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THE ROLE OF ARABIC AND ISLAMIC STUDIES IN A SECULAR SOCIETY

BY

IBRAHIM OLATUNDE UTHMAN

Introduction

Recently, many Nigerians have been clamouring for Nigeria to be regarded as a purely secular society especially in the wake of establishment of *Shari'ah* Courts in Zamfara State to replace Area Courts. One of the arguments put forward by the advocates of a secular Nigeria is that a secular society is not synonymous to a Godless society but rather signified the neutrality of Government on religious matters as well as its lack of nepotism towards any particular religion. However, this paper submits that Nigeria has always been ruled as a secular society right from its conception by the British colonialists and that it is this secular nature of the country that constitutes the major factor militating against the effective teaching of Arabic and Islamic Studies in the country. This paper is, therefore, an humble attempt to unravel the secularity of Nigeria and the role that the teaching of Arabic and Islamic Studies can play in reforming secular society.

The Secularity of Nigeria

A perusal at all contemporary secular societies such as Britain and United States of America will reveal that a secular society is indeed a Christian society. Secular societies like Britain and United States according to contemporary realities have one thing in common which is the incorporation of Christian ideas in all their socio-political and economic system. Such incorporation of Christian ideals which can also be found in the Nigerian society includes observation of Saturdays and Sundays as work-free days, use of cross in government hospitals as a symbol of healing and Christian common law. According to Lord Sumner, "Britain has always been based on Christian ideals and the English law may well be called a Christian law"¹.

Another feature of these contemporary secular societies is the teaching of Christian religious and Biblical studies in all public schools. For instance, in most government owned schools in Nigeria including those built by Muslim missionaries, Christian Religious Studies is taught. In Ikere-Ekiti for example, there are eleven secondary schools and all of them have Christian Religious Studies teachers paid by the Government². On the other hand, Islamic religious studies is only taught in one secondary school namely Ansar-Ud-Deen High

School³. In fact, there was the case of a primary four Muslim pupil who was beaten by an English teacher for not attending Bible Knowledge class in 1995⁴.

Ironically, all the above happens in a country whose constitution recognises the rights of every Nigerian to freedom of belief and worship as well as to propagate and manifest his/her religious observances⁵. Interestingly too, the national policy on education stipulates that no child shall be forced to accept any religious instruction which is contrary to the wishes of his parents⁶. In short as far as the Nigerian Constitution is concerned, the country is a multi-religious and not secular society. Many Muslim scholars have convincingly written to advance the multi-religious nature of the country⁷. Yet, Nigeria has always been run as a secular society nay a Christian society following the foot steps of the British who built their society on Christian ideals and who fashioned the Nigeria nationhood after their own.

The Problems of Teaching Arabic and Islamic Studies

Consequent upon the deliberate disregard for the provisions for Arabic and Islamic Studies by the Nigerian constitution and the national policy on education, there is today a gross decline in the number of students who enroll for Arabic and Islamic Studies at all levels. Many students believe that the twin subjects are inferior because of the perceived non-recognition of them by their school authorities. For instance, many schools do not provide suitable classes for teaching the two subjects. There are even times when the two subjects are deliberately omitted on the timetable. In fact there was the case of a principal who asked the Arabic teacher posted to his school to teach English Language because the school was built by Christian missionaries⁸.

There is also the problem of inadequate number of teachers for the two subjects. This is mainly because students who have not been taught these subjects at both their elementary and secondary levels of education can not have strong motivation for studying them at the tertiary level of their education. They usually develop the erroneous notion that the two subjects are too difficult to learn especially those of them who did not attend local Qur'anic schools before. This is the case with many students who refuse to study the two subjects at the Colleges of Education in Western Nigeria⁹.

Unfortunately, some of the few teachers available to teach Arabic and Islamic Studies cannot even teach them effectively¹⁰. The major factor responsible for this is lack of mastery of the subjects. It is pathetic and outrageous to mention that there are some non-Muslims appointed to teach Arabic and Islamic Studies even at University level who are grossly incompetent to teach them¹¹. It is true that this writer is not unaware of some non-Muslims who have distinguished themselves in the field of Arabic yet, Bolaji Idowu said it all when he explained aptly that a person who does not cherish and believe in the beauties

of African Traditional Religion cannot teach it competently and without prejudice¹². The same can also be said of the two subjects in question especially Islamic Studies.

Unlike other subjects, Arabic and Islamic Studies must be viewed from a moral or ethical perspective. Teachers of the two subjects must therefore be embodiments of the Islamic ethical codes. They must not only teach by precepts but more importantly by examples. This is the best teaching aid and in fact methodology in this regard. Their conducts, modes of dressing and even personal mannerism must be in line with what they teach. According to a statement of Allah, those who are teachers and builders of virtues cannot afford to neglect their own souls if they have truly understood:

Do ye enjoin right conduct on the people and forget to practise it yourselves and yet ye study the scripture? Will ye not understand?¹³

The appointment of those who are either academically or morally unqualified to teach Arabic and Islamic Studies is no doubt a big disservice to the teaching of the two subjects. It is clearly a direct consequence of the secular nature of the Nigerian education system.

Moral Values in a Secular Society

There is no gainsaying the fact that a major feature of the contemporary secular society is lack of proper ethical orientation or the loss of moral values. Most of the times, parents are absent from homes due to their pre-occupation with making ends meet thereby denying their children the opportunity to receive proper training and monitoring especially in their formative years. This failure to provide children with adequate attention and care has been worsened by the total breakdown of the family system. The upsurge in broken homes and single parenthood has subjected most of the victims of such phenomenon to psychological trauma and the harsh realities of life at very tender ages¹⁴.

Consequently, some of these victims grow up to become hardened criminals who perpetrate such atrocities as examination malpractices, cultism, abduction and even stark murder. They also engage in such unproductive pursuits like drug-pushing, alcoholism and prostitution. By and large, they end up adding to the flootsam and jetsam of the society as symbolised by the *Area-hoys and Yau Daba* syndromes in Nigeria today.

The preponderance of moral license and decadence has also been engendered by the advancement in science and technology. The use of modern telecommunication gadgets as agents of socialization, formation of ideas and teaching of values has been well acclaimed but what has not yet been quantified

is the attendant moral decadence. Many a time, men and women are shown nude at times in actual sexual acts on these gadgets. This has led to the increase in moral laxity as characterised by the increase in rape, teenage sex and pregnancies, abortions and confusion of paternity¹⁵.

The commercialization of religion is also a direct fallout of the loss of moral values. Religion has been converted into a big money-making industry where people are attracted by promises of miracles, better life, good jobs, husbands, wives or improved business ventures. Many people realising the enormous influence of religion in people's lives have become religious leaders overnight using religion to gather economic fortunes¹⁶. A notable feature of these pseudo religious leaders is the currency they give to the potency of witchcraft. By this singular act, they have become prophets of doom who foretell ill-will, misfortunes and disasters.

Dr. Olubunmi Okogie, a one-time President of the Christian Association of Nigeria once commented on this ugly development when he observed that some commercial minded people had been hiding under Christianity to play on people's superstitions and human sorrow by establishing run-away churches all over the country¹⁷. He also noted that 90% of these commercial churches' members are female who had one problem or the other like the desire to keep their husbands and boy friends¹⁸.

Despite the above outcry by Dr. Okogie, it is these commercial churches that now dominate the Nigeria Media. They advertise their "powers" in Newspapers, Television and Radio. Infact, the 91 printing and electronic media in Nigeria have an outrageous quantity and varieties of these religious programmes. According to Kilari, one noticeable trait of these programmes is that they are very Americanised. This is not surprising since most Christian organizations secure financial backing and support from American evangelical interest¹⁹.

Probably, corruption is the greatest vice that has reared its ugly head in the Nigeria society. An average Nigerian has no doubt sold his conscience in this regard. There is hardly any public officer willing to discharge his responsibility before his palms are greased. The orgy of corruption has been compounded especially the Police became notorious for their "Wetin you carry syndrome". In fact, after two years in office and the enactment into law of the anti-corruption bill, the battle against corruption by the current civilian administration in Nigeria is far from being won. Despite the present Federal Government policy on the removal of all roadblocks, the corrupt policemen for instance are still seen once in a while on the roads collecting illegal fees from motorists. This has only shown how even those who are supposed to protect the civil society have fallen prey to corruption²⁰.

It is therefore clear from the above that the problem of humanity today is the loss of the so vital and life-sustaining moral values in the name of secularity. According to Eric Fromm, the problem of the 19th century was the declaration by man that God was dead while the problem of the last century was the death of man himself²¹.

The need for reformation and the role of Arabic and Islamic Studies

It is apparent that all the problems associated with a secular society listed above have become matters of grave concern to the incumbent civilian administration. In order to arrest these problems, Governments at various levels in Nigeria have started to take laudable steps. For instance, the President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria has launched both the national rebirth and anti-corruption programmes. The Governor of Edo State has also launched an anti-prostitution and women trafficking programme. The last but not the least is also the attempt by all northern states Governors to re-establish the criminal aspect of the *Shari'ah* in their Courts following the Zamfara State initiative.

All the above are no doubt attempts to bring about a much-desired change in the Nigerian environment. Undoubtedly, the twin subjects of Arabic and Islamic Studies have significant roles to play in the reformation of the country and nay any secular society for that matter. The acquisition of a deep and correct knowledge of Islam and its socio-political, economic, educational and religious teachings through the study of Arabic and Islamic Studies has the capabilities of making a sizeable segment of the Nigerian society God-conscious, righteous, honest, law-abiding, incorruptible and morally disciplined.

Going by the submission of Fromm quoted earlier, no sustainable achievement and progress can be made by man without the consciousness of God. The teaching of Arabic and Islamic Studies effectively at all levels of the Nigerian educational system will inculcate in Nigerians right from childhood the consciousness of Allah, the Ominipotent and the Ominiscient. When a person has this conception of God, he bears Him in mind at all time and does not need to be policed before he becomes law-abiding and incorruptible. A practical manifestation of this is the *Ramadan* fast in Islam. *Ramadan* is the month of the biggest and most invigorating fasting exercise. Through it humanity is trained to resist all human passions, desires as well as whims and caprices and to submit to the will and commandment of Allah alone. This is a big exercise in self discipline and control²².

The teaching of this and other practical observances in Islam such as *Salah* (Prayer), *Zakah* (Annual due), *Haji* (Pilgrimage) will enable students of Arabic and Islamic Studies not only to grow up conscious of Allah, but also to move close to and commune with Him without any intermediary. For instance a good knowledge of Islam will empower people on how to take decisions on such

major events as choosing a job, husband or wife and this will reduce to the barest minimum if not eliminate completely the patronage of commercial spiritualists. Through Arabic and Islamic Studies knowledge, they would have easily learnt *Salatul-Istikhārah* or the prayer for searching or blessings and goodness on any important event in their lives²³.

Guidance on how to live a pure and morally upright life can also be gained from the learning of Arabic and Islamic Studies. For instance, many people engage in illicit affairs of their ignorance of the simplicity of marriage in Islam. They risk their lives through abortions and exposure to unprotected sex even when they use condoms probably because they want to accomplish university education before marrying or the fear of pregnancy while in school. Many still require a lot of education on misconceptions about marriage such as a lady getting married at the age of six or as soon as she starts her menstruation. These are topical issues in our society with their attendant medical implications, e.g. damages on the private parts of the victims known as Vesico Vagina Fistula²⁴.

A good knowledge of Islam is also needed by Nigerians today to solve their economic problems without necessarily resorting to dubious and fraudulent means. A good number of people today groaning under the yoke of debts due to the conventional secular based economic system. They live daily under the grips of capitalist financial houses. Even the co-operative organisations are only a little better than these shylock institutions. The knowledge of a non-interest banking and financial system as put forward by Islam will go a long way in solving the economic burden of these people. It is noteworthy to mention here that many members of the families of the deceased especially women suffer because of various cultural practices that deny them full property rights and in fact even regard them as properties to be shared out among their husbands' male relatives. Perhaps this is because many of these families especially those that are Muslims are unaware of any equitable system of sharing estates in Islam²⁵.

It must also be mentioned that the study of Arabic and Islamic studies will make Muslims in particular and Nigerians in general better informed on how to live together peacefully in a multi religious society which Nigeria truly is. Most of the heinous crimes, manning and killing that have been orchestrated in the name of religion like the recent Kaduna riots are therefore born out of the politics of using religious affiliation to struggle for state power²⁶.

No one who truly understands Islam will sanction the killing of any living being even an animal without a just cause. The history of Islam is rich with how Muslims accommodated non-Muslims and guaranteed their inalienable rights to worship and other basic human rights. The reception given by Prophet Muhammad to the Christian delegation from Najran is a prominent illustration of the Muslims' attitudes to Christians²⁷. In the same vein, Umar the second Caliph

met an aged Jew begging for alms and declared thus: "By Allah, we will fail to do justice if we leave people unprovided for their old age..."²⁸

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to examine the role of Arabic and Islamic Studies in Nigeria. It has shown that despite the provisions of the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, the Country has always been run as a Secular Society. It has also traced the preponderance of moral decadence in the country to the secular features already entrenched in the running of the society. These Secular features have also affected adversely the teaching of Arabic and Islamic Studies in Public Schools as seen by the loss of interest in the twin subjects by students.

Consequently, the paper argues that no meaningful progress can be made in arresting the prevailing decadence in Nigeria without the teaching of Arabic and Islamic Studies as core subjects. It will also be in recognition of the country as a multi-religious society as depicted in the Country's Constitution.

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2. An interview conducted with a native of the town who is also the incumbent President of the Muslim Students Society, College of Education, Ikere-Ekiti Chapter.
3. *Ibid*; His name is Monsur Babalola and he was interviewed at the College in February, 2000.
4. The name of the student is Basirat Adesina and she was interviewed at the house of her auntie in July, 2000.
5. Federal Republic of Nigeria, *The Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria*, Lagos, A Daily Times Publications, 1979. See Section 35, paragraph 2.
6. The Nigerian Education Research Council, *National Policy on Education*, Lagos Federal Government Press, 1971. See Section 1 paragraph 7 (ii)
7. Khalid Rashid (ed.) *op. cit* p. 64
8. The incident occurred at the Emmanuel College, Samanda, Ibadan, Oyo State in 1999.
9. An interview was conducted among Muslim Students at the Emmanuel College, Ibadan, Muslim College Akure, Ansar-Ud-Deen Secondary School Ado-Ekiti 1997
10. The incident happened at the University of Port Harcourt where the writer met the Lecturer involved in July, 1992 during the National/Higher Institution Convention of the Muslim Students Society of Nigeria B Zone.
11. An interview was conducted with some of the Muslim Students taught by such Lecturers at the Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife in July, 1997. One of the students, Ibrahim Rauf was a part three student of the University at the time of the interview.
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