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Arabic Poetry in Ibadan: Historical Perspectives

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Abstract

The history of Arabic poetry in Ibadan could be referred to as the era of Shaykh Abu Bakr bn Qasim Alaga. He was taught Arabic Prosody by Shaykh Nakarata, and was the first to compose Arabic poem among the 'Ulama' in Ibadan. This study concentrates on the development of Arabic poetry in Ibadan, focusing particular attention on themes of Ibadan Arabic poets.

Penetration of Arabic Language into Ibadanland

Ibadan was founded as a city through a man called Lagelu in 1788 C.E.¹ He came from Ile-Ife and settled down at Ibadan, at an area known as Eleyele Hill. Not long after that, he left Eleyele for another place called Bere.²

The word Ibadan was coined from Eba-Odan, which means (a town near savannah), because it was between the open space and the desert, it was free of wild animals. It was surrounded and covered by the forests. From this word, "Eba-Odan", the place was usually called Ibadan, with the elision of the vowel E and O in the compound word, Eba-Odan; it was shortened and called Ibadan.³

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Ibadan became a secure refuge city, when the old Oyo and Owu were captured and destroyed by the Fulanis. It became a living or hiding place for fugitives and defeatism from any side of Yoruba land. In the light of this, the post of Oba and elders in Ibadan land was not hereditary, but based purely on militarism of the heroes and genius people who took great parts in the wars.

By 1851, government in Ibadan was divided into two lines; the military and the civil. At the top of the main civil line was Baale, and the top of the military line was Balogun.⁴

The title of Baale was used at that time for the rulers of Ibadan city. The first Baale of Ibadan was Moyo who hailed from Ile-Ife and settled at Ibadan.⁵

However, with the advancement of time, people from various places migrated to the town (Ibadan) because of the love the Ibadan indigenes have for the strangers. They have been taking strangers as their brothers and sisters; there are no tribal sentiments between the indigenes and non-indigenes.

As regards religion, Ibadan is like other towns in Yoruba land. At that time, traditional religion was the religion of the Ibadan people (i.e. worshipping of idols). Islam entered Ibadan through Muslim traders and strangers, it was then called Esin-Imole; which literally means, the Religion of Malians.⁶ Islam was developing gradually, until one of the warriors of Ibadan embraced Islam. The warrior was called Latosa Are Ona Kakanfo (1871-1885) who accepted Islam through Alfa Muhammad Bello and his elder brother Ilyas; son of Uthman. Both Islamic scholars migrated from Iseyin, a flourishing center of Islam at that time to settle in Ibadan.⁷

Before Are Latosa was converted to Islam, the Islamic religion was being practiced among the non-indigenes who were traders in Ibadan land. It was not easy then to convince and convert pagans to Islam. But after Are Latosa became Muslim, the religion of Islam began to spread to the length and breadth of Ibadan land. The Muslims chose Imams among themselves and the person so chosen was nicknamed Imam Gunnugun Olohun (Raven of Allah).

The first mosque they built at that time was located at Ayeye area in 1830 C.E. this was later destroyed by Basorun Iba Oluyole. After that, Baale Ope Agbe provided another land for them to rebuild the new central mosque at its present site, in the year 1850 C.E.⁹

During the era of Iba Oluyole, Shaykh Uthman bn Bakr al-Dindy entered Ibadan and stayed at Ita-Okoro, Isale-Osi area. After his settlement, he collaborated with scholars ('Ulama') of Ibadan to establish an Islamic Ummah (community). Such scholars were; Shaykhs Ahmad Kifu. Muhammad bn Hassan bn

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Ishaq, Uthman Ona'do and others. They resolved to appoint Uthman bn Abu Bakr as their Imam in 1839 C.E. After his demise, Imam Kifu took over and led Muslims for a year as Imam (1871-1872).¹⁰ After him, Imam Haruna Agbeni became the chief Imam of Ibadanland in 1872 C.E. During his time, Islam was well developed in Ibadan, scholars were in large number. Some of the unbelievers embraced Islam, especially the commander of Ibadan at the time; Are Latosa and other warriors.

During his time (Imam Haruna), Abu Bakr bn Qasim popularly known as Alfa Alaga returned to Ibadan from Ilorin, where he was educated under Shaykh Abdullah Nakarata.¹¹ Alfa Alaga was an Ibadan indigene, born at Ilorin and studied Arabic and Islamic studies there too. When he arrived at Ibadan, he made Arabic Language and Islamic studies well standardized among the Muslim scholars.

He began to teach them various branches of Arabic and Islamic studies. He was the first Mufassir in Ibadan and a great Shaykh for 'Ulama' (scholars) of Ibadan because majority of them learnt various branches of Arabic language from him.

Among his students were; Shaykhs Harun bn Sultan (Imam Oke-Gege), Hassan Abata, Aminu Ona'do, Sulayman Alagunfon, Abdullah bn Uthman, Malik bn Husayn Motala and others. All his students were pioneers of Arabic and Islamic studies in Ibadan till date. Some of their descendants are leaders in the Imamship field today in Ibadan.

Arabic Poetry in Ibadan

It was reported that when Shaykh Alaga was coming from Ilorin, after his graduation under Shaykh Abdullah Nakarata, he stopped over at Iseyin. When the people of Iseyin saw him, they wanted him to stay with them, and to become their teacher. But Shaykh Alaga replied saying:

"I am coming from Ilorin, passing through this town to Ibadan, my homeland, after I spent some years in Ilorin, and you want me to stay here and live with you, this is not possible."¹²

After making these statements he composed these lines of poem for them.

للعلم حقا خرجنا # نطلبه حيث سرنا
ومن يردده لدينا # فلياتنا حيث كنا
والزاد لا بد منه # كي لا يجوع لدينا

Meaning

1. Certainly, we left our town with the aims of seeking knowledge wherever we reached.
2. Whoever wants to acquire knowledge from us must come to our place.
3. But he must make a provision for his sustenance, so that he would not starve while with us.

This is the first Arabic poetry recorded in the history of Ibadan poems. After him, Arabic poetry started developing gradually, until the arrival of Shaykh Waziri Bida of Ibadan in 1910 C.E.¹³ He taught some 'Ulama' (Scholars) of Ibadan various aspects of Arabic studies like Nahw (Syntax), Sarf (Morphology), Balaghah (Rhetorics) and 'Arud (Prosody) e.t.c.

One of the factors that led to the development of Arabic poetry in Ibadan is that many scholars ('Ulama') had access to some books on Arabic Literature and Language, published in Egypt and Lebanon, which they brought from Borno and Kano. They studied eulogy of the Prophet of al-Fazazy (d. 627/1230 C.E.), witrriyyah of al-Baghdadi al-Witri (d. 1349 A.H.); another eulogy of the Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W.), Mukhtar Shi'r-1-Jahili (Odes of the famous seven pre-Islamic poets) Maqamat of al-Hariri (d. 516/112 C.E.) and many others. These works are all in verses, except Maqarnat which is the mixture of both poems and prose. This is significant for verse composition was at that time a very important vehicle of expression. They were greatly influenced by these books to the extent that they imitated the styles of the authors in their works. By this, they were able to compose good poems. Such people include; Shaykhs Elesinmeta. Sadiq Folorunso, Mudaththir Abd-Salam among others.

Also, the role of traditional Islamic schools (Katatib) that were later changed into organized schools by scholars had a great impact on the development of Arabic poetry in Ibadan. According to Abu Bakr (1993), the first modern school was established by Imam Harun Oke-Gege in Ibadan. Other scholars followed his footsteps by establishing modern Arabic schools which paved way for the development of Arabic Literature. Many of Ibadan youths enrolled in those Arabic schools. Such schools include; Kharashi Arabic Schools (estab. 1945), Madrasat at-Ta'lim al-'Arabiyyah Oke-Are (estab. 1954), Shamshu as-Su'ud al-Islamiy (estab. 1955) and Arabic Institute of Nigeria (estab. 1957). Many people later became poets and composed Arabic in a large quantity and quality. Among these are: 'Ustadh Abu Bakr Abdul-Ganiyy popularly known as Baba Qadi, Alhaji Hamid Nasaj Oke-Odo, Shaykh Barihi Adetunji, 'Ustadh Abd-Rashid Awwal and many others.

Themes of Arabic Poetry in Ibadan

Arabic poetry refers to poetical composition that arouse feelings which have measures and whose parts end in rhyming syllables.¹⁴ It has sixteen metrical schemes called Bahr (river), each of which has a number of variations. However, the earliest poetical pieces in Arabic were the rhymed prose without metre called Saj'.

Poetry in the classical period was most prominent, if not the only genre of formal literary expression known to Arabs. It had tremendous impact on their life.¹⁵ The purpose for which the poets composed poem during that period was to serve their community as its spokesman and praise singer, and to the rulers as the image maker. This is the way the emergence of a poet from a tribe was usually an occasion for joy and merry-making.

Most of the people who wrote Arabic poetry in Nigeria especially in Ibadan were basically scholars and not professional poets. The aims for which they wrote poems differ from those of the traditional Arab poets.¹⁷ Their focus on poetical composition is didactic which means to teach the value of their religion. They also believe that poetry has an emotional effect on the people and easier to memorize than prose. According to al-Ilory (1967); some of the factors that make versification relevant to our scholars are preaching, guidance and eulogy of Prophet of muhammed¹⁸

Therefore, it is pertinent to explain at this juncture as discussed by Abdul-Rahman (1989) that writers of Arabic poetry in Ibadan are primarily 'Ulama' (scholars) who for the purpose of understanding Islam studied Arabic Language and its Literature¹⁹

The poems composed and gathered by Ibadan poets at the first appearance are patterned on the style of the classical poetry. The themes like: *Tctqriz* (Encomium) *Tahni'ah* (Felicitation), *Wa'z* (Exhortation), *Ta'lim* (Instructional Poem) and *Shi'r Murasalat* (Correspondent Poem) were common in their writings and compositions. Below are some examples of the poems composed by Arabic poets in Ibadan showing the aforementioned features.

At-Taqriz (Encomium)

Taqri- is a commendation of a poet on his poetical composition or to praise the book **written** by somebody. The following poem was composed by Imam Sadiq Folorunso. when he was praising the poetry of Shaykh Sanusi Alaka, which he wrote for Imam Muhaly Abdullah Basunu, when the later became the chief Imam of Ibadanland in 1940 C.E

بدأت بحمد الله مدح الفتى ولا # وفاق على الأتراب فوق تناولا
ثرايا شعر فيه مدح إمامنا # أفاض عليه الله نعمى وهطلا
وقد كان مثل الملح حلّ طعامنا # وكان كيدر في غياهب أسدلا
ولله منه وهو أزهى بصنعه # لآلى زانت عقد عذاره أعقلا
ولم نر فينا مثل ما لمحمد # السنوسي نجل الأكرمين تأثلا
له الأصل في علم عريق مرسخ # إلا أنه الفرع على الأصل قد علا
فلا غرو أن يحدو الفتى حدو شيخه # له استبح لو يوجد له ند في العلا
فرحت لما وفقت في شعره على # بديع وأنواع العلوم مفصلا
فيا ربّ يارحمان يا منقذ الورى # من الغرق والورطى قه أضرب البلا
صلاة وتسليم على سيد الورى # محمد المبعوث نعمى وخضلا

Translation

1. I start laudation of the youth (Sanusi) with praise of
2. Allah, he (the youth) surpassed his mates' commendation,
3. Thuraya (Palisades) can not resemble the praise of our Imam, may Allah shower His blessings and mercies upon him.
4. He was like salt in the soup and was like deeds than pearls which adorned the neck of a slim virgin.
5. We have not seen someone like Muahmmad Sanusi; a son of distinguished and noble descent.
6. He has solid foundation in knowledge, except that was branch might rise upon the root.
7. It was not an aggression for youth to resemble his father and there is nobody like him in the community.
8. I was happy when I met embellishment in his poem and other branches of knowledge.
9. Oh! My Lord, the Beneficent, the Protector His creatures, protect him (Sanusi) from all afflictions.
10. May Allah's blessing and peace be upon the master of creatures; Muhammad who sent a grace and mercy to the whole world.

Al- Wa'z wal- 'Irshad (Exhortation and Guidance)

Among their themes is *Wa'z wal 'Irshad*. The following lines are parts of the exhortation odes of Shaykh Bunyamin Matala. He composed it on the pattern in the book *Zuhd wal Wasiyyah* of Imam Ali bn. Husayn, grandson of Caliph Ali bn. Abi Talib. He arranged it according to alphabetical order. Letter *tha'* is taken from his book as an example:

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فرغت العمر في طلب المعاش # ولا تجديك مالك في الجداث
ستحسبه ومن أين اكتسبت # جميع المال ذلك في البعث
ستفرغ ثم تكي أو تعضى # أصابعك على جمع العياث
وهل أعددت تمرار الصراط # على ما كنت تكثر من رفاث
ويا ويح من اكتسب المعاصى # إذا طرح الجزاء لكل عاث
ترى وجهها بياضا أو سوادا # وفعلك جله صارت الرثاث
سألتك يا إله العالمين # إذا تجرى الخلاقن بغياث

Translation

1. You have spent your life about seeking substance, your wealth won't help you in grave.
2. You will account for it (wealth) and declare where you gathered your property on the day of resurrection.
3. You will be afraid, then cry and grab on your fingers for gathering the ravage.
4. Do you prepare for (passing on) the will of Sirati? On what you have done in obscenities.
5. Woe unto who earned the sin when the reward was lay down for the wicked (people)
6. You will observe that some eyes are white or black, all your deeds become shabby.
7. I plead to you oh! Thy Lord of universal, when the creatures are rewarded with succor.

Ar-Ritha' (Elegy)

Ritha' is a poem eliciting pity composed for a dead person where the elegist mentions the characters of the deceased. This theme is among the classical poetry themes, which Ibadan Arabic poets also composed. Example of this are the following lines, on which Shaykh Muhammad Tahir bn. Malik Matala lamented Shaykh Muhammad Bello Oke- Are's death.

بسملت إذ حمدلت ثم أصلصل # على أحمد المختار فهو محمد
فسبحان من لا يموت ولا له # شبيهه ولا كفو له فهو صمد
ولكن رب العرش قهر خلقه # بموت ولن يبقى على الأرض متمد
فها هو شيخ عالم بغوامض # لأنواع علم النحو أو فقه
وذاك فصيح اليربويين صادع # اللغتنا عجم فهد سرمد
وإن هو خاص في النصيحة فاسمعن # يبينه للخاص ونعد
ظننا لهذا الشيخ قد راح ذاهبا # إلى جنة الفردوس قرب محمد
صلاة إلهي كلما نام نائم # على أحمد نختر فجز محمد

Translation

1. I start this (ode) with Bismillah, Alhamdulillah, then, I say blessings of Allah be upon His Prophet Muhammad.
2. Praise be unto Allah, who does not die, and there is none like Him, He is on whom all depend.
3. But the Lord of Al-'Arsh (the Throne) overwhelmed his creatures with death, there is none who will remain on earth forever. This Elegy is for the illustrious scholar (Muhammed Bello Oke-Are)
4. He was an erudite Shaykh, who understood the obscure kinds of syntax and jurisprudence, he was a leader,
5. He was an eloquent person among the Yoruba, and an expert in some foreign languages.
6. Whenever he was preaching, his sermon was always clear to people collectively and individually.
7. We believe that Shaykh (Bello) was in Garden of Eden, near Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W.)
8. May the blessings of Allah be upon the Prophet Muhammad when a sleeping person sleeps.

Salient Arabic Poets in Ibadan

It is very difficult to make a list of compilation of Arabic poets in Ibadan, from the early period of Islam in Ibadan to the present date. And it is more difficult to mention all the names of Arabic poets in Ibadan in this project but the names of poets whose works reached the stage of Diwan (collection of poems) will be mentioned.

- A. **Ahmad Rufai:** He was the grandson of Uthman bn. Musa, who came to Ibadan from Iseyin and became a citizen there. His father was Muhammad Bello; one of the prominent scholars of Ibadan. Ahmad Rufai began his study from his father, and learnt from some ('Ulama') of Ibadan, such as,

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Shaykh Muhammad Sanusi Al-Katibi, Shaykh Yusau and Shaykh Imam Haruna Oke-Gege, He was the first scholar of Ibadan who travelled out to the Arab land for seminar. He became the Mufasssir of Ibadan after Shaykh Tahir bn. Malik; he was poet and a writer. Among his works are; Kitab Hibbatul Mawla fi Bayani Ma'ani La, Tuhfatul Ikhwanfi 'Urn Sarf, Tarikh Kubar 'Ulama 'i Ibadan and some poetry works. He died in 1972.

- B. **Shaykh Tahir bn Malik Matala:** He was the son of Malik bn. Husayn and studied under his father. He also studied under the erudite Shaykh Imam Harun Oke-Gege. When Imam Harun died, he elegized him with valuable poems. He was one of the great Mufasssirun (Exegetes) in Ibadanland. He has many commendable works in Arabic Literature, especially Arabic poetry.
- C. **Shaykh Bunyamin bn. Tahir bn. Malik Matala.** He was among the pioneers of Arabic and Islamic studies in Ibadan. He was very knowledgeable in Arabic Literature, Prosody and Shari'ah. He was a champion in the field of prosody, language and linguistic and has many works in poetry on various aspects of Arabic studies. He wrote a book following the patterns of Kitab Zuhd of Imam Husayn bn. All. He has to his credit Kitab Mu'jam (Lexicography) which he wrote and arranged on the letters of Arabic alphabets.

Conclusion and Recommendation

Attempt has been made in this article to bring into limelight the historical sketch of the development of Arabic poetry in Ibadanland. The poetical composition of Ibadan poets demonstrates the styles of Nigerian verse writers and shows the extent to which the Yoruba scholars have gone in scholarship. It reveals also that poetic creation with aesthetics and rhetorical effects exist in their attempt to versify.

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