

**NATIONAL BOARD FOR ARABIC AND ISLAMIC STUDIES: It's Socio-  
Economic and Educational Contributions to Nigeria**

**By**

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**(Paper presented at the 1st National Conference of National Board for Arabic and Islamic Studies (NBAIS) at the Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, May 7-8, 2012)**

**Historical Antecedents**

Africans value education. In Nigeria, successive governments see improving educational access and quality as essential to national economic and political development. Thus, over the years, significant achievements were made in promoting literacy rate among the populace. However, the most pervasive form of education, which the government especially in Nigeria usually seeks to promote, is the Western form of education to the disadvantage of the Arabic education, which has been centuries before the Western form of education.

Literacy in Arabic predates literacy in any European languages including English, in West Africa and in Nigeria in particular. For over 800 years, the people of West Africa and in particular the people of Nigeria kept records of their intellectual exploits in Arabic covering all aspects of human endeavours. Volumes of books were authored by the indigenes down the ages, scholars from the Middle East and North Africa like al-Maghili visited West Africa and especially Nigeria. Those itinerant scholars, imparting knowledge and producing books, frequented Kano and Katsina.

About a century before the coming of the British to take over Nigeria, there was the jihad of Usmanu Dan Fodio, which had a face of scholarship. This face of scholarship was even greater than any other faces of the regime because it left behind rich legacies of manuscripts touching all aspects of learning. The three key players were from the family of Usmanu Dan Fodio. Sheikh Usmanu Dan Fodio himself who authored hundreds of books in Arabic was the first. Next was his brother Abdullahi, who was a scholar par excellence and who was very rich in literature, in language and in other branches of learning. The third of the trio was Muhammed Bello, son of Usmanu.

It is clear that to know the history of Nigeria and indeed West Africa there is need to know Arabic. It was in Arabic that history of this area over the ages was written before anyone in Africa knew how to write in English, French, German or Portuguese. This culture of learning did not stop in spite of the occupation of Nigeria by the British. The British themselves recognized this. They encouraged the learning of Arabic especially in the north. It was realized here that it would be turning the current of water back to stop the search for knowledge in Arabic. They watched the culture of Arabic and Islamic learning to grow just as the twin disciplines occupied the curricula in their respectable universities in the United Kingdom, the rest of Europe, the Americas and the near and far East.

Checking the mood of the northern rulers, the British cooperated with the emir of Kano and other emirs to establish the Kano School for Arabic and Islamic Studies in 1932. Because Arabic was and still is learnt in Britain, the colonial rulers attracted some scholars from the University of London to work in that school. One of such was Professor Marvin Hisket among others. When the Sardunana of Sokoto Sir Ahmadu Bello became the Premier of Northern Nigeria, the whole of the north continued to pursue Arabic either exclusively or along with English.

On 2nd June 1952, the council of Ministers in Northern Nigeria presided over by Sir Ahmadu Bello set up a powerful committee. This included Emirs of Zaria and Misau, Ministers of Social Services, that of Community Development, that of Works, and the Minister of Natural Resources. Others were the Wazirin Sokoto and Ciroman Kano among others to recommend ways and means to improve on Higher Muslim learning. This committee recommended in its report published in 1953 by the Government Printer, Kaduna, the mainstreaming of the Arabic schools, provision of facilities for teaching students with little or no western education, expansion of the curricula of the Arabic teacher training schools, to provide manpower for the schools and breaking the schools into two streams. One stream concentrated on training teachers while the other stream focused on training of law students. Among the products of such schools were the rulers and administrators, the bureaucrats and the judges of the Sharia courts nationwide while many of them went to the UK and the Sudan to further their education and they came back to Nigeria as doctors, university teachers, administrators, technocrats and judges of the civil courts and Shariah courts.

The law of northern Nigeria on education established the National Board for Arabic and Islamic Studies (NBAIS). The same government established the Ahmadu Bello University (ABU), Zaria. With the creation of states, there ceased to be a central government for the north. Thus, it was difficult to find a central place to accommodate the Board. As such, the National Board for Arabic and Islamic Studies was and still is housed in the Institute of Education, ABU, Zaria, in lieu of its final take-off as an examining body like similar ones in the country.

## **The Roles of NBAIS in the Growth of Nigeria Nationhood**

NBAIS has contributed its quota to the modern Nigeria for the past six decades judging from the quantity, quality and diversity of the roles of its products in all areas of human endeavour. They are the forerunners in the integration of the *almajiri* system of education. NBAIS system of education as a nation builder is in the forefront of the educational and moral advancement of the country. As though a pyramidal structure, the largest numbers of its products are teaching in the primary schools, secondary schools, Colleges of Education, the Polytechnics with the Universities as the apex of the pyramid.

Many of the products of NBAIS are past and serving professors, past and serving Vice-chancellors. Many of them were past and serving judges of the High Courts, Appeal Court and Supreme Court. All the past and present Khadis and Grand Khadis nationwide are products of the NBAIS system of education. Many products were posted to Nigerian Missions abroad not necessarily in the Middle East where their cognate knowledge is centrally relevant but also in the rest of the world.

Other examining bodies and agencies for quality assurance employ products of NBAIS system of education. Such bodies include the West African Examinations Council, National Examination Council, the Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council and National Universities Commission where they hold key positions. The Nigerian Army employs them in their education corps, the Imamate section and the Nigerian Defense Academy. The Nigeria Police Force also followed the suit.

Many of the products went into business utilizing the training of hard work, perseverance, discipline, honesty and fear of Allah in their transactions.

Many of them have made headway with this and are now paying back to their alma mater through establishment of NBAIS recognized schools nationwide. Many of the products are imams in mosques across the country while many of them are social workers inviting people to what is right and discouraging people from doing what is wrong, rebranding Nigeria so to speak.

Products of NBAIS are technocrats in the various Federal and State government ministries serving in different capacities. Those who have flair for politics have risen through the ladder to occupy almost all available positions in the Nigerian polity. It is no surprise that the first civilian President of Nigeria Alhaji Shehu Aliyu Shagari has established an NBAIS recognized school at his homestead. This attempt should be understood as an acknowledgment of the system that produced him.

The quest for national recognition for NBAIS coincided with the steps recently taken by the Federal Government to streamline various activities of the *almajiri* schools with the formal system of education. This will checkmate begging of pupils of *almajiri* schools for survival. It will also put into classrooms some nine to ten million pupils of school age both at the Basic and Secondary levels of education in Nigeria. This presupposes more work for NBAIS in the national transformation agenda.

Before the present Ag. Registrar of NBAIS, Prof. Shafi Abdullahi who is the immediate past Director of the Institute of Education, ABU, Zaria, took over as National Coordinator some couple of years before, there were just few schools established by different state governments such as Kano, Jigawa, Nasarawa Sokoto, Kebbi, Kwara, Borno, Adamawa among other states in the north. The accreditation of private similar schools by the NBAIS received a boost when the then coordinator came on board. Indeed, these State governments increased the number of schools they inherited from their predecessors. Before this regime,

accreditation by the NBAIS was limited to the north, but this was extended to cover the south where schools pass the accreditation exercise. Thus, NBAIS became truly national in outlook and its activities.

It was the opinion of the present writer expressed elsewhere that:

The Federal Government recognition of the activities of NBAIS will open windows of opportunities to give formal education to those who are being educated in an informal way and in a haphazard manner, which will then checkmate the situation of students not being enrolled in formal schools. That is why the recognition of this special school is going to assist on the attainment of National Policy on Education. It will take care of many Nigerians yearning for education.

### **NBAIS Quest for National Recognition: The Journey so far**

The journey for the quest for NBAIS recognition is a wheel that has come full circle. The three hurdles were crossed as follows. In May 2010, the 62nd Joint Consultative Committee on Education (JCCE) Reference Committee recommended the memorandum for full recognition of the National Board for Arabic and Islamic Studies to the JCCE Plenary. At the 72nd JCCE Plenary Meeting held in Jos in September 2010, the recommendation of the JCCE Reference Committee was endorsed unanimously by the body, for the consideration of the National Council on Education (NCE). It was a good omen that Sokoto State hosted the NCE in January 2011 where the coast became clear for the final recognition of the NBAIS activities and certificates.

This, to the glory of Allah the Almighty, was achieved. We must appreciate, after Allah, the courage and sterling leadership qualities demonstrated by the Honourable Minister of Education, Prof. Rukayatu Ahmed Rufai at the Sokoto

encounter. The unflinching support of the ABU Vice-Chancellor, Professor Abdullahi Mustapha is also significant.

## **Opportunities and Challenges before NBAIS**

The first challenge taken by the NBAIS was the task of mainstreaming its syllabuses and curricula to be in consonance with the National Policy on Education. This was pursued vigorously with series of workshops organised to review the syllabuses and prepare the curricula on all the subjects. The experts engaged for this exercise were virtually the same employed by similar examining bodies in the country. The co-operation of the Nigeria Educational Research Council in this assignment was enormous.

The necessity to disengage NBAIS from the Institute of Education of ABU Zaria became apparent sequel to the National Council on Education approval of its activities in January 2011. The Board submitted its organogram and draft law to the Vice-Chancellor who raised a team to study them and make recommendations. Appreciable progress has been made in this direction as the high-powered committee, headed by the Deputy Vice-Chancellor of the institution, submitted its report to the Vice-Chancellor a reasonable while ago.

A veritable vistas of opportunity offered itself to the NBAIS with a keen interest of the Federal Government through the Federal Ministry of Education in the Almajiri education programme as noted before. The more the pupils and students of this system pursued their learning, the more the functions of NBAIS will be apposite. This is because of the clear synergy between the twin roles of teaching and learning sponsored by the Federal Government and monitoring as well as certification of the products embarked upon by the NBAIS.

It was realised that a frontier of the NBAIS zonal coordination should be extended to cover the entire nation. Thus, in addition to the existing four zonal offices, which covered the entire 19 northern states of Nigeria, two additional zones were created, one of which was located in Ibadan to cover the states of the south-west of the River Niger and another in Enugu to cover its southeast.

The task of carrying forward the advocacy on the activities was embarked upon with determined efforts. There was the nationwide one in 2010 followed by the institutional one held at Sokoto later in the same year. While not resting on our oars, the present national conference was organised.

About a year ago, the stakeholders of NBAIS from every nook and cranny of Nigeria met here in the auditorium of the ABU Postgraduate School to take some decisions on the way forward. The resolutions were sent to the Vice-Chancellor of ABU on the basis of which the Disengagement Committee was set up. The outcome of this is as a matter of urgency being awaited.

### **Action Required**

It is significant to note that there are still major national hurdles to be covered on which the support of all lovers of learning and believers in the intellectual legacy left by the family of Usmanu Dan Fodio and his successors are seriously required. The feedback from the Vice-Chancellor should be processed to the Honourable Minister of Education who will seek the endorsement of the Federal Executive Council after which it will be transmitted to the National Assembly as a Bill to be enacted for it to assume a fresh legal entity like other examining bodies.

The commitment of all, especially from all the proprietors of NBAIS schools most of whom are governments of most northern states and all others who can carry forward the advocacy on NBAIS to the lawmakers at the National Assembly.

## **Conclusion**

One concluding remark is that there is no gainsaying the fact that the good work started with best of intention and total commitment by Sir Ahmadu Bello and his cabinet on sowing NBAIS as though a mustard seed has blossomed and it is well nigh an oak of a tree. The wisdom of transferring the NBAIS to the Institute of Education, ABU Zaria during the reign of General Yakubu Gowon as military Head of State and the then Colonel Hassan Katsina as Governor was a well guided decision. The role of NBAIS elder sister, the Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, by acting in loco parentis to the former is an indelible mark left on the sand of time. The rest of the journey through the Federal Executive Council to the National Assembly should not be treated with levity or with mental laziness. All praise is due to Allah in the beginning and now.