates for the teaching of Arabic, as it is the language of the Quran and Islamic rituals, and serves as the intellectual vessel for many aspects of Islamic heritage and culture¹.

Learning Arabic in Africa is considered a religious duty for every African Muslim—an imperative that underscores the authenticity of African culture and its close relationship with Arabic culture and language².

Arabic has remained the language of knowledge and culture for more than eight centuries, with approximately thirty African languages being written in Arabic script, including Hausa, Swahili, and Fula³. This is affirmed by Al-Qalqashandi, who states: "...and they write in Arabic script in the manner of the Maghrebis⁴

The emergence of Islamic states in the region led to the Arabic language gaining a sense of sanctity among the Muslims of West Sudan."

All important documents were written in Arabic, and it served as the language of government and scientific correspondence, playing an important role in the transmission of Arabic culture⁵. It became a vital source of the Islamic renaissance in West Africa, deeply influencing the guidance of preachers and the call to correct methodology, as exemplified by the correspondence between Askia Muhammad and Imam Jalal al-Din Abdul Rahman al-Suyuti⁶.

The spread of the Arabic language in West Africa was remarkable. Thomas Arnold noted: "The Arabic language became the means of communication among the tribes of half the African continent"⁷. This spread was due to the presence of many Moroccan judges and scholars who were instrumental in spreading the language beyond the Sahara. The king provided them with good salaries and held scholars in high esteem⁸.

The official status of Arabic in sub-Saharan Africa is confirmed by Hubert Deschamps, who states: "The tribes of the African kingdoms not only adopted Islam, but were also deeply influenced by Arab culture because of the

¹- Omar al-Toumi al-Shaibani: "The Role of Education...", previous reference, p. 121.

²- Imara Bayt al-Afiya: "Sources of Arabic Islamic Culture in Nigeria," article in the Journal of the Islamic Call College, No. 15, 1908, p. 11.

³- Omar al-Toumi al-Shaibani: "The Role of Education...", previous reference, p. 121.

⁴- Abu al-Abbas Ahmad al-Qalqashandi: *Subh al-A'sha fi San'at al-Insha*, Dar al-Kutub al-Khediveh, Cairo, 1333 AH / 1915 AD, Vol. 5, p. 298. See: Mustafa Hijazi Sayyid Hijazi: "Hausa Language and People," article in *Al-Faisal Magazine*, No. 91, 1984, p. 113.

⁵- Othman Sayyid, Ahmad Ismail Al-Bili: *op. cit.*, p. 49.

⁶- Adam Harun al-Mahdi Miqa: "Scientific Correspondence and Its Educational and Da'wa Impact in West Africa (The Letter of Ibn Baz as a Model)," article in *African Studies Journal*, No. 3, 1429 AH / 2008 AD, p. 4.

⁷- Thomas Arnold: *The Call to Islam*, translated by Hassan Ibrahim Hassan et al., Egyptian Renaissance Library, Cairo, 1971, p. 61.

⁸- Muhammad al-Hasan al-Wazzan: *Description of Africa*, edited by Muhammad Haji and Muhammad al-Akhdar, Dar al-Gharb al-Islami, Beirut, Lebanon, 1998, Vol. 2, p. 167. See: Sami al-Kayyali: "Effects of the Language of the Quran on the Language of Non-Arab Muslims," *Arabic Language Journal*, Morocco, Vol. 7, No. 1, p. 134.

widespread use of the Arabic language in these lands”¹. Islamic civilisation in West Africa had a significant political, economic and cultural impact on the Islamic kingdoms, particularly in the field of education².

Since then, it became imperative for the Islamic kingdoms in West Africa to adopt a fully Islamic character in building their states and following the path of Islamic nations³. The kings of the Islamic kingdoms of Mali and Songhai encouraged the promotion of Islamic education and the spread of culture and the Arabic language throughout their territories. Scholars formed the essential elements of various government administrations, and their literacy and extensive knowledge of laws and regulations gave them a prominent position⁴.

This link with African societies and the Islamic world initiated a long-lasting revolution in West Africa⁵. Islamic families cultivated the education of their children in traditional schools⁶, which is evidenced by the fact that Western schools recognise that the Sahara has made a significant contribution to Islamic cultural relations⁷.

B) The impact of the Arabic language in strengthening cultural ties:

The Arabic language spread rapidly and widely in West Africa because wherever Islam took root, the Arabic language followed, serving as its voice and means of communication⁸. It was through Arabic that various sciences were documented. One manifestation of this interaction is the overlap of Arabic with the Fulani language and the influence of Moroccan writing, as the Fulani language contains phrases in Arabic⁹.

In addition, the Hausa language reflects this influence, particularly in the names commonly used in trade transactions, such as the names of goods and commodities coming from the Islamic Maghreb¹⁰.

¹- Hubert Deschamps: Religions in Black Africa, translated by Ahmad Sadiq Hamdi, Egyptian General Book Organization, 2011, p. 132.

²- E.G. Parrinder: "Islam and West African Indigenous Religion," Numen, Vol. 6, London, 1959, p. 139.

³- Khadr Mustafa al-Nijri: "Missionary Activity and Colonialism in Nigeria," a thesis submitted for a Master's degree, supervised by Sheikh Muhammad Qutb, King Abdulaziz University, 1398-1399 AH / 1978-1979 AD, p. 7.

⁴- Abu Bakr Ismail Muhammad Miqa: "History of Islamic Culture and Education in Western Sudan-West Africa," article in Al-Dara Journal, p. 216.

⁵- E.G. Parrinder: op. cit., p. 130.

⁶- Ibid., p. 134.

⁷- Ahmed S. Bangura: op. cit., p. 47.

⁸- Abd al-Salam Abu As'ad: "Cultural Relations Between African Peoples and the Role of Islam and the Arabic Language in Consolidating Them," article in the Symposium on Cultural and Social Communication Between African Countries on Both Sides of the Sahara (May 12-14, 1998), reviewed by Abd al-Hamid Harama, Islamic Call Publications, Tripoli, 1999, p. 27.

⁹- David Robinson: "Fulfulde Literature in Arabic Script," History in Africa, Vol. 9, 1982, p. 253.

¹⁰- Mustafa Hijazi Sayyid: "Islamic Hausa Literature," Imam Muhammad bin Saud Islamic University, 2000, p. 31.

In addition, students became proficient in Arabic and scholars in the Sahara were keen to teach it. Arabic played a pioneering role in the preservation of the Holy Qur'an and established itself as the leading language for the transmission of knowledge within Islamic borders. Its influence extended to local languages that sought to adopt the Arabic script, and scholars began to write in Arabic, particularly in biographical literature. Many of these scholars emphasised the eloquence and rhetorical skills of the translators and their knowledge of language and literature. This led to a flourishing of artistic creativity in various fields of Islamic Arabic scholarship¹.

As a result of the spread of Arabic in Western Sudan, an Islamic scholarly movement emerged in the fields of literature, history, Islamic sciences and Arabic linguistics. Poets and thinkers such as Abd al-Rahman al-Sadi, Ahmad Baba al-Timbukti and Mahmoud Kati², among others from Western Sudan, mastered the Arabic language and produced works in various fields of knowledge³. Other writings appeared in tafsir (exegesis), hadith, jurisprudence, and logic⁴, with historical texts found particularly in Timbuktu⁵.

Arabic remained the language of knowledge and civilisation in Africa for many centuries, as Africans sought to learn it both in their countries and in Arab lands by enrolling in their institutions and universities. Through Arabic, they accessed sources of Islamic heritage, including jurisprudence, hadith and tafsir, and used it to express their cultural, social and political histories⁶.

Schools in West Africa used Arabic and taught Islamic traditions⁷, allowing Arabic to penetrate deeply into the region and establish itself as an official language. Its roots were firmly established through learning and the principles of the Islamic faith⁸.

As the language of the new religion, of commerce and of cultural communication, Arabic has aroused considerable interest in learning. It

¹- Abd al-Aziz Shahbar: "The Firmness of Arab Islamic Identity in Western Sudan," article in the Symposium on Cultural and Social Communication Between Countries, Tripoli, 1999, pp. 40-41.

²- Dawood Abdul Qadir Iliga: "Incoming Educational Systems in West Africa and Their Impact on Society," lecture delivered at the African Universities Forum, Sudan, 2006, p. 6.

³- Omar al-Toumi al-Shaibani: "Philosophy of Teaching Arabic....," previous reference, p. 6. See: Muhammad Suleiman, Muhammad Saleh Jamal: "Arabic as a Means of Understanding Among Nigerian Muslim Peoples," Fourth International Conference on the Arabic Language, Dubai, May 6-10, p. 194.

⁴- Omar al-Toumi al-Shaibani: "The Role of Education....," previous reference, p. 125. See: Abdul Ali al-Wudghiri: "Arabic Language and Islamic Culture in West Africa and Features of Moroccan Influence," Publications of the Faculty of Arts and Humanities, Rabat, 2011, 1st ed., p. 100.

⁵- Basil Davidson: *op. cit.*, p. 38.

⁶- Omar Adam Muhammad: "Contributions of Sheikh Abdullah bin Muhammad bin Fudi to Arabic Islamic Sciences," article in the Third International Conference on the Arabic Language, "Investing in the Arabic Language and Its National, Arab, and International Future," Dubai, May 7-10, 2014, p. 4.

⁷- David Robinson: *op. cit.*, p. 251.

⁸- Adam Idris Muhammad: "Arabic Language of the Chadian Kingdoms," article in the Symposium on Cultural and Social Communication Between African Countries on Both Sides of the Sahara, Tripoli, 1999, p. 111.

influenced several African languages, such as Swahili, Fulani, Mandinka and Hausa, which borrowed heavily from the Islamic heritage, as did other languages of peoples who adopted Islam¹.

The roots of Islamic civilisation were firmly established after the emergence of Arabic as the basic language of communication, writing and culture. As a result, local languages began to include between 20 and 30 words of Arabic or Arabic origin².

The spread of the Arabic language and Islam in West Africa was facilitated by African Muslims' devotion to the Qur'an and the writings of Sufi leaders, both in poetry and prose, whether in Arabic or in local languages using the Arabic script³.

Among the manifestations of the spread of Arabic in Western Sudan, we find that Africans exchanged well-known works from Al-Andalus, Morocco and Egypt, such as "Introduction to Ibn Ajurrum", "Commentary by Al-Makudi on Ibn Malik's Alfiyyah", and other grammar and prosody texts, such as "Elaboration and Clarification in the Science of Morphology" by Al-Makudi⁴.

All of this was due to the proliferation of manuscripts, especially those related to the sciences of the Arabic language, which generated significant profits through the spread and flourishing of knowledge⁵. Education encompassed all Islamic sciences, including tafsir (exegesis), fiqh (jurisprudence), hadith (prophetic traditions), and all aspects of the Arabic language and its arts, such as grammar and rhetoric, which form its fundamental pillars⁶.

The Africans not only consulted the works of their Eastern and Western counterparts through transmission and narration, but also engaged in classification and scholarly expertise. They produced commentaries, glosses and annotations, and devoted themselves to authorship and expression. For example, Ahmad ibn Muhammad ibn Imam Ahmad al-Husayni al-Idrisi, a scholar and grammarian, explained "Elaboration and Clarification" by Al-Makudi and also

¹- See: Muhammad Abdul Rahman Traore: "Effects of the Spread of Islam on Life in the Greater Sahara," article in Tawhid Journal, 1416 AH / 1990 AD, No. 77, p. 94. Abu Bakr Keba: "The Mandingo Language and Its Relationship with Arabic," article in the Symposium, No. 14, pp. 135 and following.

Al-Hajj Sila: "The Role of Arabic Language in African-Arab Relations," Arab-African Forum on Relations Between the Arabic Language and Other African Languages, Senegal, 1984, p. 97.

²- Hassan Ahmad Mahmoud: Islam and Arabic Culture in Africa, Arab Thought House, 2001, unpagged, p. 30.

³- Babakr Samba: "Cultural Communication Between the Two Sides of the Sahara in Modern Times," article in the Symposium on Cultural and Social Communication Between African Countries on Both Sides of the Sahara (May 12-14, 1998), pp. 152-153.

⁴- Muhammad al-Faran: "The Impact of the Arabic Language on Some African Languages," article in the Symposium on Cultural and Social Communication Between African Countries on Both Sides of the Sahara (May 12-14, 1998), p. 132.

⁵- Al-Hassan al-Wazzan: previous source, Vol. 2, p. 167.

⁶- Abdul Qadir Zbadia: "The Songhai Kingdom During the Askia Period (1493 AH / 1590 AD)," W.N.T, Algeria, unpagged, p. 103.

commented on “The Lamentation of Al-Majaradi al-Salawi”. Several African scholars explained “Al-Ajurumiyah”, “The Lamentation of Al-Zuqaq” and “The Shining Pearls” by Ibn Bari, demonstrating their creativity and excellence in Arabic calligraphy¹.

Writing and science flourished in West Africa², where Islamic culture and the Arabic language reached their zenith. This was due to the arrival of the Arabs, who brought with them Islam, its culture and the Arabic language, which spread despite the presence of many other cultures³.

It is worth noting that the Arabs did not impose their culture on the Sudanese; rather, they preserved African cultures. The Arabs did not destroy local institutions; instead, these institutions took on new forms within the framework of Islamic civilisation, leading to positive integration rather than absorption or arbitrary oppression as practised by European colonisers⁴.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, it can be said that the spread of the Arabic language contributed significantly to the strengthening of cultural ties between the Maghreb countries and sub-Saharan Africa during the 10th century AH / 16th century CE. The links were strong, as evidenced by the eagerness of the inhabitants of the region to buy Arabic books and learn the Arabic language, which gave everyone a sense of common cultural and political belonging. Arabic became the language of documentation, the language of official records, and the language of religion and civilisation in most of sub-Saharan Africa.

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¹- Muhammad al-Faran: previous reference, pp. 132-133. See: Mas'oud Bobo: "From the History of the Spread of the Arabic Language in the Horizons," *Historical Studies Journal*, No. 63-64, University of Damascus, Syria, 1998, p. 6.

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