

DIDACTICISM IN THE ARABIC POETICS OF SHAYKH YA'QŪB AL-MUKHTĀR (1890-1965) OF NIGERIA

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Introduction

Of those renowned scholars was Shaykh Ya'qūb b. Imam of Ikirun, the author of reputable publications. (Abubakri, 1972:198)

Shaykh Ya'qūb of Ikirun...a forgotten Yoruba scholar. (Ogunbiyi, 1999:111)

This paper is prefaced by the above quotations, which might appear contradictory, yet provide us with the bases for this study. If Shaykh Ya'qūb was such an erudite scholar with refereed publications as noted by Abubakri (1972), he could not have been forgotten, as his writings, which featured prominently in the curricula of the traditional Islamic centres in Yorubaland, are still being read even in modernized Islamic centres nowadays. The view of Ogunbiyi (1999) could, therefore, be premised on the fact that though Shaykh Ya'qūb was one of the prominent cultivators of Arabic scholarship in Yorubaland, south-western Nigeria, researchers and literary critics have not paid him enough attention in their research efforts.

It has been observed that Arabic scholars of Yorubaland belong to a number of categories: Of them are teachers who ensure the continuity of Islamic education, Imāms for Jum'ah and Rātibi mosques, preachers, calligraphers, Ṣūfī leaders and writers (Folorunsho, 2003:77). This paper focuses on the last category with a view to examining the contributions of the 'Ulamā' to didactic literature, discussing one of them, Shaykh Ya'qūb al-Mukhtār as a case study.

The thematic range of the Arabic literary compositions among the Yoruba 'Ulamā' embraces the lyrical (*al-ghinā'ī*), the didactic (*al-ta'līmī*) and the epistolary (*al-murāsalaḥ*) (Bidmus 1972:97). An observation of these writings shows the didactic writings as consuming the lion's share. Of the greatest contributors to didacticism in Yorubaland is the subject of this paper, to whom little attention is paid by literary critics. This paper examines, albeit briefly, the life of this great scholar and his works as a way of filling the vacuum created by the paucity of research on the forerunners in the field of didacticism in the Arabic literary circle of Yorubaland, a group to which Shaykh Ya'qūb belonged.

Arabic Didactic Writings in Yorubaland

Didacticism, according to Holman (1972) connotes instructiveness in a literary work, one of the purposes of which appears to be to give guidance, particularly in moral,

ethical or religious matters. From this definition, it can be deduced that a didactic writing is such a literary piece that is aimed at imparting or teaching a lesson. We can safely submit, therefore, that the Arabic writings consisting of purely religious themes, such as *wa'z* (exhortation), *ḥikmah* (wisdom, aphorism), *tārīkh* (historical exposition), and *ta'līm* (instructions on aspects of Islam or Arabic language) are didactic as they are basically intended to put a certain teaching across to the readers.

Didactic writings enjoy the pride of place in the Arabic works of Nigerian 'Ulamā'. In fact, Kobi-Bauchi (2001:132) has drawn our attention to the preponderance of didacticism within the collections of the Arabic writings of Nigerian authorship. In justification of the magnitude of didacticism in these writings, Hunwick submits that:

The Islamic teaching tradition is a strong one in Nigeria and the need for texts for students was always great. Importing manuscript copies from North Africa or Egypt was expensive...Evidently responding to local needs, teachers then made summaries of certain of these imported texts;... they also versified some of them using the didactic metre (*al-Rajaz*)... to facilitate rote learning. These versifications were sometimes amplified by later generations. (Hunwick, 1977)

It is pertinent to observe that the production of didactic writings began in the 17th century in Hausaland. Of the surviving works of that century is *Majzarat al-fityān*, a didactic poem consisting forty-eight lines based on the Rajaz metre of the Arabic prosody (Ahmed, 1989:59). The poem was composed by the celebrated Muḥammad al-Kashnāwī best known by his sobriquet, Ibn al-Sabbāgh.

The pre-19th century Arabic literature and that of the *Jihād* of Ibn Fūdī in the 19th century concentrated mainly on didactic works with religious undertones. The 19th century witnessed an upsurge in the production of didactic works in prose and in verse with the emergence of the reformist Fulani scholars: Shaykh 'Uthmān b. Fūdī (d. 1817), his brother 'Abd Allāh (d. 1826) and his son Muḥammad Bello (d. 1837) on the Arabic literary scene. According to Yahya (2003:79), it was only towards the end of the 20th century that Nigerian writers of Arabic began to show increasing interest in other areas of literature like short stories, novels, drama and non-religious poetry.

The contribution of Yoruba 'Ulamā' to didactic literature was a by-product of the textbooks available for their studies and their callings as religious scholars and teachers. Also notable was the influence of the literary heritage of the 19th century Hausaland on these 'Ulamā'. The main subject matter of their didactic writings is the religion of Islam presented in different perspectives. Abubakre (2004:317) describes Ahmad b. Abubakri as a forerunner in the cultivation of didacticism in Yorubaland with his famous work entitled, *Ilṭiqāt al-mutūn min khamsah funūn*. Popularly known as Omo Ikokoro (1870-1935), he was an 'ālim (religious scholar) from Ilorin whose itinerary covered the larger parts of Yorubaland. Also notable was Shaykh Ya'qūb al-Mukhtār to whom scholars like Abubakri (1972, Al-Ilūrī (1986) and Ogunbiyi (1999) have paid glowing tributes for his significant contributions to didactic literature in Yorubaland.

Shaykh Ya'qūb al-Mukhtār: A Brief Historical Account

Shaykh Ya'qūb was born in Ikirun, south-western Nigeria in the year 1890. His father Muḥammad Mukhtār was one of the veterans of the internecine Yoruba wars between Ibadan and its opponents which ended with the intervention of the British from Lagos in 1893 (Ogunbiyi, 1999). His father fought on the side of Ibadan and returned to Ikirun after the end of the war. Hajara, the mother of Shaykh Ya'qūb was from Iresaadu near Ogbomoso in the Oyo State of Nigeria.

He spent his early years under the tutelage of his uncle 'Abd al-Raḥmān who became the fourth Chief Imam in Ikirun. His education started in the pattern of his contemporaries, with the reading of the Holy Qur'ān from his uncle. He later studied under Shaykh Abī Aḥmad al-Tijānī Muḥammad Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn popularly regarded as Alfa Agba in Ikirun (al-Mukhtār, 1953). While this scholar was the *Mufasssir* (Qur'ānic exegete) in Ikirun, Shaykh Ya'qūb served as his *Ajanasi* (lieutenant). This role actually prepared him for assumption to the office of Mufasssir conceded to him by his teacher Shaykh Abī Aḥmad al-Tijānī Muḥammad Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn in 1944. Al-Ilūrī (1986) claims that Shaykh Ya'qūb also studied under some other scholars including Mustafa Serubawon and Sālim Afandi, a Lebanese resident in Ajase (Republic of Benin).

He travelled far and wide both in Nigeria and other West African countries. He returned to Ikirun in 1940 on the invitation of Akinrun Kosamotu, the traditional ruler of his birthplace. On his arrival, he established an Arabic school at the central mosque and being a well-versed scholar, the school received a large number of students. He pioneered a formal Arabic education school in Ikirun (Ogunbiyi, 1999). The school was attended by residents of Ikirun and also by students from the neighbouring towns and gradually, his fame extended to various parts of Yorubaland. The school, which was later converted to a Muslim primary school, was named Nawar-ud-Deen Qur'ānic School (Adesina, 1983).

Oke (1990) notes that Shaykh Ya'qūb took much interest in the teaching of Arabic and Islamic studies. He was always busy reading and teaching the holy Qur'ān from dawn till sunset. He taught such reputable Nigerian scholars as Shaykh Shittu Onilewura, the late Chief Imam of Osogbo and Chairman of League of Imam and Alfas in Osun State in Nigeria during his life time, Alfa Ghazali Isale-Koto (from Ilorin) and Alfa Yusuf Akinpelu.

In 1948, according to Adesina (1983), Christian missionary schools in Ikirun converted a large number of Muslim children to Christianity before they were offered admission. Shaykh Ya'qūb felt concerned and decided to convert his Qur'ānic school to a primary school for the benefit of Muslim children. This was the first Muslim missionary school in Ikirun and her environs and it provided the Muslim children the opportunity to acquire western education without abandoning their Islamic identities. At inception, the school suffered financially but through the untiring efforts of Shaykh Ya'qūb, the school gained a strong footing. He was instrumental to the introduction of Nawar-ud-Deen Society to the neighbouring cities including Iree, Iragbiji, Aagba and Inisa, where these branches also established missionary schools.

According to Oke (1990), Shaykh Ya'qūb initiated the formation of the Association of Imams in Ikirun and the formation of Arabic Teachers Association to protect the rights of Arabic teachers in public schools.

His Didactic Literary Works

To meet the almost insatiable demand of Muslims for reading printed works in Arabic in replacement for time-consuming copied texts, Shaykh Ya'qūb took to selling books in the course of his travels. This probably gave him an idea of rare books that were in high demand in local Islamic schools, which he later edited and republished. The greatest of the opportunities afforded by his travels was his contacts with the Egyptian bookseller and publisher, Mustafā al-Bābī al-Ḥalabī who published seven of his works (Reichmuth and Abubakre, 1995).

Generally speaking, all the Arabic works of Ya'qūb consisting mainly of annotated editions of popular Islamic poems and prose which were widely used in Arabic schools and are still being used till today are didactic. Our efforts to locate the original copies of these works, which could have assisted us in assessing the extent of Ya'qūb's contribution proved futile. However, as an editor, he probably omitted some details considered unnecessary for his audience and made other relevant additions. He succeeded in establishing himself as one of those who contributed mostly to Arabic literature in Yorubaland in the twentieth century, (Folorunsho, 2007:39).

Though the task of editing these works did not qualify him as the original author, nevertheless, the significance of his contribution lies in preserving these valuable works from going into abeyance. The works are briefly reviewed as follows:

Mawā'iz balighah min Zabūr Sayyidinā Dāwūd

The work contains some popular *wa'z* (admonition) texts, arranged in thirty chapters. Shaykh Ya'qūb attributed the work to Prophet Dāwūd but interestingly, the texts are actually traceable to apocryphal writings attributed to Wahb b. Munabbih, (Ogunbiyi, 1999). The work was published by Mustafā al-Bābī al-Ḥalabī in Cairo in 1936. Another edition of the work was published by al-Tijānī al-Muāḥammadī Press at Tunisia in 1956. It is of thirty-six pages. The work is didactic as it teaches doing well and refraining from evils. It is copiously used by preachers and Imams in inculcating the spirit of righteousness in their audience.

Al-Sab' al-mathānī

A short treatise of fifteen pages on *fiqh* (jurisprudence), attributed to a certain Muḥammad Abī al-Dārayn. It was published by Mustafā al-Bābī al-Ḥalabī in Cairo in 1936. It outlines what a prospective Imam is expected to know to be able to lead successfully. Whenever there was a quarrel over the imamship of any town in the area, the case would be referred to Shaykh Ya'qūb who used to test the contestants with questions drawn from this text. The contestants who got higher marks would then be chosen. The work is didactic as it contains the required intellectual background of a scholar appointable as an Imam.

Khamsūna farīdah

The work is an annotated edition of the original Arabic work of Muhammad b. Abī Bakri b. Ali on Islamic ethics. It is of sixty-four pages. It contains fifty obligatory duties of a sincere Muslim. The original work, as noted by Ogunbiyi (1999), was expanded by Ya'qūb to include verses from the Qur'ān, relevant Ḥadīth, lines of

poetry and even stories of *wa'z*. The work, which contains religious instructions interspersed with Qur'ānic quotations, was published by Muṣṭafā al-Bābī al-Ḥalabī in Cairo in 1945.

Nahy al-nāhīn

The work was originally written by Shaykh Abū Bakrī al-Zasāmī to identify and stigmatize mortal sins. The original text was greatly expanded by Shaykh Ya'qūb with appropriate materials from hadīth literature and popular *adab* stories already in use by local preachers. It was published by Muṣṭafā al-Bābī al-Ḥalabī in Cairo in 1946. Two other works are appended to *Nahy al-nāhīn*, the first is *Nabdhātun fī ihdā' thawāb al-a'māl al-ṣāliḥ li'l-amwāt* extracted from *Tahbīb al-muslimīn bikalām al-'ālamīn* of Abū 'Abd al-Qādir b. 'Alī al-Husaynī al-Adhamī. It discusses offering the reward of good deeds to the deceased. The second one is entitled *Nabdhātun fī ba'd al-bid' al-shā'i'ah*, a short treatise discussing some common innovations. It was extracted from *Usūl fī'l-bid' wal-sunnah* by Ustādh Muḥammad Aḥmad al-'Adwī. It is of forty-eight pages.

Majmū'ah al-qaṣā'id al-wa'ziyyah

The work is a collection of three major poems on religious exhortation attributed to three notable scholars. The first poem entitled *al-Qaṣīdah al-wa'ziyyah* was attributed to Ḥusām al-Dīn Abī al-Ḥusaynī 'Alī al-Wā'izī. The second poem was entitled *Qaṣīdah 'unwān al-ḥikam* and the third poem *Allāhu lī-'uddah*. It was published by Muṣṭafā al-Bābī al-Ḥalabī in Cairo in 1953. It is of twenty-four pages.

Hujjah kāfiyah wa adillah shāfiyah

The work deals with scholastic polemics on cigarette, tobacco and marijuana smoking. It also discusses the permissibility of snuff for the Muslims. The work was published probably in defence of the cigarette smoking habit of Shaykh Ya'qūb. The book is in three parts; the first being the introduction where he explains what serves as motivation for him to write on the subject. The second part is the annotated text of *Al-Munabbih al-nābiha li'l-muslimīn fī'l-'afrāh wa'l-ma'tam*, an admonition against some local funeral and wedding customs, by 'Alī b. al-Zubayr b. al-Ḥajj al-Nufawī. The third part contains the earliest text of *al-Dīn al-naṣiḥah* of Shaykh Ādam 'Abd Allāh al-Ilūrī. It calls for true Islamic practice among the people in Nigeria stressing the need for Muslim solidarity and the effective management of pilgrimage in Nigeria (Adesina, 1983). It is a work of seventy-two pages, published by Muṣṭafā al-Bābī al-Ḥalabī in Cairo in 1959.

Hidāyah al-muta'abbidīn

The work is an edited text of 'Alī al-Bāji al-Faqīh's work on the correct performance of *ṣalāt* (prayer) followed by 'Uthmān b. Fūdī's *Nūr al-albāb* on the various classes of Muslims based on the degree of their compliance with Islamic injunctions. The third part of the book is entitled *Nubdha yasīra fī ṣifāt al-'āqil wa'l-aḥmaq* extracted from a book entitled *al-Mustatraf fī kullī fann mustatraf* by Shihāb al-Dīn Muḥammad b. Aḥmad Abū 'l-Faṭh al-'Ibshīhī. It was published by Muṣṭafā al-Bābī al-Ḥalabī in Cairo in 1965. It contains seventy-eight pages.

Apart from these seven published textbooks on religious teachings, Shaykh Ya'qūb is also credited with four didactic compilations on the Arabic language. A collection of these writings is preserved on microfilm at the University of Ibadan. The texts are given the following titles: (i) *Ta'lim al-talāmīdh sabīl al-rasā'il* (MS: Ibadan (UL) 509, no. 16); (ii) *Muqarrib al-tarīq lil-mukhātibīn al-mutbada'in fī tadrīs al-lughah al-'arabiyyah* (MS: Ibadan (UL) 509, no. 16); (iii) *Ta'lim ba'd al-lughah al-'arabiyyah wa'l-'āmmiyyah ma'an* (MS: Ibadan (UL) 509, no. 17); (iv) *Ta'lim al-lughah al-'arabiyyah 'alā sabīl al-as'ila wa'l-'ajwiba mushāfahatan wa ghayrahā* (MS: Ibadan (UL) 509, no. 18).

His Style of Writing

Commenting on an aspect of the style of Ya'qūb, al-Ilūrī (1987:164) says:

Ya'qūb's style is not bad except that he mixes his comments with the original text such that the reader is unable to distinguish the root and the stem...

In spite of the above criticism, the works are noted to be free from obscure words and complex constructions. The efficiency of this scholar is evidenced in the stylistic usage of Arabic language. The works are free from unnecessary rhetorical embellishments which allows his audience to understand his ideas without hindrance.

Conclusion

This paper has discussed the participation of Yoruba 'Ulamā' in the cultivation of didacticism. The Arabic literary production of Yoruba 'Ulamā' can be broadly categorized into three—the didactic, the lyrical and the epistolary. Didactic writings from the largest of the three categories.

Shaykh Ya'qūb, the subject of this paper, was one of the Yoruba 'Ulamā' who made significant contributions to didactic writings. His works embrace both linguistic and theological studies. These works have featured prominently in the curricula of both traditional and modern Arabic/Islamic learning centres up till the present period. Considering the value of these works, it is recommended that, in addition to studying them in Arabic/Islamic centres, they should be included in the list of works being studied at both secondary and post-secondary levels of our educational system. The works should also be translated into other languages so that they may enjoy wider readership.

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