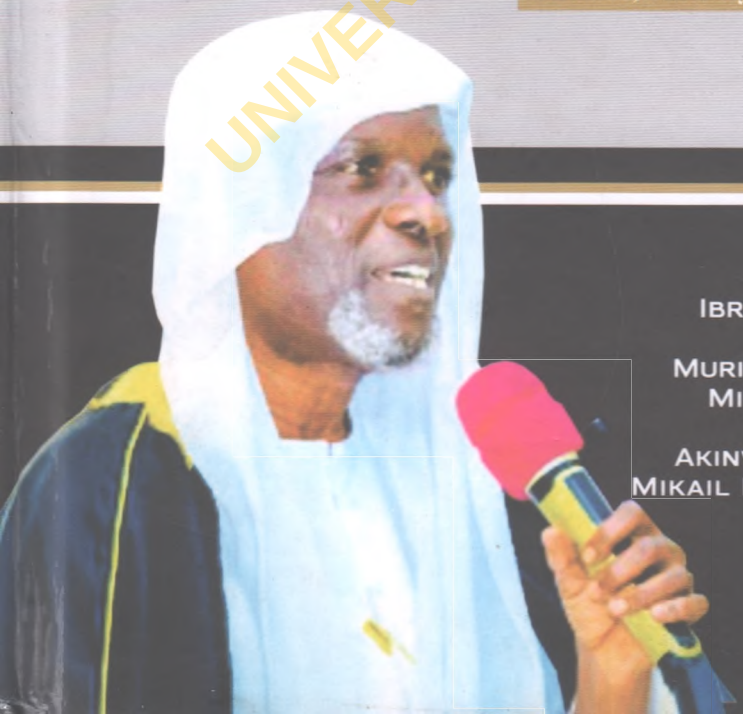
FRONTIERS OF CIVILIZATION:
THE TRAJECTORY OF ARABIC AND ISLAMIC STUDIES IN YORUBALAND

A festschrift in honour of

PROFESSOR MUFUTAHU OLOYEDE ABDULRAHMON

The Imam, University of Ibadan Muslim Community



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Professor Mufutau Oloyede Abdulrahmon

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Published by

Department of Arabic Studies, University of Ibadan

First published, 2025

ISBN: 978-978-55033-4-7

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Looking Inside-Out: Arabic and Islamic Studies in Nigeria and its Global Connections

Lere Ameen Ibrahim

Introduction

Nigeria, located in West Africa, is the most populous country on the continent. Prior to colonial rule, it comprised a mosaic of diverse ethnic groups, kingdoms, and emirates, each with distinct cultural and religious traditions (Ibrahim, 2019, p. 150). Major ethnic groups such as the Hausa, Yoruba, and Igbo practised indigenous religions characterised by the veneration of deified beings, ancestral spirits, and sacred objects crafted from wood, metal, and food items.

Islam reached parts of the Nigerian region well before the incursion of European colonialists in the nineteenth century. Its cultural alignment with some indigenous traditions facilitated its acceptance, enabling converts to harmonise their new religious obligations with familiar cultural practices. Islamic moral values and the civilisational appeal of Islam attracted not only the common people but also members of the ruling class. According to Azeez (2004, p. 1), Islam maintained its religious and cultural dominance in many parts of Nigeria until the arrival of Christian missionaries in the 1840s, which marked a significant turning point in the region's religious landscape. Backed by European colonial authorities, Christian missionaries sought not only to challenge Islamic influence but also to dismantle its cultural foundations—particularly its linguistic anchor, Arabic—which had long sustained the intellectual and spiritual vitality of Islam in the region.

Despite these challenges, a dedicated cadre of Muslim scholars and educators remained resolute in preserving Islamic teachings and the Arabic language, both regarded as essential for maintaining the integrity of the Qur'anic message. Often working under adverse political and social conditions, these individuals laid the groundwork for the sustained transmission of Islamic knowledge across generations. Motivated by a strong sense of *da'wah*, Arabic and Islamic Studies (AIS) centres gradually emerged across Nigeria, including in the predominantly Christian south, transforming

the country into an important hub for Islamic scholarship and intellectual engagement (Abbas & Lawal, 2016).

In contemporary times, the study of Arabic and Islamic Studies in Nigeria has evolved beyond local boundaries. Scholars no longer operate in isolation; rather, they have actively forged global connections—extending both eastward towards the Arab world and westward to other parts of the globe. What initially resembled a mentor–mentee relationship between Nigerian scholars and Arab institutions has matured into a dynamic partnership, particularly in areas such as knowledge production, cultural exchange, and academic collaboration. Nigerian scholars of Arabic and Islamic Studies have increasingly gained international recognition, winning prestigious awards and securing academic positions abroad—as university lecturers, editors, and researchers in renowned institutions across the Arab world and beyond (Ibrahim, 2014).

While existing studies have addressed the resilience and historical development of AIS in Nigeria, as well as its socio-political and cultural significance (Ibrahim, 2024; Ibrahim, 2019; Ibrahim, 2018a; Ibrahim, 2018b; Ibrahim, 2016; Abdulrahmon, 1984; AbdulRaheem, 2018; Yahya, 2018), limited attention has been given to its global connections and the implications of these transnational linkages. This paper seeks to address this gap by examining the opportunities and challenges presented by globalisation in the field of Arabic and Islamic Studies in Nigeria.

Specifically, the paper traces the historical development of AIS in Nigeria, problematises the concept of globalisation in relation to Arabic scholarship and analyses the influence of global connections on the thoughts, practices, and aspirations of Nigerian AIS scholars. It investigates how these scholars engage with global Islamic discourses, the extent of their immersion in Arab socio-cultural values, and the reciprocal enrichment that emerges from these exchanges. In conclusion, the paper critically reflects on the limitations and potential challenges posed by globalisation within the framework of Arabic and Islamic Studies in Nigeria.

Conceptualizing Global Connectivity

Globalisation and connectivity are two distinct yet semantically related concepts. Linguistically, the term *connection* stands in contrast to isolation, separation, or sequestration. Human life in complete isolation is often less productive—arguably even dehumanising—as there is a conceptual distinction between "life" and mere "existence." In Arabic, *ḥayāt* refers to life, while *wujūd* refers

to existence. Both may sometimes be denoted by the word *shay'un* (a thing or being); to distinguish the living from the non-living, the adjective *ḥayy* (alive) is applied (Qur'an 21:30).

This ontological distinction is reflected in the Qur'ānic narrative of creation, where the formation of human life is depicted as the outcome of interconnected elements—dust, water, and the divine spirit. The divine breath, when combined with material components, gives rise to the living human being. Khan (2003, p. 13) observes that this natural phenomenon is established "on the universal principle of conversion." This synthesis signifies the importance of connectivity as an essential condition for vitality and progress. The Qur'an declares: "We have indeed created man in the best of moulds" (Qur'an 95:4). The divine creative process metaphorically underscores the necessity of connection—whether spiritual, material, or social—as a prerequisite for functionality. This underpins the argument that globalisation is fundamentally predicated on connectivity (Oxera, 2010, p. 3).

Through globalisation, migration and human mobility have expanded dramatically, bringing diverse populations into contact and fostering cultural exchange, knowledge production, and mutual influence. Social media platforms have become vital tools for global connectivity, enabling individuals to access and participate in wider cultural discourses. As Davies (2020, p. 103) notes, individuals are no longer confined to local cultural resources; global cultural products are increasingly within reach.

One key outcome of global connectivity is the emergence of the concept of global citizenship, which emphasises responsibility beyond national borders and engagement with global issues (UNESCO, 2015, p. 14). Yet this aspirational ideal is not without its tensions. A Yoruba proverb captures the complexity well: *Ìṣe ọpọ ènìyàn dùn, oúnjẹ wọn ní kò rọrùn*—"The labour of many is admirable, but its reward is often burdensome." Global interdependence brings with it multiple challenges, including language barriers, cultural misunderstandings, and unequal power dynamics.

Moreover, global connectivity—while enhancing collaboration—can exacerbate existing inequalities and introduce new forms of exclusion, particularly for marginalised communities. It may foster cultural homogenisation, where dominant global norms suppress local identities. Increased interconnectedness also brings fresh vulnerabilities, including ecological exploitation, cyber insecurity, and transnational terrorism (Sassen, 1998; Wade, 2025).

Arabic and Islamic Studies in Nigeria: An Overview

The globalisation of the Arabic language is closely linked to its association with the celestial message of Islam—the Qur'ān, which was revealed in Arabic. While Islam constitutes a comprehensive body of knowledge, Arabic remains the principal medium through which this knowledge is accessed, interpreted, and transmitted. This interdependency has rendered the study of Islam and Arabic virtually inseparable for devout Muslims, who must understand the language of revelation in order to engage fully with their faith (Abdulrahmon, 2012, p. 3).

In most parts of the Muslim world, the spread of Islam served as the principal vehicle for the propagation of Arabic. Without Islam, Arabic may not have attained such global prestige. However, the case of West Africa, particularly Nigeria, presents a unique scenario. According to AbdulFattah (2007), the presence of Arabic in the region predates the introduction of Islam, having been facilitated through trans-Saharan trade routes that connected North Africa with sub-Saharan regions. Commercial and cultural exchanges across these routes laid the groundwork for subsequent Islamic expansion. The moral and ethical conduct of Muslim traders impressed local populations, easing the way for the acceptance of Islam. This development was further reinforced by the arrival of trained *du'āt* (Islamic missionaries), particularly from North African regions (Yahaya, 2023; Hunwick, 2026).

The religious and cultural transformation that accompanied the spread of Islam began long before colonialism, at a time when present-day Nigeria was a mosaic of independent ethnic groups, emirates, and kingdoms. Kanem-Bornu was the first region to experience the dual illumination of Islam and Arabic, as early as the seventh century CE (Hunwick, 1965, as cited in Opeloye, 1996). A critical factor in this development was the migration of Umayyad fugitives fleeing the Abbasid dynasty. Their arrival significantly contributed to the growth of Islamic culture and the flourishing of the Arabic language in the region (Nafawa, 2008).

From Kanem-Bornu, Islam spread into Hausaland, reaching cities such as Kano, Katsina, and Zaria by the early fourteenth century, then under the influence of the Mali Empire (Azeez, n.d.). Both commoners and rulers, including local *mais* (kings), offered patronage to the religion and its associated language. The 1804 *jihād* led by Uthman dan Fodio further consolidated the place of Arabic and Islam in northern Nigeria, culminating in the establishment of the Sokoto Caliphate and widespread Islamic reform (Brinin-Tudun, 1996, p. 155).

In Yorubaland, the introduction of Islam is believed to have occurred via Mali, at a time when the region had not yet encountered any Abrahamic religion or modern civilisation (Imam, 2018, p. 40). Over time, Islam became indigenised and integrated into Yoruba culture. A popular Ifa chant, still sung among Yoruba traditionalists, affirms the antiquity of Islam in the region:

Ayé/Ile la ba'fa,

Ayé/Ile la ba'mala,

Òsán gangan ni Ìgbàgbó wọlé dé.

Meaning:

Ifa has been with us since time immemorial;

Islam has been with us since time immemorial;

It was Christianity that arrived later in the day.

Itinerant scholars from Mali, such as Shaykh Ṣāliḥ Jinta, played vital roles in nurturing the faith through teaching and mentorship—similar to the influence of Shaykh ʿAbd al-Karīm al-Maghīlī in Hausaland (Abubakre, 2018). Yoruba princes in towns such as Ilorin, Ede, and Ibadan were among the early learners and patrons of Arabic and Islamic Studies. Their enthusiasm contributed to the establishment of Arabic schools across the region.

In the present day, Arabic and Islamic Studies are no longer confined to traditional or privately owned centres. These disciplines now compete with Western-oriented courses in Nigerian universities and colleges. Unlike in the past when students of Arabic were sometimes stigmatised or socially marginalized, their status has significantly improved (Folorunso, 2023, p. 152). Indeed, many who once pursued other disciplines now express admiration, and in some cases envy, for those who studied Arabic and Islamic Studies. This cultural shift is captured in a popular *waka* (Islamic Yoruba poem), cited by Doi (1984, p. 140):

Ẹyin tẹ ò kẹ́wú kò tí í jù,

Awa ń nawo a qalamu.

***Meaning**:*

As we enjoy the fruits of Arabic literacy,

the path to join the queue remains opens and bright.

Even in secular popular music, artists like Wasiu Ayinde Marshal have echoed this changing perception of Arabic studies, once considered derogatory:

Kewu ni,

Kewu ni,

Owu Ọlọ́run ló fere sí ṣẹ́ wa,

A ti dúpẹ́!

Meaning:

Arabic? What for? They scoffed before.

Eventually, by Allah's will, our efforts ennobled.

To Him-our thanks.

These expressions signify a broader societal revaluation of the discipline, affirming its relevance in modern Nigeria and its alignment with both local heritage and global Islamic culture.

Arabic and Islamic Studies in Nigeria and the Question of Globalization

Building upon the conceptual discourse on globalisation and the historical trajectory of Arabic in Nigeria, it can be argued that Arabic and Islamic Studies are not indigenous to Nigeria in the strict sense. Rather, they represent indigenised or domesticated forms of foreign knowledge systems. This view, however, does not negate the early arrival of Arabic among the family of foreign languages in the region. Some researchers even use the terms "locality" and "aboriginality" interchangeably when discussing the presence of Arabic and Islamic Studies in Nigeria (Amuni, 2009, p. 235). Beyond early contact, their deep involvement in Nigeria's intellectual and cultural history lends weight to this perspective. According to Abdulrahmon (2012, p. 3), Hunwick once theorised that Arabic is a language of Africa—a view further supported by the presence of the Shuwa Arabs in Northern Nigeria, who strongly identify with the Arabic language.

These early socio-cultural interactions played a vital role in embedding Islam, particularly by providing new converts with basic religious literacy. Yet a challenge remained: how could a religion so deeply tied to the Arabic language gain traction among populations unfamiliar with that language? To address this, early scholars localised Arabic pedagogy, aligning instruction with local culture to ensure better comprehension.

In Hausaland, for instance, instructors associated Arabic letters with familiar objects or phrases. Thus, *alif* became *alefi*, *ḥā'* was rendered *hamiruwa*, *ṭā'* became *tamithanu*, *'ayn* was called *anbakofin*, and *ghayn* was known as *aganbakofin*. This method ensured that learners could connect abstract phonemes with tangible cultural referents. Such practices may have inspired Trimingham's argument, cited by Doi (1984), that the success of Islam in Africa was due to its "Africanisation"—with Africans themselves acting as the primary agents of its spread. This allowed the religion to be assimilated "without causing too great a disruption in communal life" (Doi, 1984, p. 137).

The process of indigenising Arabic and Islamic Studies was not confined to the North. A similar tradition developed in Yorubaland. In his account of *Walīmat al-Qur'ān* (Qur'ān graduation ceremonies), Doi (1984) recorded the following *waka* (Islamic chant) commonly recited by well-wishers:

Keu ti mo kọ́kọ́ kẹ,

Ba sin, mi ara,

Alefi, alefu, minkuda, ayinnikafa,

Ba ta sa...

The first Arabic letters I learned were:

Alif, Bā', Tā', Thā', Jīm, Ḥā', Khā'...

Such examples illustrate the celebratory integration of Arabic into local learning cultures. Shaykh Najm al-Dīn Otun, *Mudir* of *Ma'had al-Ḥayy* and a disciple of Shaykh 'AbdulBaqi Muhammad, once recounted an anecdote from his arrival in Saudi Arabia. He and his peers were subjected to a placement test, which began with the word: "يَا" (*yā*) = *ya* + *fatḥah* + *alif madd*. One of them, shaped by a localised Nigerian pedagogical approach, confidently rendered the pronunciation as follows: *Yāāā-fa-alif mada yāāā*. The insertion of the underlined word *fa* between *ya* and *alif madd*—which together equal *yāāā* as pronounced by him—is a Yoruba expression meaning "to elongate" or "to make long." In this context, it signified that the *ya* was lengthened or extended by the following letter of elongation, *alif*. This interpretive style resonates primarily with Yoruba linguistic sensibilities and may not be readily understood outside that cultural framework. Amused, the Arab examiner burst into laughter and asked: "What kind of *madd* (elongation) is this?" The story highlights the gap between local pedagogical methods and global standards.

Interestingly, this localised Arabic culture became a celebrated tradition among some Nigerian scholars, particularly those referred to in Yoruba as *Makondoro*. A defining feature of this group is the use of Islamic *waka* as a third source of religious instruction—after the Qur'ān and Ḥadīth. They are also known for their resistance to Arabic grammar (*naḥw*), which they consider an obstacle to the indigenisation of Arabic learning (Oyedemi, 2024). This sentiment is captured in the following Yoruba *waka*:

Keu onilawani ni ni keu gidi,
Tiwa yàtọ̀ sí tiyin gbàrọ̀gùdù,
Keu naḥ̀wu n ko akeda mi ẹnu.
Meaning:
The scholars in turbans hold the real Arabic knowledge;
Our version differs significantly from yours;
Yours is burdened with naḥw—grammar that troubles the tongue (Trans. is mine).

Nonetheless, many students from these traditions have begun to embrace formal Arabic instruction. While retaining their cultural identities, they now recognise the importance of mastering global Arabic standards. Some have enrolled in formal institutions such as the Arabic Institute of Nigeria, Ibadan, while others pursue private lessons due to professional commitments. Notable examples include Professor Aliyy Abolaji, former Head of Arabic at the Islamic University, Niamey (Niger Republic), and Dr Aliy Adebisi of the University of Ilorin. The former specialises in Arabic linguistics, while the latter—now Director of the Institute of Arts and President of the Nigeria Institute of Translators and Interpreters (NITI)—is an expert in Yoruba/Arabic/English translation.

The next section will explore how Arabic and Islamic Studies in Nigeria increasingly engage with global networks and shift from localised to internationalised paradigms.

Globalizing Arabic and Islamic Learning in Nigeria: The Journey So Far

Politics, as a powerful force within human societies, has significantly shaped the trajectory of Arabic and Islamic culture in Nigeria. This influence was particularly evident in the Kanem-Bornu Empire, widely recognised as the cradle of Islamic scholarship in what is now Northern Nigeria. The relocation of the capital to Anjemi proved pivotal, transforming the region into a hub of

transregional scholarly exchange. Notably, scholars such as Shaykh Muhammad Mani, al-Bikrī, and Shaykh Abū Bakr al-Barkumī were among those who visited the region (Nafawa, 2019, p. 13).

This scholarly tradition did not emerge spontaneously; it was sustained by the committed support of Muslim monarchs. One such pioneer was Mai Abdul Jaleel VII, who combined financial patronage with personal academic involvement. Remarkably, he studied over 150 books under his palace imam, Abū ʿAbdullāh Hāʾilay ibn Badr. His repeated pilgrimages to Mecca enabled him to establish diplomatic and educational links with Islamic leaders. Among his notable legacies was the annual dispatch of cloth to adorn the Kaʿbah (Nafawa, 2019).

In a remarkable act of transnational investment, Mai Abdul Jaleel built a student hostel at Al-Azhar University, known as *al-Ruwāq al-Barnāwī*, to support his citizens studying abroad. His successors extended this legacy by establishing another hostel at Jāmiʿ Zaytūnah in Kairouan.

According to al-ʿUmarī's *Masālik al-Absār*, by the mid-thirteenth century Kanem's scholars had established themselves as intellectual authorities in both the Maghrib and the Arab lands. They even founded a Mālikī madrasa in Cairo around 1242 (as cited in Alikali, 1993, p. 174). Under the rule of Mai Humy ibn Abdul Jalil (r. 1096), Islam was officially adopted as the state religion. Humy's teacher, Shaykh Muhammad Mani, enjoyed court privileges and was granted *maḥram* status, excusing him from public obligations (Alikali, 1993, p. 172). The collapse of the Umayyad dynasty in 750 CE and the subsequent rise of the Abbasids also facilitated Islamic expansion into *Bilād al-Sūdān*. Some Arab geographers recount how factions such as Banū Humayy migrated to Kanem and established a new ruling house (Alikali, 1993, p. 171).

In Yorubaland, Islam took a different trajectory. Unlike their northern counterparts, Yoruba kings often embraced Islam primarily for its perceived spiritual power rather than for civilisational alignment. However, notable Obas in Iwo, Ede, Ikirun, and Epe eventually offered substantial support (Ibrahim, 2025). While efforts were made to institutionalise *Sharīʿah* in parts of Yorubaland, the global connections fostered by Yoruba Muslims were generally limited to the *Hajj* and brief encounters with Saudi Arabia.

In the pre-digital era, Arabic periodicals served as rare conduits of global Islamic knowledge. The emergence of radio, television, and satellite media revolutionised access. Nigerians increasingly tuned in to Arabic-language broadcasts from stations such as BBC Arabic, VOA, Deutsche Welle

(DW), Radio Moscow, and several Gulf-based networks including al-Jazīrah, al-ʿArabiyyah, al-Saʿūdiyyah, and Iqraʾ (Haruna & Ibrahim, 2018).

Additionally, private Islamic organisations and school proprietors played key roles in securing scholarships from Arab countries. Danmole (2019, p. 174) documents the efforts of Alhaji Muhammed Bakrin Raji Ottun, who founded the United Muslim Party in Lagos in 1953. One of its objectives was to facilitate educational opportunities for Nigerian Muslims in the Arab world, particularly in Egypt and Saudi Arabia.

While these developments brought significant benefits—scholarship, exposure, and institutional ties—they were not without drawbacks. These challenges, both structural and ideological, will be explored in the next section.

Indices of Arabic and Islamic Global Connections

This section highlights the positive impacts of global connections on Arabic and Islamic learning in Nigeria, including their influence on scholars and institutions. The discussion, organised around thematic subheadings, builds on Davies's (2020, p. 102) definition of globalisation as: *"Fostering the advancement of mentality and conjecturing the pictures of a borderless world through the use of information technology to create partnerships to foster financial and economic integration."*

Due to space constraints, only key aspects among the outlined elements are examined as follows:

1. East Meeting the West

One major consequence of the early domestication of Arabic and Islamic Studies in Nigeria was the perception that these disciplines were the exclusive preserve of Muslims. As a result, non-Muslims—regardless of their interest or qualifications—were often marginalised. This exclusivist mindset, originally embraced by many Muslims, contributed to suspicion and even hostility toward university departments of Arabic and Islamic Studies, particularly those whose pioneer staff and students were non-Muslims (Abdulrahmon, 2018, p. 3).

To avoid engagement with the perceived "West"—often portrayed as the domain of *kuffār* (infidels)—many Nigerian Muslims preferred sending their children to Islamic institutions in the Arab world, such as Al-Azhar University and the Islamic University of Madinah. Ironically, many of these Arab institutions were themselves significantly influenced by Western pedagogical

structures and employed Western-trained scholars. Over time, this paradox prompted a gradual shift in perception: the idea of seeking knowledge for its own sake, regardless of its origin, began to gain traction among Nigerians.

In parallel, several Nigerian students began to pursue advanced degrees in Arabic and Islamic Studies at Western universities. Upon their return, this group, alongside Arab-trained scholars and Nigerian university graduates, fostered a new academic synergy. A defining feature of this emerging intellectual culture was the integration of Western and Islamic knowledge systems, either through dual acquisition or parallel development.

Interestingly, some scholars who had previously opposed such integration later reversed their stance after witnessing its undeniable advantages. As a result, the old binary of "Islamic" versus "Western" institutions is no longer the dominant framework. The cross-pollination of traditions, fuelled by globalisation, has enriched scholarship and promoted intellectual collaboration across borders.

2. Contributions to Global Islamic Discourse: Past and Present

Until recent decades, when globalisation transformed the world into a metaphorical "global village," Nigerian scholars of Arabic and Islamic Studies, despite their intellectual depth, remained largely invisible on the international stage. Their deep engagement in scholastic debates rarely reached audiences beyond local or national contexts. For instance, the intellectual disputes among scholars in Ibadan over such issues as visiting non-Muslim rulers, congregational Qur'ān recitations on the Day of 'Āshūrā', and New Year supplications and predictions could have generated broader interest and constructive dialogue had they occurred in the era of digital interconnectedness (Jimoh, 2020, p. 223).

While the contributions of scholars trained in the Arab world are well noted, those trained within Nigerian institutions have also made significant impacts. Their bilingual and multilingual capabilities have enabled them to engage effectively across diverse cultural and scholarly landscapes. Notable figures include Professor M. O. Abdulrahmon, Professor R. D. Abubakre, and Professor Amidu Sanni, whose works reflect a synthesis of Nigerian cultural values and Islamic worldviews. Particularly commendable is the work of Professor Daud Noibi, whose advocacy for religious tolerance in a multi-religious Nigerian society has received international recognition. His

efforts earned him the Order of the British Empire (OBE). At one interfaith conference in a predominantly non-Muslim setting, his paper sparked such intense discussion that a Hindu scholar remarked: *"Listen, Daud! Do you realise that you are the hero of this conference? Everyone talks about your paper"* (Noibi, 2009, p. 47).

The advent of the internet—one of globalisation's most powerful tools—has significantly expanded Nigerian scholars' participation in global Islamic discourse. The contributions of traditional Islamic scholars such as Shaykh Abubakar Gumi, Shaykh Adam Abdullah, Shaykh Muhalli Badruddeen, Shaykh Muhalli Aroworeki, and Shaykh AbdulBaqi Muhammad have become increasingly visible. Through their Arabic and Islamic schools, they mentored generations of scholars who are now prominent voices in global scholarship.

Among the new generation of scholars emerging from these intellectual lineages are Shaykh AbdulRasheed Hadiyatullah, Dr Sirajudeen Al-Asra', Dr Kamil Mustapha, and Professor Kakuri, among others. A particularly illustrative case is Shaykh AbdulRasheed Hadiyatullah's bold intervention during the 1987 meningitis outbreak, when Saudi authorities temporarily suspended Hajj participation for certain countries, including Nigeria. His well-crafted, persuasive letter, widely circulated at the time, is believed to have influenced the reopening of Hajj access to Nigerian pilgrims the following year (Ibrahim, 2001, p. 83).

3. International Collaborations and Exchange Programmes

One effective way to expand the frontiers of knowledge in Arabic and Islamic Studies is through academic collaboration and exchange programmes. This global academic culture is not alien to Nigeria, particularly within universities and institutions where Arabic and Islamic Studies are offered as degree programmes. Over the past three decades, this practice has gained increasing momentum, largely due to the reintegration of Nigerian scholars trained in both Western and Arab institutions.

These scholars brought with them international academic networks and friendships forged during their studies, which have significantly shaped the development of Arabic and Islamic Studies in Nigeria. They have engaged in joint research projects and co-authored academic papers on intellectual and legal issues with global relevance. A notable pioneer in this regard is Professor R. D. Abubakre, formerly of the University of Ilorin, whose collaboration with S. Reichmuth at the

School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London, blossomed into long-term scholarly partnership. Together, they co-authored *Arabic Writing between Global and Local Cultures: Scholars and Poets in Yorubaland* (Indiana University Press/Ohio State University, 1997) (AbdulRaheem, 2018).

Another significant example is the partnership between the King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz International Centre for the Arabic Language (KACAL) and the Nigerian Centre for Arabic Research (NCAR). This collaboration led to the publication of the compendium *Al-ʿArabiyyah lil-ʿĀlam* (Arabic for the World), with *Al-Lughah al-ʿArabiyyah fī Nāijīriyyā* (Arabic Language in Nigeria) featured in its seventh series. Edited by Professor Khidr AbdulBaqi, the volume includes contributions from eminent Nigerian Arabic scholars such as Professors Tijani al-Miskin, AbdulRazaq Deremi Abubakre, Muhammad Mu'adh Unguru, Badmos Lanre Yusuf, Mashood Mahmud Jimba, Qasim Badmus, Muhammad ʿUmar Ndagi, Isa Alabi Abubakre, and Khidr AbdulBaqi (Alkhidr, 2017).

International collaboration has also extended to jointly organised academic conferences and workshops, sponsored by both Nigerian and foreign institutions. A notable example was the international conference held at Eko Hotel, Lagos, involving representatives from over seven Arab countries alongside Nigerian scholars. The Nigerian Centre for Arabic Research and Markaz as-Salām li-Taʿlīm al-ʿArabī wa al-Islāmī, Ijokoro, played a central role in organising this event and continues to serve as a bridge between Nigeria's Arabic scholars and the Arab world (Ibrahim, 2014).

In addition, annual workshops organised by the Islamic University of Madinah have been instrumental in recruiting Nigerian students for further studies. Other Saudi-based institutions have followed suit by offering scholarships and exchange opportunities. Al-Azhar University in Cairo has long been a trailblazer, historically providing academic support and platforms for Nigerian scholars (Abdus Salam & Mohammad, 2022, p. 8). Beyond the Arab world, countries such as the United Kingdom, the United States, and Germany have also hosted Nigerian scholars, fostering intercultural dialogue and research partnerships.

4. Extension of Philanthropic Gestures

In the field of wealth distribution, several Islamic philanthropic organisations have maintained a strong presence in Nigeria. Prior to the presidency of Olusegun Obasanjo, Nigeria was actively engaged in philanthropic networks with countries across the Muslim world. These gestures could be categorised into two forms: religious and humanistic. The religious-oriented included mosque construction, the distribution of rams for the Ileya festival, *iftār* feeding during Ramadan, and the establishment of fully funded Arabic schools. The purely humanistic dimension included orphanage care, medical assistance, borehole projects, and the distribution of clothing—benefiting both Muslims and Christians alike.

However, during Obasanjo's administration, amid heightened global concerns over terrorism, a wave of indiscriminate allegations led to the closure of several international Islamic NGOs operating within Nigeria. Despite this setback, their earlier activities had far-reaching impacts. These organisations not only distributed relief materials and social palliatives but also created employment opportunities for many Nigerian graduates of Arab universities who might otherwise have remained jobless. Some employment packages offered by these organisations were so attractive that they were often preferred over Nigerian civil service roles, including academic appointments in universities (Ibrahim, 2001, p. 55). Their influence underscored the broader benefits of international Islamic philanthropy beyond immediate humanitarian aid.

5. Learning Scholarship (*al-Minhah al-Dirāsiyyah*)

Scholarships for Arabic and Islamic Studies (*minhah dirāsiyyah*) were not widespread in Nigeria prior to the colonial era. As discussed earlier, the earliest initiatives were pioneered in Northern Nigeria, where Muslim rulers such as kings and *mais* actively sponsored students to study in Arab countries. These efforts laid the foundation for what later became a more formalised scholarship tradition.

According to al-Miskīn (2017, p. 26), although colonial authorities did not support such initiatives, the legacy of educational sponsorship persisted. Following Nigeria's independence, several Arab countries began offering scholarships to Nigerian students as part of cultural diplomacy and religious solidarity. This intervention played a vital role in reviving Arabic and Islamic Studies,

especially at a time when colonial education policies had significantly eroded Arabic's role in Nigeria's intellectual and educational landscape.

For many Muslims in the southern region, this era marked a major turning point, as access to scholarships from Arab countries offered renewed hope for the advancement of Arabic and Islamic education in their communities.

6. Graphic Culture: Arabic Calligraphy and Artistic Expression in Nigeria

The knowledge of *al-khaṭṭ al-ʿArabī* (Arabic calligraphy), originally introduced as a pedagogical tool to improve handwriting and documentation, has evolved into a significant form of artistic and cultural expression in Nigeria. In recent decades, there has been a conscious movement to expand the utility of Arabic beyond the classroom and integrate it into everyday aesthetics and professional practices.

One pioneer of this cross-disciplinary innovation is Dr Tafiq AbdulRauf of Iwo, who envisioned a synergy between Arabic calligraphy and traditional craftsmanship. By collaborating with Muslim professionals such as welders, builders, carpenters, and sculptors, he sought to elevate the prestige of Arabic Studies through Arabic branding of public and private works. This vision fostered the rise of Nigerian *khaṭṭāṭūn* (calligraphers) whose work blends spiritual literacy with visual aesthetics (Ibrahim & Alimi, 2020, pp. 116–118).

As part of this movement, Arabic school students with talent in calligraphy have received training through these collaborations, and several have gone on to become notable calligraphic artists. Prominent among them are Mallam Ibrahim Elemo in Iwo and Ustadh Ismail in Ibadan. This cultural phenomenon is not confined to the South-West. According to al-Miskīn (2017, p. 27), the northern regions of Nigeria have long embraced Arabic calligraphy in both religious and decorative contexts.

Examples of commonly used Arabic inscriptions in such calligraphic works include:

There no god save Allah	لاإله إلا الله
Allah suffices for us; He is worth being relied upon	حسبنا الله ونعم الوكيل
I rely on Allah	توكلت على الله
The topmost wisdom is the fear of Allah	رأس الحكمة مخافة الله
Shyakh Inyas	الشيخ انياس

Shyakh Ibrahim al-Kahwlakhy	الشيخ إبراهيم الكولخي
No rest for the enviers	ليس للحسود راحة

This blend of aesthetic expression and religious devotion reflects how Arabic calligraphy has transcended its traditional educational function and has been reimagined as a cultural symbol in contemporary Nigerian Islamic life.

The Other Side of Global Connections in Arabic and Islamic Studies in Nigeria

Despite the inestimable benefits derived from global connections in Arabic and Islamic education, the accompanying challenges and pitfalls cannot be ignored. This reality appears to support the Marxist critique of globalisation, which characterises it as a veiled form of exploitation. According to Davies (2020, p. 10), globalisation is "nothing particularly spectacular or new, but merely the latest stage of international capitalism." While one may be reluctant to endorse this view fully—given the tangible gains globalisation has brought—a critical examination of Nigeria's global academic engagements lends it partial credence. The negatives that have emerged are often the result of failures on the part of both beneficiaries and benefactors.

Historically, Nigeria's global engagement in Arabic and Islamic Studies was not intended as a tool for cultural domination or economic exploitation; rather, it aimed to foster intellectual and spiritual growth through the lens of Islam. Over time, however, some of the very agents entrusted with sustaining this noble mission have become complicit in undermining its core values. The following section highlights one of the most pressing adverse effects:

1. Self-Demeaning Practices and Scholarship Corruption

The original intention behind integrating Nigeria's Arabic and Islamic scholarship into the global academic arena was to develop human capital, empower local scholars, and expand their intellectual horizons. The early pioneers of these international linkages understood that, while globalisation can inspire self-confidence, it can also foster elitism and new forms of exclusion, particularly when poorly managed.

A clear example of the initial modesty and integrity in these engagements is seen in Nigeria's collaboration with Al-Azhar University, which offered full scholarships covering tuition, food, and accommodation. Despite this generosity, Nigerian stakeholders, like the rulers of Kanem-Bornu,

insisted on constructing a dedicated hostel (*al-Riwāq al-Barnāwī*) for their students, reflecting a spirit of dignity and contribution rather than dependency (Ibrahim, 2014). Regrettably, over time these admirable principles have been eroded. Some contemporary Nigerian administrators of global scholarships have abandoned the ethos of justice and equity, replacing it with nepotism, profiteering, and favouritism.

While institutions such as Al-Azhar and Saudi universities continue to demonstrate goodwill, several local administrators (*mudīrīn*) have turned scholarship distribution into a commercial enterprise. Instead of allocating scholarships based on merit and need, some sell slots to the highest bidders. Others favour relatives or close allies, treating the opportunities as inheritable privileges; some even promise the same scholarship to multiple applicants while collecting bribes from each (AbdulRasheed, 2025). Such unethical practices demean the integrity of Islamic scholarship, violate Islamic ethical principles, and undermine the potential of global academic co-operation.

2. Curriculum Debacle

One clear manifestation of globalisation in Arabic and Islamic Studies in Nigeria is the largely unquestioned adoption of Arab-oriented curricula. In educational management, curriculum design must consider cultural sensitivity, inclusivity, and responsiveness to the specific environment of the target audience. Moreover, curricula should provide flexibility in delivery and promote student autonomy and self-directed learning to cultivate well-rounded, effective, and engaging learning experiences (Syomwene, 2020).

It is, however, disheartening that at the inception of these imported curricula, many proprietors of Nigerian Arabic schools were largely indifferent to their incompatibility with Nigerian cultural values. Curricula were adopted wholesale, perhaps owing to the perceived benefits or prestige attached to an "Arab" programme.

Consequently, the quality and relevance of graduates, particularly in the South-West, have been adversely affected. Students have been deprived of opportunities to engage meaningfully with their own cultural heritage, history, and the official language, all of which are essential for navigating their societal roles effectively (Abdulrahmon, 2008, p. 7). This disconnect partially explains why many Arabic-school graduates prefer pursuing higher education in Arab universities rather than Nigerian or Western institutions. Moreover, numerous Nigerian graduates returning from studies

abroad face significant challenges in continuing their academic pursuits within the Nigerian system, owing to an unfriendly academic environment and poor integration between imported curricula and local educational contexts.

3. Cultural Invasion

A defining characteristic of global connectivity is the erosion of cultural diversity and the homogenisation of identities. While Islamisation refers to the adoption of Islamic religious values and cultural systems—an essential component of Muslim piety—Arabisation, as described by Doi (1984, p. 234), is essentially an acculturation process with little or no direct bearing on piety. When approached as a tool for linguistic immersion, however, Arabisation can be an effective means of acquiring fluency and understanding the intricacies of the Arabic language. For Muslim students in non-religious disciplines, this form of immersion is arguably optional.

Ironically, among many Nigerian Muslims there has been a disproportionate celebration and assimilation of Arab cultural expressions, elevating Arabisation from an optional cultural engagement to a near-compulsory identity marker. This is exemplified by the widespread, uncritical adoption of Arab clothing, such as *jubbah*, *al-kīmmah*, and *shumagh*, particularly during religious occasions and Islamic festivities. Introduced largely through returning pilgrims and graduates of Arab universities, these styles have gradually become synonymous with an "authentic" Islamic appearance.

The situation is further reinforced by the Tablīghī Jamā'at and similar groups that have adopted Arab-style dress as permanent attire, embedding it in the religious psyche of many adherents. A growing trend among some Arab-trained scholars is the hybridisation of Arab and indigenous Nigerian dress—for example, combining the *shumagh* or *kīmmah* with local garments such as *agbada*, *esiki*, and *babariga*, often worn in a stylised manner reminiscent of Arab culture. While not explicitly anti-cultural, this hybrid fashion implies that purely Yoruba attire is inadequate for religious functions, especially when worn by figures of Islamic authority, such as a *khaṭīb* on the *minbar*. Consequently, some now view indigenous clothing as inappropriate or even sacrilegious in Islamic contexts.

This conflation of Arab culture with Islamic identity has further alienated non-Muslims, particularly Christian fundamentalists, who perceive such cultural borrowings as covert

Islamisation. A case in point is the AI-manipulated image of Pastor E.A. Adeboye, General Overseer of the Redeemed Christian Church of God, which depicted him in Arab dress standing at the Kaʿbah in Makkah. The viral image sparked outrage and conspiracy theories suggesting conversion or symbolic submission to Islam. The original post, according to *Punch* (22 December 2024), "gained massive traction—3.8 million views, 1,500 shares, 1,800 comments, and 4,000 likes."

Reacting to the controversy, Pastor Adeboye was quoted by Arongbolo in the *Nigerian Tribune* (4 January 2025) as saying: "I'm sure many of you saw that picture showing me as an Alhaji. The Lord said, 'Mockers will be louder and more aggressive this year than ever before.' But unfortunately, Daddy says many of them will not survive this year. I'm the one who added 'unfortunately,' because God doesn't want the death of a sinner."

This episode reflects persistent confusion between Islamic values and Arab cultural practices—confusion with serious implications for interfaith dialogue and religious tolerance. Similarly, a comment from a non-Muslim respondent during debate over a postponed *Sharīʿah* panel in Oyo Town illustrates the problem. Mistaking the intended panel for a full *Sharīʿah* court, he remarked: "If it's the kind of *Sharīʿah* like that of Saudi Arabia, which allows gays, alcohol, clubbing, and mingling of opposite sexes, not Hausa *Sharīʿah*, I would've had no problem with it."

Such statements underscore the widespread misconception that Islamic law, culture, and Arab sociopolitical norms are monolithic. This misconception is fuelled by Nigerian Muslims' excessive embrace of Arab cultural elements, which inadvertently blurs lines between religious principles and regional customs whether long-standing or newly invented.

4. Modernity, Tradition, and ʿAqīdah-Driven Tensions

Modernity, in its basic sense, is a progressive development or transformation of a society's traditions. According to *Merriam-Webster* (n.d.), it refers to a state of affairs pertaining to the present or immediate past. Modernity often arises through cross-cultural interactions and exchanges among diverse human communities. In secular contexts, tradition is understood as inherited cultural practices. In Islamic thought, however, tradition—*Sunnah*—carries profound theological significance. Unlike the mutable customs of secular societies, Islamic tradition is sacrosanct, derived from the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), and thus resists

manipulation or distortion. Nevertheless, Islamic tradition remains adaptable, insofar as it can accommodate cultural practices that do not contradict the fundamentals of Islam (Bello, 2013).

Before the recent wave of reconnection between Nigerian Muslims and the Arab world, the Muslim community in Nigeria appeared relatively unified in its general conception of Islamic ideology. While orientations such as Sunnism and Ṣūfism coexisted—and were sometimes contentious—differences rarely escalated into accusations of disbelief (*takfīr*). Frictions existed, but were largely inter-doctrinal rather than intra-doctrinal, and groups still acknowledged one another as part of the broader Islamic community.

However, increasing connections with Saudi Arabia and its theological institutions introduced heightened awareness and segmentation of ʿaqīdah (creed). Today, not only are there distinct ʿaqīdah identities, they are also periodised—with references to the ʿaqīdah of the 1990s, 2000s, and so on. Despite similarities in external expressions—attire, beards, even prayer postures—intra-Muslim relations have become increasingly cautious and guarded. A slight misattribution of doctrinal alignment can ignite long-standing hostilities.

What is particularly troubling is that many of these factions were trained in the same institutions and taught the same fundamentals. The divisions, therefore, appear more artificial than theological, suggesting a "Nigerianisation" of doctrinal identity, or worse, strategic factionalism designed for socio-economic gain. The discourse is no longer centred on Islam or Muslims in general, but on being *Jamāʿah* or non-*Jamāʿah*, often to the exclusion of broader *ummatic* identity.

Social media has increasingly become a stage for the performance of "Nigerianised" Salafist expressions, where adherents engage in vitriolic exchanges over nuanced—and often contentious—religious matters that could be addressed more productively through seminars, conferences, or similar scholarly forums. These ideologues, shaped by neither the classical traditions of the East nor the contextual insights of the West, disregard the example set by local ʿulamāʾ who initially nurtured their understanding before its refinement under Arab scholars.

A vivid illustration of respectful scholarly disagreement followed the passing of the mother of Shaykh AbdulRazaq Abdul Rahman, a disciple of Shaykh Adam Al-Aluri. On the third day after her death, a tense but civil debate emerged in Iwo, Osun State, among respected scholars—Shaykh Adam Abdullah Al-Aluri, Shaykh Murtadha AbdulSalam, Orisun Mimo, and Shaykh AbdulBaqi

Muhammad (*Olūkọ́ Agbà*)—concerning the permissibility of communal prayer gatherings and the collection of *ṣadaqah* on the third or eighth day after a Muslim's death. Although each scholar maintained a differing view, the discourse, while intense, remained within the bounds of scholarly decorum; no resolution was forced, each party retained his opinion, and life resumed its usual course (Sutti, 2025).

This incident echoes the early Muslim community, where differences of opinion among the Companions were not uncommon. Yet such disagreements did not devolve into hostility or mutual condemnation, as each respected the integrity of the other. Ultimately, every individual is accountable before Allah according to the sincerity and merit of their understanding.

These internal disagreements, conducted under various branded versions of the *Sunnah*, have no authentic basis in Islam. The only divinely sanctioned identity for believers, as stated unequivocally in the Qur'an, is "Muslim": "He has named you Muslims both before and in this (revelation) …" (Qur'an 22:78). This Qur'anic designation should remind all factions that unity in essential beliefs outweighs minor differences in ʿaqīdah nuances or organisational affiliations.

Ibn Kathīr (n.d.) explains that this naming occurred both in previous scriptures and in the Qur'an, and that the designation represents a divine honour rooted in the legacy of the Prophet Ibrāhīm. This understanding highlights the inconsistency of replacing a Qur'anic identity with sectarian labels neither emphasised by the early generations nor mandated explicitly in Islamic scripture.

Conclusion

This study has sought to highlight Nigeria's strategic position within the broader context of global Arabic and Islamic intellectual traditions. It explored Nigeria's early engagement with Islam, a period largely focused on spiritual propagation with minimal concern for extending intellectual frontiers beyond liturgical practice, and traced the evolution of Arabic and Islamic Studies (AIS) in Nigeria from cultural domestication by local scholars, notably the *Makondoro* group, to present-day globalisation.

Initially resistant to modernisation, this group feared that reforming AIS might undermine indigenous cultures compatible with Islamic values. However, as globalisation intensified, AIS in Nigeria transformed from a locally disparaged field into a respected domain of scholarship. The benefits of global engagement have been numerous: facilitating academic exchanges and

scholarships, promoting Arabic graphic arts, fostering transnational Islamic solidarity, and contributing to global intellectual discourse. Nevertheless, the study also examined the challenges accompanying global integration, including curriculum misalignment, cultural invasion, and self-demeaning practices rooted in inequitable access to resources. For Nigeria's engagement with global Arabic and Islamic traditions to be more fruitful, deliberate efforts are needed to ensure cultural sensitivity, uphold scholarly integrity, and foster mutual respect in global academic collaborations.

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