

## PERSPECTIVES ON THE COLLECTION AND PRESERVATION OF ARABIC AND AJAMI MANUSCRIPTS IN NIGERIA

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### Abstract

*This paper highlights the relevance and importance of Arabic and Ajami manuscripts collection and preservation as literary source materials for development through teaching, learning and research. The paper identifies five perspectives on collecting and preserving Arabic and Ajami manuscripts in Nigeria. The first perspective concerns the relevance of the manuscripts to teaching, learning and research, which prompted governments, Islamic scholars and researchers to engage in the collection and preservation of these resources. The second perspective refers to the period when Nigeria became a single political unit in 1914 when the need for account books and treasury records arose. The third perspective relates to the period when both the colonial administrations in 1948 in Lagos and the seat of the colonial administration in Kaduna in 1950 realized the need to preserve Nigeria's historical records. The fourth perspective focuses on the period when veteran and erudite historians put forward a proposal on the need to "save what can be saved" of the historical records in the country before it was too late. The fifth perspective could refer to the period when some indigenous art teachers, historians, and scholars thought of the need to reconstruct the history of the Nigerian people's cultures and civilization. This resulted in the publication of their recoveries and findings for the advancement of teaching and learning. Consequently, this led to the establishment of the Northern History Research Scheme at the Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria. The paper concluded that the collection and preservation of Arabic and Ajami manuscripts is an effort to transmit knowledge, cultures, values, and skills to society. In order to ensure the effective preservation of this invaluable national cultural heritage, it is recommended, among others, that the public repositories of Arabic and Ajami manuscripts should exploit appropriate Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) in the management of these special resources.*

**Keywords:** Collection, Preservation, Arabic and Ajami Manuscripts, Teaching, Learning and knowledge

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### Introduction

The main thrust behind discourse on the perspectives on the collection and preservation of Arabic and Ajami manuscripts in Nigeria is for the understanding of Nigeria's scholarly and Arabic and Ajami heritage by the indigenous scholars and intellectuals who

dedicated themselves to the development of knowledge. The collection and preservation of accumulated wisdom in a nation is the responsibility of all the stakeholders responsible for nation-building and the development of society. The discourse, however, will serve as a clue towards understanding the efforts made on the collection and preservation of Arabic and Ajami manuscripts as source materials essential for the development of new knowledge.

The collection and preservation of the Arabic and Ajami manuscripts are relevant and important to the socio-political, economic, and administrative processes for good governance and a better life for society. However, the discourse is within the literary considerations for the collection and preservation of these resources for onward transmission of the knowledge contained in the manuscripts through the provision of access, retrieval and use. The discourse narrates the various literary perspectives that led to the collection and preservation of the Arabic and Ajami manuscripts in Nigeria. Understanding literary perspectives on the collection and preservation of Arabic and Ajami manuscripts will educate and add more understanding to the existence of the resources and where they can be accessed and retrieved before their extinction. More so, it will trigger inquiry and further research on other locations where the resources can be found, their owners or custodians and the content of the resources for the purpose of the development of knowledge.

The collection and preservation of the sum total knowledge that exists within any community is great for the transmission of values, skills, and know-how to that society, as well as a means of deriving new forms of knowledge from old knowledge. This is an outcome and or the by-product of the literary ability of the people in the community, as they have the ability to read and write and keep their literary outputs. Unesco (2022) literacy is the ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate, compute and use printed and written materials associated with varying contexts in life. However, according to the National Council of English Teachers (2020), literacy is the way we interact with the world around us and how we shape it and are shaped by it. It is how we communicate with others via reading and writing, but also by speaking, listening, and creating. It is how we articulate our experience in the world and declare. The Arabic and Ajami manuscripts are testimonies to the intellectual capability of the people of Nigeria, particularly northern Nigeria, who are classified as members of the literate societies who can read, write, speak and articulate their experience. Over the years, they have had the capability to preserve their literary heritage, historical antecedents, and ideas in the form of Arabic and Ajami manuscripts. This allowed them to participate in the production of new ideas of knowledge and participate in promoting world civilization and scholarship. This is of great concern to the host of academia from all fields of knowledge and for the rejuvenation and development of any society involved.

The Arabic and Ajami manuscript resources indicate, reflect and represent the intellectual heritage of the people of Nigeria. Arabic manuscripts are those manuscripts written in Arabic with Arabic characters, while Ajami manuscripts are those manuscripts written in any other language using Arabic characters. Haidara (2007) maintained that the manuscript is the collective memory of our ancestors, proof of their identity, the extract of

their thoughts, the summary of their experiences, a collection of all their innovative and creative works, a legacy filled with tremendous gifts and abundant benefits. The manuscripts are rich in thought and scientific content, symbolizing the constructive role played by our predecessors and the undeniable contribution they made to the growth of Islamic civilization.

It has been established through many studies that the Arabic and Ajami manuscripts in Nigeria have covered numerous fields of scholarship and are sufficient to influence societal development and communication of ideas, knowledge and innovations. Because of this, interventions need to be put in place to prolong the life span of these information resources from generation to generation. Thousands of these manuscripts are believed to be with their diverse owners in Nigeria, and some are under the care of public institutions. The Arabic and Ajami manuscripts as intellectual resources covered a wide range of subject disciplines dealing with all aspects and perspectives of the human endeavour; this is possible due to the fact that the concept of knowledge in Islam is always within the belief and total submission to all what Allah instructed His creatures, through His book. However, the Arabic and Ajami manuscripts in Nigeria, by their content, deal with both religious and non-religious subjects as information resources. They contain the literary heritage of the people of the area; otherwise, the wisdom of the nation needs to be preserved. They include official records generated or created in the course of administrative transactions by the governments, minutes of meetings, official and private correspondences, business records, rituals, incantations, language, politics, government legislations, ethics, court proceedings and judgments records, inheritance records, divorce letters, genealogical records, records of Kundi and Charms, Diary etc. (Dogara, 2021). The traditional Muslim scholarship in West Africa, as elsewhere, used to involve fields of knowledge outside the scope of narrowly defined Islamic studies. The West African Muslim scholars produced a number of Arabic works relating to medicine, philosophy, architecture, town planning and public administration (Bunza, 2012).

### **Considerations for the Collection and Preservation of Arabic and Ajami Manuscripts in Nigeria**

Collection and preservation of Arabic and Ajami manuscripts in Nigeria as recorded information resources is an activity which was started by the Islamic scholars for many hundreds years ago. From chronological and historical perspectives, the Arabic and Ajami manuscripts have four perspectives to be considered in their collection and preservation as information resources.

The earliest manuscripts in circulation in Muslim countries were copies of the Glorious Qur'an, the recording of al-Hadith and books on Arabic grammar that relate to semantics, phonetics and syntax. During that period under discussion, manuscripts were found in the hands of scholars, students, and leaders in the areas. The leaders consider the documents as official property of the emirates, as they contain both religious and secular issues, which they refer to as guidance in running the affairs of their emirate or kingdom. Manuscripts from the official level are kept under the custody of the Viziers and Scribes in the Emirates as official

documents, while at the private level, they are kept by the concerned scholars and their students for teaching and learning. Galadanci (2007) Furthermore, this became possible because of the encouragement given to and the efforts made for seeking and acquiring knowledge and disseminating it; the early Muslim leaders and Ulamas endeavoured to collect and preserve those documents for the benefit of students and the public at large. This period could be regarded as the first historical perspective for the collection and preservation of Arabic literature in the form of manuscripts for teaching and learning as well as resource guides for administering the emirates by the leaders at that time.

At that period, the collection and preservation of Arabic and Ajami manuscripts, other pamphlets and books on religious issues were of more concern to the scholars, their students and families who formed the community of the owners and custodians of the resources, who could be found scattered in all over the Muslim communities in northern Nigeria. Muslih (2006) explained that the bulk of Arabic and Ajami manuscripts of Nigeria were produced for the purpose of teaching and learning Islam. Many Arabic and Ajami manuscripts complement the need for an influx of enthusiastic men and women, old and young, who were eager to learn how to read, write, and apply the teachings of Islam. This influenced the establishment of two schooling systems among the Muslim communities in the country for teaching and learning of Islamic religion. Dogara (2021), the structure of this schooling system can be described as (a) the Qur'anic school (*Makarantar allo*), otherwise called tablet school, and (b) the Makarantar ilmi (advance school), otherwise advanced level. The '*Makarantar ilmi*' is also known as '*karatun Zaur*', a school system where students who attained advanced levels in Islamic education from all nooks and corners gather in *Mallam*'s house to seek and acquire knowledge of Islam on a variety of subjects and branches of Islam, such as jurisprudence (Fiqh), Qur'anic exegesis Tafsir, science of Hadith, mathematics *ilm al-hisab* e.t.c. Through this schooling system, many scholars graduated, and they later generated lots of scholarly resources in the form of Arabic and Ajami manuscripts as output from what they learned out of teaching and learning Islamic principles.

During that period, both the governments and scholars in Kanem-Borno and Hausaland collected and preserved the Arabic and Ajami manuscripts. The scholars and students collected and kept the manuscripts for the purpose of teaching and learning, While the governments collected and preserved the manuscripts for both religious and secular purposes from the records they generated or received in the cause of administrative transactions within and outside the emirate. Collection and preservation of Arabic and Ajami manuscripts and their production among the literate Muslim communities in Nigeria were vigorously enhanced and motivated by the leaders who accepted the religion and adopted it as an official religion of the state or the kingdom they ruled prior to the Sokoto Jihad. This activity was sustained up to the colonial era in the country.

The second perspective on the need for the collection and preservation of Arabic and Ajami manuscripts in the country was influenced by the need of the colonial administration to collect and preserve related records of historical value and administrative value in Nigeria

when the country became a single political unit in 1914. At that period, the intention of the British administration was to collect and preserve manuscripts on the basis of the value of the account books and treasury records, the intention attached to the motive was purely attached its objective to the financial administrative process of the Government. As such, manuscripts related to the history of the different regions and peoples in the country and those with administrative value were explored and collected. Such manuscripts could be found in the National Archives and Museums in Nigeria and abroad.

The third perspective on the collection and preservation of Arabic and Ajami in the country could be regarded as when the British Colonial Office in Lagos in 1948 passed another circular on the need for preserving Nigeria's historical records, which was deemed as very important to the Government. Subsequent to this circular of 1948, in 1950, the British Colonial Administration in Nigeria, from the seat of the Northern Regional Government at Kaduna, also dispatched a similar circular to collect all the Arabic manuscripts from all nooks and corners of the region. In this effort, the manuscripts collected from the southern part of the country were stored at the University College Ibadan, while those collected within the northern region were located in Lugard House in Kaduna, now the Kaduna State House Assembly.

The objectives behind these efforts were that the British colonial administration in Lagos and Kaduna believed in the extraction of value purpose, as it is believed that the Arabic and Ajami manuscripts and other records of information have some valuable implications for application for different administrative purposes and research. These efforts made by the colonial administration for the collection and preservation of records and Arabic manuscripts could be regarded as the foundation for the establishment of the National Archives in the country. Alegbeleye (2008), consciously or unconsciously, said that these initiatives by the colonial governments could be regarded as an attempt or part of the considerations for the establishment of a national archive in the nation in disguise, which can never be escaped. In his remarks, Nasidi (2022) this effort resulted in the establishment of the Centre for Arabic Documentation, Institute of African Studies, University of Ibadan in 1963, Jos Museum in 1954 and National Archives Kaduna in 1957

The fourth perspective on the collection and preservation of Arabic and Ajami manuscripts in Nigeria could be married to the effort made by Dr. Kenneth O. Dike. A veteran and erudite scholar of history, who, out of critical thinking and sense-making of his environment as a teacher single handedly put forward a proposal before the colonial Government on how to "save what can be saved" of the historical records in the country before it was too late, due to their terrible condition. After due consideration of Dike's proposal by the colonial administration, a Public Records Office was established at the University College Ibadan, and Dike was appointed as the country's supervisor of public records. His appointment was on a part-time basis for a period of three years and was connected with the collection and preservation of "ancient documents" in Nigeria that are of public interest. One of his so many achievements in the Record office Hamman and



Muhammad (2010) reported that by 1954, W.E.N. Kensdale collected Arabic manuscripts from various parts of Northern Nigeria and deposited them in the Library of the University of Ibadan, where the Public Record Office was located.

The fifth perspective on the collection and preservation of Arabic and Ajami manuscripts in the country could be attributed to the effort made by some members of the community of prominent Indigenous professionals' art teachers, as well as historians. These professionals put their heads together and made the dream of reconstructing the history of Nigerian people's culture and civilization come true, causing publicity for such recoveries and findings for the advancement of teaching and learning. It is worth noting that Dr Dike was also among this patriotic group of academicians, who, in their efforts, dedicated themselves to holding seminars and conferences and initiating research at the postgraduate level on the studies of Arabic and Ajami manuscripts. All these were for the purpose of reconstructing the history of the Nigerian people and culture from distortion and misperception of the West. And to make the world of scholarship aware of the Arabic and Ajami manuscript resources as the basic data that contained the history of the people of Nigeria, their land, as well as their capability in documenting their historical antecedent and ideas in the form of the manuscript.

It was reported by Hamman and Muhammad (2010) that between 1959 to mid-1960s Professor Abdullahi Smith, M.Hisket, M.A.Alhaji and Murray D.Last traversed various provinces in Northern Nigeria collecting Arabic manuscripts, which were filmed in Ibadan. Subsequently, with establishment of Northern History Research Scheme in Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, many of these manuscripts were microfilmed and sent down to the Scheme in ABU.

Out of this struggle in the year 1960, Dike and Abdullahi Smith specifically initiated a laudable project on the historical studies of Nigeria and its diverse people, and they established the Northern History Research Scheme (NHRS). The Scheme was designed to document and preserve primary source materials, particularly Arabic and Ajami manuscripts, for the study of the History of Northern Nigeria. According to the First Interim Report on the Scheme (1966), the objectives of the Scheme are to promote the growth of information resources on the history of Northern Nigeria and its people, to procure relevant records for research purposes, preservation, dissemination and computerization for easy access by the public, and to recruit and train personnel to manage the collections of the Scheme effectively, and to meet the needs of advanced researchers. In addition, the Scheme is responsible for the recovery of Arabic script literature of Northern Nigeria. It was among the first public repositories to document manuscript resources because of their significance as sources of information, knowledge, and cultural knowledge of the African past.

Subsequent to the establishment of the Scheme in Ahmadu Bello University, various centres and bureaus were established by some academic institutions and state governments in the country as Nigeria's primary documentation centres. These centres and bureaus share the same common goal and objective, which is "to recover the past of peoples, cultures, and civilization, to establish and maintain a comprehensive depository for the preservation of

manuscripts in all fields of learning relating to the area of their establishment. These centres and bureaus are the Centre for Historical Research and Documentation, Arewa House Kaduna, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria. Centre for Trans – Saharan Studies University, of Maiduguri, Centre for Islamic Studies, Usmanu Dan Fodiyo University, Sokoto. Centre for Arabic Documentation, Institute of African Studies, University of Ibadan; the Kenneth Dike Library, University of Ibadan and Waziri Junaidu History and Culture Bureau, Sokoto.

In line with the collection and preservation of Arabic and Ajami manuscripts many studies were conducted in some departments of the Universities in the country at Undergraduate, Masters and Ph.D. levels; such of these departments are History, Library and Information Sciences, Arabic Languages and Hausa.

The perspective on the collection and preservation of Arabic and Ajami manuscripts in Nigeria is multi-faceted, and cognizance of their relevance to both religious and secular purposes in society made it imperative for their collection and preservation. Their collection and preservation under whatever circumstances were necessitated were due to the fact that the resources were being neglected at the hands of their owners and custodians. Historical records in government offices, in greater numbers, were found exposed to decay and destruction, and some were damaged by insects and water. The resources are instrumental in the construction of the history of Northern Nigeria as well as for academic research and cultural and religious excellence as their subjects' matter/contents encompass all activities of mankind. The subject coverage of Arabic and Ajami manuscripts is not limited to only history or religion in their intellectual contents; they also treat natural and human science subjects such as astronomy, geography, medicine, politics, and pharmacology. In a nutshell, the collection and preservation of Arabic and Ajami manuscripts in Nigeria is for the expansion of ideas as the basis for knowledge creation and its distribution.

### **Conclusion**

From the foregoing, it is concluded that the collection and preservation of Arabic and Ajami manuscripts in Nigeria, are part of the efforts of transmission of knowledge, values, skills, cultures, and civilization of the society. Hence the need for proper preservation of these rare and invaluable information resources for easy access and utilization for teaching, learning and research across the diverse fields of knowledge.

### **Recommendations**

The following recommendations are proffered for the benefit of the public Arabic and Ajami manuscripts repositories in Nigeria.

1. The public repositories should exploit the benefits of modern Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) in the preservation and management of Arabic and Ajami manuscript resources.
2. Government in Nigeria, through educational institutions, should organize sensitization campaigns on the importance and need for effective management of Arabic and Ajami manuscripts by their custodians or owners, such as institutions,

archives, families, traditional rulers, as well as Islamic teachers, scholars, and researchers at both local and national levels.

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