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Arabic and Sociocultural Change among the Yoruba
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Introduction

In an earlier study, I examined the sociolinguistic dimensions of language use in the mediation of religious experience with particular focus for Yoruba language and religious practices (Salami 2006). In that study, I tried not only to show that for the Yoruba people religion is a critical domain of experience but also that the use of the Yoruba language plays a pivotal role in this experience. In the present study, I intend to look at the impact of a foreign language – Arabic – as well as the religion of Islam on the religious life and world view of the Yoruba people as they are manifested in the Yoruba language. In doing this, I will attempt to investigate the process of change in Yoruba culture as it tries to accommodate the linguistic and religious influences from Arabic and Islam.

There is no gainsaying the fact that the Arabic language plays an active role in the mediation of the religious experience of Yoruba Muslims. It is a language they use to express their religious experience, the language of their religious education, and for them a potent tool for healing and magical practices. Furthermore, the Arabic language is used as a boundary marker, as it is the sacred language of all who profess Islam and, therefore, can also be used to reinforce Muslim identity. According to Malik (1995: 427), the relevance of Arabic to the Yoruba Muslim community cannot be overemphasized because whether they speak it or not, it is the religious language of Muslims all over the world as they must use it in their five daily prayers and in their confession of faith (kalimat al-shahadah). As noted by Samarin (1976: 5), it can be observed that groups adhering to a given set of beliefs and practices are also often set apart linguistically.
Studies in historical linguistics have demonstrated that changes taking place in language are not motivated solely by internal linguistic factors. The literature shows that language change is caused by both social and historical factors (Weinreich 1974, Labov 1972, Bynon 1977, Francis 1983, Milroy 1987). The contact between the Yoruba-speaking southwestern Nigeria, Islam as well as the Arab world has produced tremendous changes in the sociocultural life of the Yoruba people as reflected in their language. Studies have shown this impact on the phonetic, phonological as well as the lexical structures of the Yoruba language (see, for example, Abdul 1976, Ogunbiyi 1980, Abu Bakre 1984, Malik 1995).

This chapter focuses on lexical borrowing. It examines and analyses the interaction of Islamic religion and the Arabic language with specific focus on change and accommodation in Yoruba language and culture. In doing this, it discusses the nature of the contact of the two languages and examines the sociocultural motivations for the adaptation of the Arabic language. The chapter concludes that there is a pervasive influence of Arabic–Islamic culture on Yoruba and that this influence has motivated demand for change in the sociopolitical life of Yoruba Muslims as demonstrated, for example, in the demand for the Islamic legal system.

**Culture contact, language change and accommodation**

The literature shows that there exists a relationship between culture contact and language change. However, the progression from contact to change is not without its tension or conflict. As this happens to language, it is also the case with other aspects of culture, including religion. As noted by Silva-Corvan (1994, cited in Chiung 2006), intensive language contact is a powerful external promoter of language change. Borrowing, which is one consequence of language contact, is influenced greatly by the politico-social position of the speakers of a borrowing language. Thus it is the sociolinguistic history of the speakers, and not the structure of their language, that is the primary determinant of the linguistic outcome(s) of language contact. In other words, the social structure and the behaviour of members of the language-using community are the critical ingredients in the character and outcome(s) of language contact phenomena.

Hansell (1989, cited in Chiung 2006) thinks that cultural contact is language contact that results from cultural diffusion but does not require widespread bilingualism, while intimate contact is characterized by widespread societal bilingualism and by the wide variety of