

4

The Development of *ʿjami* Literature

The growth of writing in this form has very often been a process by which speakers of vernacular languages, in contact with the written foreign language, appropriated it to transcribe their own language. In Western Europe, Latin was for a long time the language of learning par excellence. Towards the end of the Middle Ages it was relegated to second rank by the European vernacular languages. For example, before 1500, 77 per cent of the books printed in Western Europe were written in Latin (Anderson 1991:18). Then, between 1500 and 1600, aided by the development of printing, particularly in vernacular languages, between 150 and 200 million books were published, the majority in the vernacular, which gradually acquired the status of scholarly languages (Anderson 1991:33-34).

Arabic has been for many of the Islamized peoples the equivalent of Latin for the peoples of Western Europe, *mutatis mutandis*. Learned people in the Islamized world not only learnt Arabic and contributed to Arab intellectual history, but they appropriated the Arabic characters in order to promote their own languages. There is virtually no region which has historically been under Islamic influence that has not adopted the Arabic alphabet for transcribing non-Arabic languages. The languages transcribed in *ʿjami* are as varied as some Slavic languages, Spanish, Persian, Turkish, Urdu, Swahili, Hebrew, Berber, Malay, Afrikaans, but also many African languages. As well as the consonants based on Arabic, *ʿjami* has, based on altered Arabic letters, created consonants to render sounds that are unknown in classical Arabic.

The research underway on the heritage of the manuscripts shows that the use of *ʿjami* has been widespread in sub-Saharan Africa. Many of the manuscripts that could have given us an idea of the intellectual production in *ʿjami* have been lost because of the poor state in which they were conserved (Kane 1994; Knappert 1990). Nevertheless, it is possible to find, in languages as diverse as Wolof, Hausa, Fulani, Mande, Songhai and particularly Swahili, writings in *ʿjami* that serve not

only as the language of correspondence, but also as the language of learning in which treatises and poems were written. However, it is mostly a devotional literature (Knappert 1990:116). Sometimes it is a translation of Arabic writings, for example the *Burda*⁷ which was translated into Fulani by Shaykh Abou Sa'adu (Knappert 1990:116). In central Sudan, there is a considerable literature in *ʿjami*, which dates mainly from the beginning of the eighteenth century. This intellectual tradition, inherited from the Sokoto Caliphate, developed greatly in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Thanks to John Hunwick (1995:86-113), there is a reference source for these texts and authors of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, both in the Arabic language and in the Hausa and Fulani variants of *ʿjami* (Hunwick 1995, 2002).

In his *History of Hausa Islamic Verses*, Hiskett (1975), one of the greatest specialists in the Hausa language, which is spoken by 40 million people, mainly in northern Nigeria and in southern Niger, classifies the themes of the *ʿjami* verse literature into eight categories (Knappert 1990:123-124):

- i. Writings about death and resurrection, the interrogations that the dead undergo in the grave, reward and punishment, and the day of judgement. This group of themes is included in the category of *waaʿi* (preaching) and *zūbūdi* (asceticism);
- ii. Panegyrics of the Prophet (*madibi an-nabi*) and sometimes praises of other saints;
- iii. Didactic explanations regarding the attributes of God and some basic principles of Muslim theology (*tawhidi*);
- iv. Writings on the precepts of Islamic law and concerning personal behaviour, particularly prayer, ablutions, successions (*fikihi*);
- v. The biography of the Prophet Muhammad and his companions. This literature also recounts the miracles attributed to the Prophet (*sira*);
- vi. Chronicles concerning the history of the region (*tarikhi*);
- vii. Writings on astrology (*ilmīn nujūmī*) and the evaluation of auspicious days for undertaking projects (*hisabi*), calculations. There is abundant literature on this subject which shows how popular it is, not only in Nigeria but in West Africa as a whole;
- viii. Texts of a political nature and sometimes invocations (this category is essentially secular).

The Fodiawa authors knew Arabic, as well as the Hausa and Fulani variants of *ʿjami*. Their writings in Arabic were aimed at a public that knew classical Arabic, but their writings in Fulani and Hausa targeted a larger audience which had not mastered Arabic. This pedagogical endeavour aimed at explaining notions such

as law, theology and the eschatology of Islam to most of the population who were thus informed about the debates going on in Caliphate literary society. As mentioned earlier, the most famous Fodiawa were Uthman Dan Fodio, Abdullahi Dan Fodio, Muhammadu Bello, but above all the daughter of Bello, Nana Asma’u (1793-1864). In a sub-title of the book written about her, Jean Boyd describes Asma’u as a teacher, a poet and an Islamic leader. It should also be added that she was a mother and a wife who, despite the many constraints of these different responsibilities and despite having lived in precarious and insecure conditions, composed an impressive number of writings in Arabic and *ʿjami* (Fulani and Hausa). Her writings cover a broad range of fields, from women in society to women and the cult of possession (*bori*), history, eschatology, politics, theology, the Caliphate and idealism (Boyd 1989:126). Thanks to Boyd and Mack (1997), we now have the originals and translations into English of the complete works of Nana Asma’u (Boyd and Mack 1997), accompanied by critical notes, commentaries and glossaries so that these texts can be seen in their political, historical and literary contexts.

In northern Nigeria, a school has been established based on the work of Hiskett and the researchers whom he trained and who have played an important role in studying Hausa verses. In addition to his above-mentioned *History of Hausa Islamic Verse*, Hiskett is the author of an anthology of political verses that reviews and analyzes six poems that teach us much about political life in northern Nigeria (Hiskett 1977). Among them figure the works of Mudi Sipkin, born in 1930, and founding member of the Northern Elements Progressive Union of Northern Nigeria. Written in the early 1950s, this Hausa poem by Sipkin entitled *Arewa Jumburiyya kawai* in Hausa (The North can only be a Republic) was in response to a poem entitled *Arewa Jumburiyya ko mulkiyya* (The North, a Republic or a Monarchy?) by a member of his party, Saad Zungur, who was also inspired by the confrontation between politicians from the north and the south on the future of Nigeria, at the time of the constitutional conference held in Ibadan in 1950 (Hiskett 1977:8).

Another important work proceeding from what one can perhaps call the ‘Hiskett school’ is that of Abdulkadir Dangambo. In two volumes of almost 800 pages, this thesis was defended at the School of Oriental and African Studies at London University in 1980 and is devoted to *wakokin waaʿzi* (sermons in verse). Like the panegyrics (*wakokin yaboo*) these sermons in verse constitute one of the main literary categories in Hausa. The material discussed in the thesis covers the period from 1800 to 1970 and constitutes a critical study of the form, content, language and style of the poems belonging to the sermon category.

Also from the Hiskett school and worthy of mention is the thesis defended by Abdullahi Bayero Yahaya at the Department of Nigerian Languages and

Culture of Bayero University in 1983. This is dedicated to a Hausa poet called al-Hajj Bello Yahaya who was trained both in English and Arabic and Islamic studies. Inspired by the beggars who recited the poems of Uthman Dan Fodio in Arabic and Hausa, Bello Yahaya composed poems in Hausa on numerous subjects. He wrote political poems in support of the Northern People's Congress, a party dominated by northern Nigeria in the 1950s and 1960s (Yahaya 1983:7). The sociological and psychological impact of the economic and technological transformations during the colonial period reflected in these poems makes fascinating reading. His poem *Wakar Reluwe* (Song of the Railway) is constructed on the Arab metre *mutaqarab* and opens as follows:

Ina gode Allahu mai yau da gobe

[Praise be to God to whom today and tomorrow belong]

Das sanya Hausa cikin reluwe

[For including the Hausa among the users of the train]

Technological progress, far from shaking people's faith, has reinforced it insofar as they first consider that this progress is a blessing that God has bestowed upon them. Al-hajj Bello Yahaya is also the author of many poems about the transformation of social relationships in the colonial era and the emergence of waged labour, as well as praise for the Prophet Muhammad and sermons in verse. Apart from the metre inspired from Arabic metrics, the style of Bello's poems places his work in the Islamic library.

In addition to the development of *ajami* which is an evidence of African agency, there are other types of knowledge inspired by Arabic and Islamic influence in black Africa. Among these forms of knowledge is an exoteric component which links African Islam to the scholarly tradition of classical Islam, as well as an esoteric component that situates this Islam in the everyday concerns of the population, including those who are not Muslim.