

THE ‘ILMIYYAH[†] SCHOOLS IN THE POST-INDEPENDENCE LAGOS

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Abstract

The article narrates how colonialism consigned Islamic Education to the background and how Muslims, who were the main literate population in Lagos, became uneducated due to the introduction of Western education, which they were also excluded from. The ‘*Ilmiyyah*’ schools, founded by the Muslims at a certain point, have become counter productive, as their graduates were never gainfully employed and like the *Boko Haram* (‘Western education is forbidden’) group in northern Nigeria, the proponents of the ‘*Ilmiyyah*’ schools could see nothing wrong in their mode of learning and teaching.

This paper proposes a way out of this predicament, giving examples of how Muslims in the Middle East and Europe freed themselves from the fear of indoctrination, and created an educational system that allows Muslim children to excel in both Western and traditional Islamic education.

Our intention in this contribution is to study the operation of the Modern Arabic Schools in contemporary Lagos owned by private individuals, otherwise known as ‘*ilmiyyah*’ schools. The love of the Lagos Muslims for Qur’ānic studies had been established elsewhere.¹ That love has culminated in their patronage of Qur’ānic schools, whatever their professions, which in turn has assisted the high number of Qur’ānic schools in Lagos. The state is broadly divided into five divisions namely Ikeja, Badagry, Ikorodu, Lagos and Epe (IBILE). Statistics have shown that the Lagos division has a total of 224 schools, with Ikorodu division having 105, Epe division having 87, Ikeja division having 112, and Badagry division having 65.² The ‘*ilmiyyah*’ schools are of a smaller number than this. It is necessary to start with the features of the ‘*ilmiyyah*’ schools, and then to observe the *modus operandi* of the schools vis-à-vis the administration, certification of administrators and teachers, and features of the graduates of the schools. This paper will conclude with suggestions for improvement of the operational modes of the schools.

[†] ‘*Ilmiyyah*’ schools elsewhere have been separately classified as being different from Modern Arabic Schools for the convenience of analysis. For the purpose of this paper and because of the similarities of the features of Modernized Arabic Institutions and ‘*ilmiyyah*’ schools, we have referred to the Modern Arabic Schools as ‘*ilmiyyah*’ Schools in this paper. For the other classification see Razaq D. Abubakre, *The Interplay of Arabic and Yoruba Cultures in South-Western Nigeria* (2004), Darul-Ilm Publishers, Iwo, p. 147.

In the post-independence era of Lagos, 'ilmiyyah schools developed gradually and achieved reasonable growth. There were four 'ilmiyyah schools in Lagos before independence. They were:

1. Ansar-ul-Islam Arabic school, Ojogiwa, Lagos, founded by Shaykh Kamaluddin al-Adabi in 1924.
2. Shafahudeen Arabic school (now moribund) also founded in 1924 by Alhaji Imam H. A. A. Olorunkemi, in Lagos Island.
3. Ansarullah Arabic school, founded in 1951 at Ikorodu by Alhaj Mustapha Ajagbemokeferi.
4. Markaz-ut-Ta'lim-ul-'Arabiyy, Agege, founded at Abeokuta but relocated to Agege before independence. The founder was Shaykh Adam Abdullah al-Ilori.³

In the post-independence era, three were founded between 1960 and 1969; eight in the 1970's; twenty four in the 1980's and an additional fifteen between 1990 and 2000.⁴ Barring any oversights, as of the year 2000, Lagos could boast of 54 'ilmiyyah schools, all of which run the *i'dadiyyah* (primary) and *thanawiyyah* or *tawjihiyyah* (secondary) programmes. Such a large number of 'ilmiyyah schools is a major development in educational advancement in Lagos, especially in the area of Muslim contribution to private ownership of schools. It is then apposite that we study the contribution that these schools have made to the well being of Muslims who patronise them individually and collectively.

Features of the Schools

(a) Modern Facilities

Most of these schools are situated in premises befitting schools of the modern age. Schools such as the *Markaz* at Agege, *Dar-ud-Da'wah* at Isolo, *Safwat-ul-Islamiyy* at Alakuko, and *Zumrat-ul-Adabi* at Orile Iganmu are very good examples. There are also institutions in rented premises which are also somewhat similar in standard to those mentioned above. These include *Dar-ul-Falahi* at Amukoko and *Dar-al-Is'ad* at Orile Iganmu.⁵ In most cases, those who founded these schools are also the heads who determine how the schools are run, who fills teaching positions, and who carries out particular roles.

(b) Administration of the 'Ilmiyyah Schools

It is pertinent to start with the administration of the schools. In all of these schools, the actual administration is in the hands of the proprietor, although he may have appointed assistants for specific functions. Each of these schools has a structure similar to those of *Adabiyyat Kamaliyyat* and *Markaz*, both of which had been modern 'ilmiyyah schools before independence.

Each of them has an administrative unit where both the *mudir* (director/founder) and the *Mudarisul awwal* (principal) stay with all administrative staff. They all also claim to have secretaries/registrars and bursars. One fascinating thing about the set up is that each of these officers is also a teacher in the school. It

is a clear indication that special knowledge required by the offices held is never considered before the officer is appointed to the office. Also common is the fact that an officer may be replaced without any allegation of misconduct, and another appointed without a formal interview process. This researcher observed a situation where a proprietor (or *mudir*) ordered that the bursar of his college be replaced by another teacher only on the suspicion of the bursar disclosing the income of the school to other teachers, of whom he was one. The allegation was not substantiated, nor a query or warning given to the bursar. In any case, he is still teaching in that particular college.

(c) *Qualifications of the Proprietors and the Teachers*

This is the most incommensurate aspect of our findings on these *'ilmiyyah* schools. The highest qualification of most of the directors and principals is *thanawiyyah* – Senior Secondary School Certificate and most of these schools also operate up to the senior secondary level. In fact the very few exceptions to this rule include Shaykh Musa Agboola, the proprietor of *Dar-al-Falahi*, who has a degree in Arabic and Islamic Studies from a Libyan University; Ustadh Muhammad Abbas of *Markaz-ul-'ulum*, toll gate, Lagos who has a Masters degree in Education and a Bachelor's degree in Islamic Education, both from the Lagos State University, Ojo, Lagos; Ustadh Thawban Adam Abdullah al-Ilury of *Markaz-ul-'ulum*, Otubu, Agege who has a degree in Arabic from a Saudi University in Makkah and a Master's degree from the Lagos State University.⁶

It is equally noteworthy that all members of the teaching staff also possess the *thanawiyyah* certificates except in a few cases. For example, *Dar-ud-Da'wah* used to have a graduate member of staff until recently, when he left. *Dar-al-Falahi* has a diploma holder from the Sudan and a few of the teachers of *Safwat-ul-Islamiy* and *Dar-al-Da'wah* very recently completed the Lagos State University Diploma in Arabic and Islamic Studies. In the course of the fieldwork for this research, a total number of fifty teachers in these schools were randomly interviewed through the administration of questionnaires. There were agreements in their responses even when some of those that are related to the proprietors were purposely included in the list of those interviewed.⁷ A summary of their responses goes as follows:

- i. Appointment is usually without terms of agreement but as a grace from the proprietor.
- ii. Since no salary scale is followed, increment and promotion are not automatic, and are based on the goodwill a staff enjoys from the director/proprietor.
- iii. Being given a teaching appointment is seen as a privilege, as hundreds of colleagues are thrown into the labour market to search for jobs.
- iv. The master-servant relationship between the proprietor and the teachers allows no room for agitation towards any improvement in staff-welfare, and any of the teachers observed as having the tendency to oppose this relationship will swiftly be eased out in order not to pollute others.
- v. Assistance from overseas and well-wishers at home is usually administered by the director, with neither input from the staff nor any benefits getting to them.
- vi. These schools have no welfare programme in place – instead, it is the staff that organise assistance for any member in need.

- vii. When foreign educational aid such as scholarships come, it is only in very rare cases that a teacher will be able to benefit from it. Instead, the proprietor distributes the money to his children and relatives.
- viii. In virtually all of these schools, teachers who insist on going for further studies do not return to the school.
- ix. Cases of fund mismanagement are sometimes levelled against staff. Whenever such allegations are levelled against a teacher, it has been discovered that the teacher has been either cheated in the past or owed some amount of money.
- x. Except in a few cases, all the schools have recorded differences between the proprietors and some teachers who expressed the need for improved welfare programmes for staff.
- xi. That as a result of the above, contending personalities do not meet face-to-face and may even fight it out “spiritually”.
- xii. That fears of being spiritually suppressed has been responsible for some of the teachers staying back until they receive the blessings of their mentors and directors to do other things.
- xiii. The members of staff only make ends meet by getting involved in other activities such as *jalb* (spiritual consultancy), and by serving as local imams and missionaries for certain groups.⁷

In spite of all of the above, some members of staff who are adjudged exceptionally good by the proprietors receive incentives and gifts, not only from the *mudir* but also from his admirers. Good examples are the lay readers, who, besides the primary assignment of teaching, also accompany their *mudirs* to public lectures; they receive incentives from the *mudir* and gifts from his admirers. Some directors have been able to keep these good staff solely for this reason, as such gifts sometimes include free accommodation, vehicles, cash and financing to perform Hajj. However, in the past, and in a few cases, other directors have abused this opportunity, and subsequently lost such good hands to other scholars.⁸

(d) *Curriculum*

Though there is no officially uniform curriculum for these schools, the subjects taken are in most cases the same. Except for the *Adabiyyah* schools in Orile and Mushin, the curricula of which were fashioned in line with that of the *Mahdul-Azhar* in Ilorin, most of these schools use curricula fashioned along the line of *Markaz-ut-Ta’lim al ‘arabiyyah* at Agege. The contents of the curriculum satisfy the standard required of Senior Secondary School, but the language of instruction has remained Arabic. There are no classes taught in English or French.

(e) *Graduates*

Most of the graduates of these schools are neither gainfully employed nor able to proceed to a post-secondary education. In a questionnaire administered among 200 graduates of these schools from all parts of Lagos between September 2004 and January 2005, data were collected regarding the occupation of the students after they leave school. Table 1 shows the percentages of graduates engaged in various professions and vocations:

Table 1: Percentage of Graduates in Different Professions

<i>Graduate</i>	<i>Percentage (%)</i>
Further studies (diploma)	10
Further studies (degree)	5
Self-employment (teachers)	10
Self-employment (<i>jalb</i> /native doctors)	25
Missionaries (employed by Muslim groups)	10
Teachers (employed in government schools)	4
Teachers (employed by conventional private schools)	6
Teachers (employed by ' <i>ilmiyyah</i> Schools, mostly <i>alma mater</i>)	13
Trading	7
Sundries –non classifiable	10
Total	100

From the above, two opportunities for further studies are noticed. The first is diploma, the percentage of which is boosted only by the recent introduction of the Lagos State University's diploma in Arabic and Islamic Studies. Others are the diploma from the Northern Universities, where certificates of a few of the '*ilmiyyah* institutions in Lagos are recognised, as well as institutions in the Sudan and Saudi Arabia. In the second category, the degrees are mainly from the Arab world, except in very rare cases when the candidates sat for school certificates and JAMB (Joint Admission and Matriculation Board) before gaining entrance into the universities in Nigeria⁹

Those included in the self-employment category are the group of those who either have gone to establish their own schools along the line of those they have graduated from or those who start Qur'ānic schools in their localities.¹⁰ The third category includes those involved in spiritual/traditional healing. The majority of these have deviated fully from their learning as they acquire additional skills from traditional healers, who are sometimes native worshippers. These people also join associations of herbalists in order to survive.¹¹

Those who operate as Muslim missionaries are usually better off, though they do not, in our opinion, occupy the esteemed positions of their Christian counterparts, especially in Lagos. Unfortunately, only a few of the graduates of these schools find positions in missionary groups.

There are very few teachers employed in Government schools. The percentage of 4 (see Table 1) was boosted by the accommodating nature of the civilian administration of Lateef Jakande, which employed graduates of '*ilmiyyah* schools as teachers of Islamic religious knowledge in primary schools. This small percentage is currently being threatened by the new millennium requirement of National Certificate in Education for teaching in primary schools. The category of those employed by conventional private schools are seriously exploited and used for other menial jobs after teaching Arabic/Islamic Religious Knowledge. They run errands for heads of schools, serve as games teachers, bursars or even drivers in certain cases. Those employed by '*ilmiyyah* schools need no further elucidation as Table 1 above speaks clearly of them. They are those employed in the unpalatable working environment of their *alma mater* – where they cannot sincerely aspire to lay a befitting foundation for

a salutary livelihood as the job is not usually promising. In the event that a proprietor dies, all staff including those who reared and taught the children of the former proprietor will become the staff of one of his children, and even more embarrassingly, they will either have to accept the new *mudir* or face the music.

The most disturbing feature of Table 1 is that 10% of these graduates have no fixed profession. These include those who call themselves businessmen without fixed addresses, those involved in fraud in the name of being Muslim scholars and those engaged in hard drugs. In point of fact, these schools, especially those founded before independence and those founded in the early independent period were meant to do *da'wah* through education, but with time the impact of these schools was no longer positively felt in the educational circle in Lagos. About 7% of these graduates also return to learn trade, when eventually they cannot find a place in society. The profession of about 20 of the 200 people cannot be ascertained. This is baffling, as 10% of a group of people is a significant enough proportion for planners to be able to evolve workable plans to cater for them.

We are certain that not many parents would have thought of making herbalists out of their wards when they sent them to Arabic schools. The society as well as the method and language of learning inhibited them from being fully able to compete favourably with peers in the society in which they found themselves.

The system of education bequeathed to Lagos and the entirety of Nigeria fully favoured Christians. It then favours those who attend schools founded by Muslims but fashioned along the lines of Western schools, while it discourages the society from recognising the graduates of the '*ilmiyyah* schools.

The efforts of the Lagos Muslims towards educational emancipation of the *Ummah* (Muslim community) from the pre-independence era cannot be overemphasised. How much success has been achieved so far, especially considering the realities on the ground as well as the achievements of similar efforts by Muslims in other parts of the world must be observed and used to suggest further possible areas of positive impact in terms of educational activities on the *Ummah* in Lagos. It is a known fact that colonialists impeded the advancement of Muslim education all over the world and that Muslims the world over resented the colonial form of education, and long ago resolved to remain traditional. The case of Saudi Arabia and its conservative Wahhabi approach to Education is apposite here.

In 1745, Muhammad b. Abdul-Wahab imposed his doctrines on the entire area now known as Saudi Arabia, in an alliance with Ibn Sa'ud, having been rallied as a state through conquest by Ibn Sa'ud, the prince of Dariyyah, to whom Abdul Wahab had conceded political leadership.¹² From this period until as late as 1925, the leaders of this country had played down the need for the application of certain modern reforms, including major educational reforms, all on the pretence that they wanted to remain unpolluted and different from the colonialists in both form and content. In 1925 however, under the auspices of a newly created directorate for education, a formal schooling system was introduced in Saudi Arabia, and secular subjects became part of the curriculum, replacing a curriculum that had consistently been based on purely religious motives. However, there was still an element of conservatism at this time, and the project was initially met with vehement opposition. It was not until 1959 that girls had access to public schools. Today, it is a known fact that the Saudi Arabian government, with the same Wahhabi posture, not only adopts modern

technology, but also accommodates people they hitherto would have had nothing to do with. Yet, it now has a system of education that can compare with any education system in the world and it is purely an Islamicised form of education. How did they achieve this?

As late as the 1970s, Muslim thinkers had started to realise that aping the West fully removes the values of the religion of Islam from all forms of Muslim education. They held that sciences should be taught to Muslims, and yet they should seek proofs and correlation for what is being learnt from the sources of Islamic information. They realised that in order to attain material power and to interact with the wider world, the European form of education was a necessary evil. A conference sponsored by King Abdulaziz University was held in Saudi Arabia on 31 March to 8 April 1977 with the theme, "Basis for an Islamic Educational System". This was the well-known First World Conference on Muslim Education. The communique of the conference attended by over three hundred and fifty scholars of varied disciplines all over the world states, *inter alia*:

The existing conditions in present day educational institutions in most Muslim countries do not truly reflect the Islamic ideal, and these institutions do not play their rightful role in the education of the younger generation in Islamic faith, thought and conduct, and there exists at present a regrettable dichotomy in education in the Muslim world; one system namely, *religious education being completely divorced from the secular sciences, and secular education being equally divorced from religion, although such compartmentalisation was contrary to the true Islamic concept of education* and made it impossible for the products of either system to represent Islam as a comprehensive and integrated vision of life.¹³ (Emphasis added.)

A follow up conference was jointly organised by Quaid-i-Azam University, Islamabad, Pakistan and King Abdulaziz University, Saudi Arabia. This was the Second World Conference on Muslim Education held in Islamabad, Pakistan on 15 to 20 March 1980.¹⁴ This conference was followed by a few more World Conferences on Muslim Education held in different parts of the world. These conferences served as catalysts for *da'wah* through education all over the world.

The Muslim Organisations in Lagos should have changed the focus of the schools they created towards the implementation of the resolutions of these conferences. The proprietors of the '*ilmiyyah*' schools had the advantage of utilising their schools as models in this direction, because they could easily read the resolutions of these conferences which the Saudi Arabian embassy as well as embassies of other Arab countries made available to them. Instead, they adopted the compartmentalisation of religious education which was completely divorced from the secular sciences, while the schools founded by the Muslim groups on the model of the Western schools adopted the compartmentalisation of secular education which was equally divorced from religion though they sometimes teach religion using the secular method.¹⁵

While inexperience and probably shortsightedness had inhibited the Nigerian Muslims, and especially those in Lagos, from taking the advantage of the useful

resolutions of the World Conferences on Muslim Education, Muslims in other secular countries maximise the opportunity provided by these resolutions.

In the United Kingdom, at Retford, North Nottinghamshire, there exists a model Muslim boys' college named Jamia al-Karam, similar to the Lagos '*ilmiyyah* School. It has the best facilities for sciences and laboratories replete with first class equipment, and above all, has an environment conducive to the living of complete Muslim way of life. The aim of the school is to develop the pupil's morality and spirituality so that he could achieve the best of his academic potential in a caring Islamic environment. It is a boarding school, which allows the students to live a communal Islamic life while studying. Every day, the morning assembly begins with the recitation of the Qur'ān, recitation of *ṣalawāt* (blessings) on the Prophet and a short lecture. Canonical prayers are said in congregation, five times daily. The day also terminates with the recitation of the Qur'ān after 'Ishā' prayer.

Students of the college take, at the final year, 8 GSCE (the UK equivalent of GCE/NECO) from the following subjects that are taught in the school: English Language, Arabic, Islamic Studies, Urdu, Mathematics, Information Technology, Physics, Chemistry, Biology, English Literature and History. Since it has started entering students into the unified examinations, no candidate has scored less than 87% in three core subjects (English, Mathematics and Information Technology) and all of them have passed all subjects with marks above the average. The comment of Her Majesty the Queen's OFSTED Inspectors as recorded in the school records reads as follows: 'You have come a long way in a short time'.¹⁶

It must be stated that all over the world, especially in Europe and America where secular education prevails, there are a good number of Muslim schools.

Conclusion

In this short essay, we have been able to state the conditions of '*ilmiyyah* schools in Lagos, highlighting their areas of positive impact on the educational system as well as their weaknesses. We have also suggested a change in the operational manner of these schools using the examples of Saudi Arabia and the Muslim *ummah* of the United Kingdom. The point being emphasised here is that if Muslims in other parts of the world can adopt the resolutions made by leading Muslim scholars in order to effect more meaningful results for their efforts in propagating Islam through schools and education, there would be nothing stopping Muslims in Lagos from changing the educational orientation of the '*ilmiyyah* schools towards achieving meaningful goals, by blending secular and religious knowledge. If that is done, the conditions of Muslims with a sound education will definitely improve in the society – and with sound education, many other good things will follow. It is pertinent to note here that there are some proprietors striving to achieve similar goals to those described above. There are also proprietors who do not want to change with the times. A few of them have no reason beyond the fact that their mentors did not have anything to do with Western education. We must however encourage the listening ears of scholars such as (Late) Shaykh Muqaddam Lawal, Shaykh Mustapha Zughlul and Shaykh Abdul Wahhab al-Ghamawiyy who were or are already in alliance with the Lagos State University in discussing ways to create a more positive environment for students of '*ilmiyyah* schools in Lagos.

Notes

1. L. M. Adetona, *Effects of Da'wah on the Development of Islam in Lagos 1900-2005*, an Unpublished PhD Thesis submitted to the Department of Religions, Lagos State University, pp. 88-95.
2. *ibid.*, p. 88.
3. *ibid.*, p. 97.
4. *ibid.*, See the table on pp. 96-107.
5. While a list of the schools can be found in note 4 above, those already mentioned here will be used as examples throughout the study.
6. These pieces of information were extracted informally from all the proprietors during discussions with them. For example, Shaykh Abdul Wahhab al-Ghamawiyy voluntarily informed me of his enrolment for an Executive Diploma programme in English Language during a working visit to his school during Ramadan on 31 October 2005.
7. These pieces of information were collected through the administration of questionnaires. Most of the respondents agreed to fill the questionnaire on the condition that their names would be left blank.
8. A good example of the latter group is a *mudir* who went to the USA with a lay reader and dispossessed the lay reader of all the gifts presented to him. The lay reader left him on their return to Nigeria and joined the services of another scholar. This information was given to me by Hajj Luqman Abodunrin of Brooklyn, NY on 24 December 2004.
9. This researcher identifies a number of holders of degrees from the Arab World, some of whom were absorbed into the school system in Lagos before 1990. The majority of them face the obstacle of not being able to communicate effectively in the English Language. I have also interacted with an Azhar graduate of English and Education who has not been gainfully employed since 1991, partly because of this communication difficulty. The third group consists of those who attended '*ilmiyyah* schools but with personal efforts sat for GCE examinations and passed very well. Besides, they are able to communicate effectively in both English and Arabic. There are only a few examples in this group.
10. A good example of those who found an '*ilmiyyah* School is the Shiginni brothers of *Mahdul Adabiyy* who graduated under the tutelage of Shaykh Mustafa Oniyangi. Shaykh Oniyangi is not known to have possessed beyond a *thanawiyyah* certificate or its equivalent.
11. Information collected from Jamiu Kilani, aged 52, at his office on Agege Motor Road, 15 December 2004.
12. See Talip Kucukcan, "Some Reflections of the Wahabiyyah Movement" in *Hamdard Islamicus*, vol. 15, no. 111, pp. 2, 4.
13. *ibid.*, p. 25.
14. G. N. Saqeb, "Modernization of Muslim Society and Education: Need for a Practical Approach" in Wasihullah Khan (Ed.), *Education and Society in the Muslim World*, Jeddah: Hodder and Stoughton and King Abdulaziz University, 1981, p. 53.
15. Compare M. A. Bidmos, *Islamic Education in Nigeria, Its Philosophy and Research Method* (2003?), Panaf Publishing Inc, p. 75.
16. All information on Jamia al-Karam was retrieved from its Guest Book on 17 July 2002. Further information on the school may be accessed on <http://www.alkaram.org/about%20us/index.htm>