

The Converging Discourses: Rhetorical Interplay between Islamic Thought and Arabic Literature in Nigeria

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Abstract

Objective

This study investigates the dynamic intersection between Islamic thought and Arabic literature in Nigeria, highlighting how their convergence has shaped cultural, religious, and intellectual identities within Muslim communities. It focuses on the rhetorical and thematic strategies used in Arabic literary forms to convey Islamic theological and ethical messages.

Method

Using a multidisciplinary, historically informed qualitative approach, the research draws from Arabic and Ajami texts, oral traditions. It includes literary and cultural analysis of works by key figures such as Shehu Usman dan Fodio, Nana Asma'u, Shaykh Adam al-Ilory, and Zakariyah Oseni. Fieldwork provided oral testimonies and insights into contemporary pedagogical practices, while archival research explored the impact of colonial and postcolonial educational policies.

Results

The findings reveal a rich rhetorical tradition where Arabic literature serves both as a medium for Islamic knowledge and as a tool for social commentary on governance, education, gender equity, and moral reform. Core Islamic themes like tawhīd (divine unity), 'adl (justice), and taqwā (piety) consistently emerge across texts. Sufi imagery and

poetic forms infuse the literature with spiritual depth, while translations into local languages and oral performance styles help localise and broaden its impact. Modern educational systems and digital platforms further enhance the accessibility and relevance of this tradition.

Conclusion

The study concludes that this Arabic-Islamic literary tradition remains vibrant and transformative. Overcoming linguistic and institutional challenges through literacy programs, digital tools can strengthen this heritage in educational and interfaith initiatives in Nigeria.

Key words: Converging Discourses, Rhetorical Interplay, Islamic Thought, Arabic Literature.

Introduction

The rhetorical interplay between Islamic thought and Arabic literature in Nigeria represents a deeply rooted and evolving intellectual tradition that continues to shape the country's religious, cultural, and socio-political landscapes. Far from being isolated phenomena, Islamic philosophy and Arabic literary expression have historically converged to form a mutually reinforcing discourse that mediates between faith, identity, and knowledge in Nigerian society. This convergence can be traced to the 11th century, when Islam was first introduced into the region through trans-Saharan trade routes. Alongside religious doctrines, Arabic language and literary forms arrived and were swiftly adopted as vehicles for both spiritual instruction and cultural transmission.¹ Over time, this cultural and epistemological matrix took root, particularly in northern Nigeria, giving rise to enduring centres of Islamic scholarship such as Kano, Katsina, and Sokoto. These urban centres crystallised their influence during the establishment of the Sokoto Caliphate in the early 19th century, a political and religious entity that foregrounded Islamic knowledge production and Arabic literary creativity as core components of governance and social reform.²

The intellectual legacy of the Sokoto Caliphate is inseparable from its foundational figures—Shehu Usman Ĥan Fodio, Nana Asma'u, and Abdullahi Dan Fodio—whose works exemplify the fusion of theological discourse and literary eloquence in Arabic. Their writings not only articulated Islamic legal and spiritual ideals but also engaged with the lived realities of their society, advocating for justice, education, and moral accountability.³ Through Arabic poetry, legal treatises, and theological commentaries, they established a discursive tradition that has outlived colonial disruption and postcolonial reconfigurations.

¹ A Rahman I Doi, "Spread of Islam in West Africa," *Al-Islaah Publications* 16 (1979): 16; Nehemia Levtzion and Randall L Pouwels, *The History of Islam in Africa* (Ohio University Press, 2000), 45.

² Murray Last, *The Sokoto Caliphate* (Longmans London, 1967), 121.

³ ISMA'IL A B Balogun, "The Life and Work of the Mujaddid of West Africa, 'Uthmān B. Fūdī Popularly Known As Usumanu Ān Fodio," *Islamic Studies* 12, no. 4 (1973): 277; Beverly B Mack and Jean Boyd, *One Woman's Jihad: Nana Asma'u, Scholar and Scribe* (Indiana University Press, 2000), 34.

The colonial encounter, particularly in the early 20th century, introduced a new ideological and educational regime that marginalised Islamic epistemologies and disrupted indigenous literary and religious structures. In response, a revivalist current emerged within Nigerian Muslim communities, seeking to reclaim Islamic intellectual autonomy through renewed emphasis on Arabic literary forms and the revitalisation of Islamic thought.⁴ This revival was not merely reactionary; rather, it initiated a creative synthesis wherein local cultural forms—especially oral traditions—were harnessed to reinforce Islamic moral teachings. Nana Asma'u's literary corpus, for example, exemplifies this synthesis by merging Hausa oral poetry with Arabic Islamic themes to expand female access to religious knowledge and social participation.⁵ Similarly, reformist scholars like Shaykh Âdam Abdullah Al-Ilory responded to modern challenges by fusing classical Islamic curricula with modern pedagogical techniques, particularly within the institution of the Arabic school.⁶ Such adaptations not only reflect the resilience of Islamic thought and Arabic literature in Nigeria but also illustrate their capacity to navigate and shape the socio-historical currents of their time.

In the postcolonial and contemporary periods, the convergence of these traditions continues to exert significant influence, particularly within the educational sector, cultural policy frameworks, and interfaith engagements. The evolution of the madrasa into institutions that offer both Islamic and secular subjects illustrates the dual commitment to spiritual and worldly knowledge, a hallmark of the Islamic intellectual tradition.⁷ Moreover, contemporary Arabic literature in Nigeria has become an active site for interrogating societal issues such as corruption, gender equity, and social injustice, often through Islamic ethical paradigms.⁸ These developments reaffirm the relevance of Arabic and Islamic discourses in confronting the ethical and civic questions of modern Nigerian life.

Yet, despite their vitality, the continued synergy between Islamic thought and Arabic literature faces enduring challenges. These include linguistic and educational barriers that inhibit access to classical texts, the rising influence of extremist interpretations that distort mainstream Islamic teachings, and systemic inadequacies in integrating Islamic intellectual traditions into broader educational and cultural infrastructures. Such tensions necessitate a rigorous scholarly inquiry into how these discourses are maintained, transformed, and contested in the Nigerian context.

⁴ John Hunwick, "The Arabic Literary Tradition of Nigeria," *Research in African Literatures* 28, no. 3 (1997): 215.

⁵ Mack and Boyd, *One Woman's Jihad: Nana Asma'u, Scholar and Scribe*, 52.

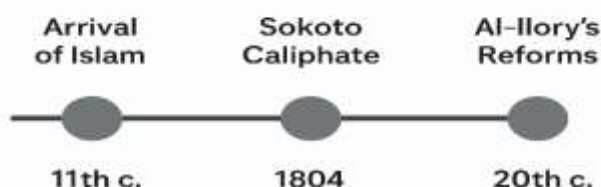
⁶ Âdam Abdullah Al-Ilory, *Ad-Deenu Naseeha* (Lagos, Nigeria: Matba'at Markaz Ta'aleemul Arabi Al-Islami, 1992), 11.

⁷ Abdullahi Ibrahim Sani and Cecep Anwar, "Madrasa and Its Development in Nigeria," *J. Pendidik. Islam* 6, no. 2 (2020): 211.

⁸ Zakariyau I. Oseni, *Al-Mahdubatul Adabiyya Li Tulaab Gharb Afrikiya* (Auchi, Nigeria: Matbahatul Noor, 2000), 44; Moshood G A Raji, *A Modern Trend in Nigerian Arabic Literature: The Contribution of Umar Ibrahim* (University of London, School of Oriental and African Studies (United Kingdom), 1986), 125.

This study undertakes a diachronic analysis of the rhetorical convergence between Islamic thought and Arabic literature in Nigeria, tracing their historical development from the precolonial era—particularly the intellectual flowering of the Sokoto Caliphate—through the colonial and postcolonial periods, to their contemporary articulations. It examines the ways in which theological, juridical, and mystical dimensions of Islamic intellectual traditions (as embedded in the concept of 'Islamic thought') are expressed, refracted, and sustained through Arabic literary production. The term 'Arabic literature' as used herein encompasses both classical and modern Arabic texts—including poetry, prose, and exegetical works—written within Nigeria or by Nigerian scholars, with particular attention to their rhetorical strategies, thematic concerns, and sociolinguistic adaptations. By critically engaging with these converging discourses, the study seeks to illuminate the enduring significance of Islamic and Arabic intellectual traditions in shaping Nigeria's cultural and ideological landscape.

Literature Review



The complex relationship between Islamic thought and Arabic literature in Nigeria is grounded in centuries of historical, cultural, and intellectual transformation. The arrival of Islam in the 11th century laid the foundation for the gradual incorporation of Islamic intellectual frameworks into indigenous political and social structures. This integration was significantly mediated through trade, especially along the trans-Saharan routes that linked northern Nigeria to the broader Islamic world.⁹ Urban centres such as Kano and Sokoto became important hubs for Islamic education and literary production, culminating in the establishment of the Sokoto Caliphate in the early 19th century. The Caliphate institutionalised Arabic as the principal language of scholarship and governance, further solidifying the role of Islamic thought in shaping northern Nigerian identity.¹⁰

Within this context, Arabic literature flourished as both a religious and intellectual enterprise. The works of key figures such as Shehu Usman Ṭan Fodio, his brother Abdullahi Dan Fodio, and his daughter Nana Asma'u represent the crystallisation of Islamic values through literary expression. These authors used Arabic not merely for doctrinal dissemination but as a means of engaging the moral, political, and

⁹ Doi, "Spread of Islam in West Africa," 16; Levtzion and Pouwels, *The History of Islam in Africa*, 45.

¹⁰ M. Hiskett, *The Sword of Truth; the Life and Times of the Shehu Usman Dan Fodio* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 89; Last, *The Sokoto Caliphate*, 121.

epistemological challenges of their time. Usman Dan Fodio's legal treatises, such as *Kitab al-Farq*, offer insightful reflections on Islamic jurisprudence contextualised within the socio-political order of 19th-century Hausaland.¹¹ Likewise, Nana Asma'u's poetic oeuvre illustrates how Arabic literary forms were employed to mediate Islamic ethics and indigenous oral traditions, particularly with regard to gender and education.¹² The establishment of madrasas and the proliferation of handwritten Arabic manuscripts underscored the central role of literature in transmitting Islamic thought and sustaining intellectual continuity.¹³

The advent of British colonialism in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, however, altered the trajectory of this intellectual tradition. The colonial administration's policy of educational secularisation marginalised Arabic and Islamic learning, displacing them with Western models of instruction. Paradoxically, this marginalisation triggered a reinvigorated Islamic literary and scholarly revival, which sought to reaffirm Islamic identity under new political and epistemological constraints.¹⁴ It was during this period that scholars such as Shaykh Âdam Abdullah Al-Ilory emerged, embodying a commitment to reintegrate classical Islamic scholarship within the modern educational framework. His works, including *Ad-Deenu Naseeha*, reflect a nuanced attempt to harmonise inherited Islamic knowledge with the exigencies of contemporary pedagogical standards.¹⁵ This sustained negotiation between tradition and innovation constitutes one of the most enduring legacies of Islamic and Arabic literary evolution in Nigeria.

The contributions of notable intellectuals further illuminate the depth and diversity of this tradition. Usman Dan Fodio's foundational texts such as *Bayan Wujub al-Hijra* and *Kitab al-Amr bi al-Ma'ruf* articulated a moral vision for Islamic governance and underscored the symbiosis of religious reform and social justice.¹⁶ Abdullahi Dan Fodio expanded on these themes through more technical theological discourse, while Nana Asma'u's didactic poetry offered gender-conscious perspectives deeply embedded in Islamic ethics and Hausa cultural idioms.¹⁷ In the postcolonial era, scholars such as Zakariyah I. Oseni continued this legacy by enriching Arabic literary output with modern themes and styles. His work *Al-Mahdubat al-Adabiyya* represents a pivotal moment in Nigerian Arabic literature, blending classical forms with contemporary thematic concerns.¹⁸ Likewise, the poetic

¹¹ Balogun, "The Life and Work of the Mujaddid of West Africa," *Uṭhmān B. Fūdī Popularly Known As Usumanu Ḍan Fodio*, 277.

¹² Mack and Boyd, *One Woman's Jihad: Nana Asma'u, Scholar and Scribe*, 34.

¹³ Sani and Anwar, "Madrasa and Its Development in Nigeria," 211.

¹⁴ Hunwick, "The Arabic Literary Tradition of Nigeria," 215.

¹⁵ Al-Ilory, *Ad-Deenu Naseeha*, 11.

¹⁶ Hiskett, *The Sword of Truth; the Life and Times of the Shehu Usuman Dan Fodio*, 98.

¹⁷ Mack and Boyd, *One Woman's Jihad: Nana Asma'u, Scholar and Scribe*, 45; Balogun, "The Life and Work of the Mujaddid of West Africa," *Uṭhmān B. Fūdī Popularly Known As Usumanu Ḍan Fodio*, 283.

¹⁸ Oseni, *Al-Mahdubat al-Adabiyya Li Tulaab Gharb Afrikiya*, 41.

interventions of Umar Ibrahim attest to the versatility of Arabic as a language for social critique, particularly in relation to political corruption and inequality.¹⁹

The corpus of Arabic literature produced in Nigeria is marked by a broad thematic range and distinctive stylistic hybridity. Central themes include religious instruction, moral education, social equity, and resistance to political oppression. Shehu Usman Ṭan Fodio's political treatises, for instance, marry theological insight with pointed critiques of leadership, anchoring his vision of Islamic society within a larger moral order.²⁰ Nana Asma'u's engagement with themes of women's education and communal morality through poetic forms demonstrates a powerful intersection of Islamic and local knowledge systems.²¹ Nigerian Arabic literature is stylistically dynamic, embracing classical genres such as qasida and maqama while incorporating vernacular idioms and oral devices characteristic of Hausa literary culture. Zakariyah Oseni's works embody this hybridity, employing ornate classical structures interwoven with culturally grounded symbolism.²² Similarly, Umar Ibrahim's modernist poetry leverages metaphor and irony to interrogate the moral failures of contemporary governance.²³

This literary tradition does not evolve in isolation but is deeply implicated in processes of cultural syncretism and identity formation. The Islamisation of identity in Nigeria involved the adoption of Arabic names, texts, and calligraphic scripts as visible markers of religious affiliation and scholarly authority.²⁴ The syncretic blending of Islamic and indigenous forms is most striking in the works of Nana Asma'u, whose use of Hausa proverbs and performance poetry exemplifies a conscious effort to bridge doctrinal orthodoxy and cultural resonance.²⁵ Similarly, the writings of Dan Fodio and his intellectual circle were attuned to the specific social and political conditions of Hausaland, crafting a discourse of reform that was simultaneously local in focus and universal in aspiration.²⁶

The colonial experience intensified the urgency of preserving Islamic cultural identity, catalysing a revivalist literary tradition that sought to reaffirm Islam's ethical and epistemological centrality. This was especially evident in the scholarly resistance to the educational and moral paradigms introduced by British rule.²⁷ The revivalist writings of Al-Ilory and his contemporaries illustrate how Arabic literature functioned as a vehicle for identity reclamation, even as it incorporated elements of modernity.²⁸ Contemporary

¹⁹ Raji, *A Modern Trend in Nigerian Arabic Literature: The Contribution of Umar Ibrahim*, 122.

²⁰ Balogun, "The Life and Work of the Mujaddid of West Africa, 'Uṭhmān B. Fūdī Popularly Known As Usumanu Ḍan Fodio," 279.

²¹ Mack and Boyd, *One Woman's Jihad: Nana Asma'u, Scholar and Scribe*, 47.

²² Oseni, *Al-Mahdubatul Adabiyya Li Tulaab Gharb Afrikiya*, 44.

²³ Raji, *A Modern Trend in Nigerian Arabic Literature: The Contribution of Umar Ibrahim*, 125.

²⁴ Doi, "Spread of Islam in West Africa," 19; Mahmud Adesina Ayuba, "The Arabic Language: Its Relevance to Nigerian Development," *European Scientific Journal* 8, no. 26 (2012): 197.

²⁵ Mack and Boyd, *One Woman's Jihad: Nana Asma'u, Scholar and Scribe*, 52.

²⁶ Balogun, "The Life and Work of the Mujaddid of West Africa, 'Uṭhmān B. Fūdī Popularly Known As Usumanu Ḍan Fodio," 285.

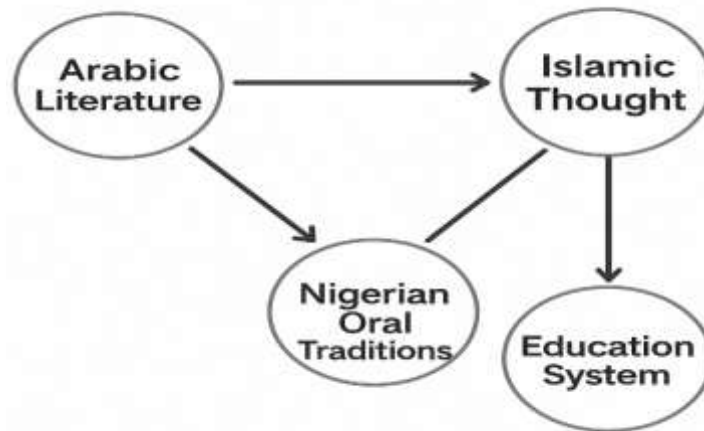
²⁷ Hunwick, "The Arabic Literary Tradition of Nigeria," 218.

²⁸ Ādam Abdullah Al-Ilory, *Tarikh Al-Da'wah Wa Du'Aat* (Cairo, Egypt: Maktabah Wahbah, 1965), 35.

figures such as Zakariyah Oseni and Umar Ibrahim extend this tradition by confronting the socio-political challenges of the postcolonial state, thus affirming the relevance of Arabic as a living, critical language of engagement.²⁹

In recent years, the interplay between Islamic thought and Arabic literature has entered the digital arena, marking a new phase in the evolution of Nigerian Islamic intellectualism. The increasing use of digital platforms to disseminate sermons, texts, and poetry signifies an emergent cyber-Islamic sphere that extends the reach and form of Arabic literary production. Murtala Ibrahim's work on Islamic cyber practices highlights how digital media are reshaping religious discourse in northern Nigeria, offering new spaces for the articulation of Islamic identity.³⁰ This transformation shows the continued adaptability and relevance of Arabic literature and Islamic thought in Nigeria, as they navigate both historical continuity and the demands of contemporary life.

Taken together, the literature reveals a rich tapestry of rhetorical, theological, and literary traditions that continue to shape and be shaped by Nigeria's Islamic intellectual heritage. The convergence of Islamic thought and Arabic literature is not simply a historical artefact, but a living discourse that engages with past legacies while speaking to the present and future cultural realities of Muslim Nigeria.



Methodology

The methodology for this study is grounded in a qualitative, multi-method design that integrates textual analysis, oral historiography, and critical discourse procedures to capture the complex interplay between Islamic thought and Arabic literary expression in Nigeria. It is organized around three core components: the research instrument, the data-collection strategy, and the analytic procedures.

²⁹ Oseni, *Al-Mahdubatul Adabiyya Li Tulaab Gharb Afrikiya*, 47; Raji, *A Modern Trend in Nigerian Arabic Literature: The Contribution of Umar Ibrahim*, 128.

³⁰ Murtala Ibrahim, "Islam in the Digital Infrastructure: The Rise of Islamic Cyber Practices in Northern Nigeria," *Religion, State & Society* 52, no. 2–3 (2024): 120.

To guide systematic engagement with both written and oral sources, a bespoke document-analysis protocol was developed. Drawing on principles of critical discourse analysis and genre studies,³¹ the protocol specifies criteria for identifying rhetorical strategies (e.g., intertextual Qur'ānic allusion, maqāma motifs, qasīda structures), thematic nodes (justice, tawhīd, gender ethics), and instances of linguistic hybridity (Arabic-Ajami code-mixing, vernacular inflections). The analytic instrument takes the form of a detailed coding manual, which was pilot-tested on a sample of five texts (including Usman dan Fodio's Bayān Wujūb al-Hijra and select poems of Nana Asma'u) to refine category definitions and ensure intercoder reliability.

Data collection proceeded in three parallel streams. First, a purposive corpus of thirty written texts—spanning the nineteenth century to the present and representing both classical treatises and modern essays or poetry—was assembled from manuscript archives in Sokoto, Kano, and Lagos, and from published critical editions.³² Second, semi-structured interviews were conducted with twelve senior mallams, Hausa-Ajami calligraphers, and Arabic instructors across these same locales. An interview guide, derived from the coding manual, probed participants' insights on how rhetorical forms shape pedagogical practice and identity formation. Each interview lasted approximately sixty to ninety minutes, was audio-recorded with consent, and subsequently transcribed verbatim in Arabic or Hausa (with translation to English as needed). Third, field notes and participant observations were gathered during recitation sessions (wa'z) and literary gatherings (majālis al-shi'r), documenting performative aspects of oral transmission.

Once collected, all textual and interview data were imported into NVivo 13 for systematic organization. Using the pre-established coding manual, two researchers independently coded an initial subset (20 percent) of documents and transcripts to confirm coding consistency; discrepancies were resolved through discussion, with categories adjusted as necessary. Thereafter, axial coding techniques were employed to relate subthemes (e.g., invocation of tawhīd) to broader discursive functions (e.g., moral mobilization).³³ Memoing throughout the process preserved analytic reflexivity and documented emergent patterns, such as the recurrent deployment of Sufi metaphors in both elite texts and popular sermons.

In addition to thematic coding, a layer of close rhetorical analysis was applied to selected case studies. For these, passages exemplifying key intersections—such as Nana Asma'u's fusion of Hausa proverbs with Arabic verse—were subjected to line-by-line exegesis, tracing intertextual references to Qur'ānic verses or Prophetic ḥadīths. This micro-analysis

³¹ Norman Fairclough, *Critical Discourse Analysis: The Critical Study of Language* (Routledge, 2013); Anis S Bawarshi and Mary Jo Reiff, *Genre: An Introduction to History, Theory, Research, and Pedagogy* (Parlor Press LLC, 2010).

³² Hiskett, *The Sword of Truth; the Life and Times of the Shehu Usman Dan Fodio*; Mack and Boyd, *One Woman's Jihad: Nana Asma'u, Scholar and Scribe*.

³³ Juliet Corbin and Anselm Strauss, *Basics of Qualitative Research: Techniques and Procedures for Developing Grounded Theory* (Sage publications, 2014).

illuminated how specific linguistic choices reinforce communal identity or critique political authority. Cross-referencing with historical archives (colonial educational reports, missionary correspondence) enabled situating each rhetorical innovation within its socio-political milieu, thereby integrating textual and contextual analysis.

Results

The dynamic convergence of Islamic thought and Arabic literature in Nigeria constitutes a discursive tradition shaped by historical continuity, theological engagement, and socio-cultural negotiation. Far from being parallel domains, these two epistemic formations operate within a shared intellectual and spiritual ecology, where Arabic serves not only as a liturgical language but as a potent vehicle for literary creativity, pedagogical dissemination, and ethical instruction.³⁴ Within the Nigerian context—particularly in regions historically influenced by trans-Saharan Islamic scholarship—this interplay has generated a robust canon of Arabic literary production that articulates Islamic theological precepts through culturally embedded literary forms.

Central to this synthesis is the expression of *tawḥīd* (the unity of God), which remains a foundational motif in Nigerian Arabic literary production. As Bhat (2018) explains, *tawḥīd* represents the monotheistic cornerstone of Islamic ontology and is consistently reflected in poetic and prose traditions as a theological affirmation and existential imperative. Nigerian Arabic poets, drawing from Qur'ānic and Prophetic traditions, recurrently structure their compositions around the theme of divine oneness, weaving metaphysical assertions into didactic narratives and lyrical exhortations. This thematic fixation shows the confluence of devotional impulse and literary articulation.

Parallel to this is the pervasive use of Arabic literature as an instrument for moral and ethical instruction. Qur'ānic injunctions and ḥadīth-based teachings are not merely cited but narrativised—imbued with rhetorical elegance and cultural resonance.³⁵ In this regard, Arabic literary expression becomes a conduit through which Islamic ethics—grounded in concepts such as *ʿadl* (justice), *ikhḷāṣ* (sincerity), and *taqwā* (piety)—are localised, taught, and internalised across diverse linguistic and social communities.

A particularly fertile domain in which this intersection unfolds is within the mystical tradition of Sufism. The Sufi intellectual and poetic tradition, steeped in metaphor, paradox, and ecstatic longing, permeates Nigerian Arabic literary culture. Sufi themes—divine love, the soul's yearning for union with the Creator, and the transformative path of inner purification—are richly encoded in poetic compositions by Nigerian mystic-scholars.³⁶ This mystical aesthetic has left an indelible mark on the region's literary

³⁴ Adams Olufemi Akewula, "Representation of Nationhood and Social Change in Bari Adetunji Arabic Short Stories," *AL-HIKMAH: INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ISLAMIC STUDIES AND HUMAN SCIENCES* 7, no. 2 (2024): 49–86; Musa Ibrahim, "Being Muslim at the Intersection of Islam and Popular Cultures in Nigeria," *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 34, no. 2 (2022): 205–22.

³⁵ Simeon Edosomwan and Claudette M Peterson, "A History of Oral and Written Storytelling in Nigeria.," *Commission for International Adult Education*, 2016.

³⁶ Kazuyo Murata et al., "Sufi Wisdom: Love as Philosophy," n.d.

expression, especially in texts that evoke the esoteric dimensions of Islamic cosmology and personal spiritual struggle.

Institutionally, the embeddedness of Islamic thought and Arabic literary culture is most visible in Nigeria's expansive network of madāris (Islamic schools), Qur'ānic learning centres, and advanced seminaries. These institutions have functioned historically—and continue to function—as sites for cultivating Arabic literacy, transmitting classical Islamic sciences, and producing literati well-versed in both the exoteric and esoteric dimensions of the tradition.³⁷ The pedagogical imperative to read, interpret, and produce Arabic texts situates literature at the heart of religious formation and communal identity. Moreover, the process of translation—particularly of Islamic texts into Arabic and into local languages—has proven vital in reinforcing this intellectual symbiosis. The efforts of Nigerian scholars to render the Qur'ān, prophetic traditions, and juridical treatises accessible to wider audiences have expanded the reach and relevance of Islamic thought. Ringim's analysis of Abdallah bin Fodio's translation techniques and Solihu's documentation of the earliest Yoruba translations of the Qur'ān both reveal the intricate balance between fidelity to classical meanings and adaptation to indigenous cultural grammars.³⁸ These translation projects are not mere linguistic transpositions; they are acts of interpretive mediation that solidify Arabic literature as a dialogical bridge between textual authority and lived experience.

This rich interweaving of discursive traditions is further catalysed by contemporary scholarly dialogues, academic conferences, and intra-Muslim intellectual exchanges that explore the boundaries and convergences of literary and theological thought. These platforms provide opportunities for reflexivity, critique, and innovation, contributing to an evolving literary-theological corpus that is both rooted in classical Islamic epistemologies and responsive to modern exigencies.

To understand the lived and textual embodiment of this convergence, it is instructive to consider seminal figures whose lives and works illuminate the intellectual trajectory of Islamic thought and Arabic literary production in Nigeria. Chief among them is Shaykh Usman dan Fodio (1754–1817), whose monumental contributions straddle reformist jurisprudence, mystical spirituality, and Arabic poetic eloquence.³⁹ Dan Fodio's literary

³⁷ Ahmad Amin, "The Role of Education to Enhance Literacy in Islam," *Al-Risalah: Journal of Islamic Revealed Knowledge and Human Sciences (ARJIHS)* 6, no. 2 (2022): 478–94; Adam Adebayo Sirajudeen, Sulayman Adeniran Shittu, and Lateef Onireti Ibraheem, "THE LEGACY OF SHEIKH AHMAD AWELENJE: IMPACTS & INFLUENCES IN NIGERIAN ARABIC ISLAMIC SCHOLARSHIP OF THE 21ST CENTURY," n.d.

³⁸ Abubakar Muhammad Ringim, "Abdallah Bin Fodio's Technique for Translating the Quran Through Telling Prophetic Stories: An Analysis of West African Islamic Scholarship," *British Journal of Multidisciplinary and Advanced Studies* 5, no. 1 (2024): 1–13; Abdul Kabir Hussain Solihu, "The Earliest Yoruba Translation of the Qur'an: Missionary Engagement with Islam in Yorubaland," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 17, no. 3 (2015): 10–37.

³⁹ Hunwick, "The Arabic Literary Tradition of Nigeria"; Abdul Azim Islahi, "Shehu Uthman Dan Fodio and His Economic Ideas," 2008; Hiskett, *The Sword of Truth; the Life and Times of the Shehu Usman Dan Fodio*.

oeuvre, including texts such as *Umdat al-Mutaʿābidīn*, *Umdat al-Bayān*, and *Iḥyāʾ al-Sunna wa Ikḥmād al-Bidʿa*, exemplifies the fusion of legal reasoning with ethical exhortation, often articulated through Arabic prose and verse.⁴⁰ His rhetorical style, steeped in Qurʾānic intertextuality and Sufi metaphor, enacts a form of spiritual mobilisation, particularly evident in *Bayān Wujūb al-Hijra*, where migration (ḥijra) is framed as both a legal necessity and moral imperative in the context of religious oppression.⁴¹ Through his literary activism, dan Fodio not only established the Sokoto Caliphate as a polity of Islamic governance but inaugurated a legacy of Arabic-Islamic scholarship that remains influential.

Equally instructive is the scholarly and pedagogical legacy of Shaykh Ādam Abdullāhi al-Ilory (1917–1992), founder of the Markaz Agege in Lagos, who synthesised traditional Islamic sciences with modern pedagogical strategies. His texts—*Ad-Dīn Naṣīḥa* (1992), *Al-Islām al-Yawm wa Ghadān fī Nijīriyā* (1990), and *Tārīkh ad-Daʿwa wa Duʿāt* (1965)—represent an erudite engagement with the challenges of modernity, secular education, and religious authenticity. Al-Ilory’s Arabic writings invoke classical stylistic devices while addressing the ethical responsibilities of the ‘ulamāʾ, the dangers of intellectual insincerity, and the sociocultural dislocations of postcolonial Nigeria.⁴² His rhetorical dexterity and exegetical rigour serve as a bridge between inherited traditions and evolving realities, confirming Arabic literature’s capacity to navigate theological depth and contemporary discourse.

In a similar vein, Nana Asmaʿu (1793–1864), daughter of Usman dan Fodio, represents a paradigmatic case of female Islamic scholarship articulated through literary expression. Writing in Arabic, Fulfulde, and Hausa, her poetry advances Sufi moral themes, pedagogical guidance, and gender-conscious education.⁴³ Her Lamentation for ʿĀʾisha stands as a poignant elegy that intertwines personal grief with communal instruction, illustrating the capacity of Arabic literary forms to encode both spiritual introspection and social engagement.⁴⁴ Nana Asmaʿu’s work shows not only the adaptability of Arabic to indigenous forms but also the centrality of women in shaping Islamic literary cultures in West Africa.

Other influential figures such as Isa Alabi Abubakar have deepened this tradition through philosophical writings and poetic reflections that combine legal scholarship with meditative prose.⁴⁵ His Arabic compositions are marked by precision, metaphysical

⁴⁰ Ameenudeen Abubakar, *Al-Mujahidul Kabeer Fi Gharibil Ifrikiya* (Kano, Nigeria: Matabihul Ataahi Al-Islami, 1992).

⁴¹ Stephanie Zehnle, *A Geography of Jihad: Sokoto Jihadism and the Islamic Frontier in West Africa*, vol. 37 (Walter de Gruyter GmbH & Co KG, 2020).

⁴² Al-Ilory, *Ad-Deenu Naseeha*.

⁴³ Mack and Boyd, *One Woman’s Jihad: Nana Asma’u, Scholar and Scribe*.

⁴⁴ H. T. Abubakar-Hamid, “Tahlilu Faniy Lib’adi Intaajul-Arabi Li Nisahi Nijiriya” (University of Ilorin, 2015).

⁴⁵ Isa Alabi Abubakar, *Ar-Riyad* (Ilorin, Nigeria: Alabi Production, 2005).

insight, and a stylistic affinity with classical Islamic thought, thereby reinforcing the intellectual and spiritual depth of Nigerian Arabic literature.

Contemporary voices such as Zakariyyā Idrīs Oseni have extended this legacy into the modern period through essays, academic monographs, and poetry that reflect the ethical, sociopolitical, and philosophical dimensions of Islamic life in Nigeria.⁴⁶ Oseni's literary corpus illustrates how Arabic literature remains a living tradition, capable of engaging pressing contemporary issues—corruption, social justice, and gender equity—through the lens of Islamic moral reasoning and rhetorical ingenuity.

In aggregate, these figures represent more than isolated cases of intellectual brilliance; they are nodes in a transgenerational network of Islamic-Arabic scholarship, each contributing to the ongoing dialogue between text and context, between inherited wisdom and emergent realities. Their works exemplify how the rhetorical strategies of Arabic literature serve not merely to aestheticise faith, but to activate ethical consciousness, sustain communal memory, and project Islamic thought into new epistemological terrains.

Discussion

The interplay between Islamic thought and Arabic literature in Nigeria offers a profound lens through which the sociocultural, educational, and political trajectories of the country may be interpreted and reimagined. This study has demonstrated that the convergence of these traditions constitutes not merely a historical artifact but a dynamic and evolving discourse capable of responding to Nigeria's contemporary challenges. Drawing upon centuries of intellectual development, these intersecting narratives remain salient in shaping identity, fostering social cohesion, and informing policy development in an era marked by pluralism, technological advancement, and political flux.

The enduring influence of Islamic thought and Arabic literature is most palpable in the formation of cultural and religious identity across Nigeria's Muslim communities. In a context marked by ethnic, linguistic, and sectarian diversity, Arabic literary traditions infused with Islamic philosophical and ethical underpinnings provide a shared ideological framework. This unifying potential is especially visible in literary expressions that emphasise themes such as justice, communal welfare, and divine accountability—motifs that resonate powerfully with Nigeria's aspirations for equitable governance and intergroup harmony.⁴⁷ For instance, the works of Zakariyah Oseni and Umar Ibrahim do not merely articulate Islamic principles but actively reinterpret them through the lens of modern

⁴⁶ Zakariyah I Oseni, "Modern Arabic and Islamic Studies in Bendel State of Nigeria," *Institute of Muslim Minority Affairs. Journal* 8, no. 1 (1987): 183–92; Oseni, *Al-Mahdubatul Adabiyya Li Tulaab Gharb Afrikiya*; Uthman Idrees Kankawi, "Al-Munajat Fi Al-Adab Al-'Arabiyy An-Nijiriyy (Dirasah Uslubiyyah Limunajat Zakariyah Idris Oboh Husain)," *El Harakah: Jurnal Budaya Islam* 23, no. 2 (2021): 371–96.

⁴⁷ Samee-Ullah Bhat, "Concept of Tawhid (Unity of God) in Islam: A Study of Relevant Qur'anic Text," *International Journal of Historical Insight and Research* 4 (2018): 20–27; Edosomwan and Peterson, "A History of Oral and Written Storytelling in Nigeria."

Nigerian concerns such as political corruption, gender equity, and social injustice.⁴⁸ These writers employ Arabic literary forms as platforms for moral critique and civic engagement, thereby enriching Nigeria's moral vocabulary and strengthening the fabric of its civil discourse.

Educational structures constitute another domain wherein the synthesis of Islamic thought and Arabic literature has yielded substantive influence. The proliferation of Islamic schools (madāris), especially in northern Nigeria, represents a tangible legacy of this synthesis. While historically oriented toward religious instruction, these institutions have increasingly integrated modern curricula encompassing science, mathematics, and social studies, thus embodying a dual-knowledge paradigm.⁴⁹ This hybridisation of Islamic and Western pedagogical systems mirrors the reformist ethos of seminal scholars such as Sheikh Adam Abdullah Al-Ilory, whose efforts to harmonise classical Islamic scholarship with contemporary educational needs continue to inform Islamic pedagogy in Nigeria.⁵⁰ However, this evolving model faces serious structural challenges—including underfunding, lack of teacher training, and inadequate infrastructure—that threaten its long-term viability. Addressing these deficiencies will require concerted policy efforts aimed at strengthening institutional frameworks, enriching teacher competencies, and embedding ethical reasoning rooted in Islamic traditions into curricular reform. By fostering critical inquiry and spiritual consciousness concurrently, the education system can produce citizens who are not only intellectually equipped but morally attuned to Nigeria's developmental imperatives.

Beyond education, Arabic literature serves as a reservoir of cultural memory and intellectual capital, which, if strategically institutionalised, can inform cultural policy and nation-building. The preservation and dissemination of Arabic literary heritage—ranging from didactic poetry to political treatises—can help cultivate national pride and intercultural dialogue. As Hunwick and Ibrahim have shown, Arabic in Nigeria is not a foreign import but a domesticated medium of intellectual production, reinterpreted through local oral idioms and indigenous themes.⁵¹ Consequently, initiatives that promote the translation of classical Arabic texts into local languages such as Hausa, Yoruba, and Igbo are crucial. These efforts not only democratise access to a traditionally elite knowledge base but also reinforce Arabic literature's embeddedness in Nigeria's multilingual and multicultural context.⁵² Similarly, policy frameworks that support Arabic literary festivals, interfaith academic symposia, and community publishing houses can transform Arabic literature from a scholarly pursuit into a living cultural force.

⁴⁸ Oseni, *Al-Mahdubatul Adabiyya Li Tulaab Gharb Afrikiya*; Raji, *A Modern Trend in Nigerian Arabic Literature: The Contribution of Umar Ibrahim*.

⁴⁹ Sani and Anwar, "Madrasa and Its Development in Nigeria."

⁵⁰ Al-Ilory, *Ad-Deenu Naseeha*.

⁵¹ Hunwick, "The Arabic Literary Tradition of Nigeria"; Ibrahim, "Being Muslim at the Intersection of Islam and Popular Cultures in Nigeria."

⁵² Ayuba, "The Arabic Language: Its Relevance to Nigerian Development."

The interfaith potential embedded within Islamic thought and Arabic literature also warrants attention. In a country where religious identity often delineates social boundaries and political affiliations, the ethical universals articulated in Islamic philosophical texts—such as justice, compassion, and humility—can serve as a common ground for interreligious dialogue. Arabic literature, when viewed not merely as theological exposition but as a humanistic enterprise, offers a medium through which diverse communities can engage in mutual recognition and shared moral reflection.⁵³ The literary legacy of figures like Nana Asma'u, who combined Sufi ethics with Hausa poetic conventions to promote women's education and social harmony, exemplifies the power of such synthesis.⁵⁴ Her writings, far from being relics of the past, continue to inspire intercommunal understanding and gender advocacy. In this light, Arabic literature becomes a vehicle for advancing not only Muslim self-definition but also peaceful coexistence in Nigeria's religiously plural society.

Nonetheless, the rise of religious extremism has presented significant threats to the constructive potential of Islamic thought and Arabic literature. Radical groups have appropriated Islamic vocabulary to legitimise violence and sectarian exclusion, thereby distorting Islam's intellectual traditions and moral vision.⁵⁵ This ideological hijacking poses dual risks: it undermines public trust in Islamic institutions and jeopardises the rich legacy of Arabic literary scholarship in Nigeria. As this study shows, reclaiming Islamic discourse from the grips of extremism necessitates robust counter-narratives rooted in authentic Islamic teachings. Community-based education initiatives, accessible literary publications, and digital media campaigns grounded in Qur'anic hermeneutics and prophetic traditions can serve as effective tools in this regard.⁵⁶ Moreover, the digital dissemination of Arabic texts, particularly those foregrounding tolerance, pluralism, and scholarly rigour, can subvert extremist narratives and restore confidence in the emancipatory dimensions of Islamic thought.

A further impediment to the wider impact of Arabic literary heritage is the linguistic barrier it poses to the majority of Nigerian Muslims. Although Arabic retains its sacral function in Islamic rituals, it remains an unfamiliar language for most Nigerians outside of formal madrasah education. This linguistic disconnect restricts access to foundational Islamic texts and diminishes engagement with Arabic literary creativity. While translation is essential, it must be complemented by proactive efforts to institutionalise Arabic instruction as a subject of intellectual pursuit rather than mere religious obligation. Community-based Arabic literacy programmes and state-supported curricular integration

⁵³ Adam Folorunsho Olowo, "A Discourse on Inter-Religion Tension in a Pluralized Nigeria: Examining the Role of Interfaith Dialogue as a Panacea" (Hamad Bin Khalifa University (Qatar), 2021).

⁵⁴ Mack and Boyd, *One Woman's Jihad: Nana Asma'u, Scholar and Scribe*.

⁵⁵ Abimbola Adesoji, "The Boko Haram Uprising and Islamic Revivalism in Nigeria," *Afrika Spectrum* 45, no. 2 (2010): 95–108, <https://doi.org/10.2307/25798918>; Jonathan Matusitz and Doris Wesley, "Case Study: Boko Haram's Digital Media," in *Jihad in Sub-Saharan Africa: The Role of Digital Media* (Springer, 2024), 179–208.

⁵⁶ Ibrahim, "Islam in the Digital Infrastructure: The Rise of Islamic Cyber Practices in Northern Nigeria."

can serve to normalise Arabic literacy as a cultural and educational objective (Ayuba, 2012; Ringim, 2024). Such an approach would not only enable wider participation in Islamic intellectual traditions but also contribute to Nigeria's epistemic sovereignty by allowing local scholars to engage directly with source texts.

Despite these challenges, the prospects for revitalising the intersection of Islamic thought and Arabic literature in Nigeria are both promising and multifaceted. The creative industries—ranging from poetry and prose to film and music—offer fertile ground for reimagining Arabic literary themes in contemporary modalities. Writers such as Zakariyah Oseni exemplify how Arabic literature can transcend its classical confines to address urgent social questions, thereby broadening its audience and impact.⁵⁷ Similarly, the ethical principles embedded in Islamic economic thought, particularly around equity and non-exploitation, can inform Nigeria's growing Islamic finance sector, fostering inclusive economic development and ethical investment.⁵⁸ These applications demonstrate that Arabic literature and Islamic thought are not static artefacts but living traditions with transformative potential.

A comparative reflection shows the uniqueness of Nigeria's Islamic literary culture when set against other African contexts, such as the Swahili coast. While Swahili Arabic literature evolved through maritime trade networks and Indo-Arabic cultural exchanges, northern Nigeria's tradition emerged from trans-Saharan routes and the legacy of the Sokoto Caliphate.⁵⁹ These distinctions shape the thematic concerns and institutional trajectories of Arabic literature in both regions and suggest the importance of context-specific policy and curricular designs.

International collaboration remains an underutilised but vital strategy for amplifying Nigeria's Arabic-Islamic intellectual heritage. Cross-border academic partnerships, translation exchanges, and joint archival projects with institutions in North Africa, the Middle East, and Southeast Asia could strengthen Nigeria's research base and global scholarly visibility.⁶⁰ Exposure to comparative discourses also enables Nigerian scholars to situate their work within broader Islamicate traditions, thereby enhancing both the analytical depth and the international relevance of their contributions.

Conclusion

This study has illuminated the intricate convergence between Islamic thought and Arabic literature in Nigeria, revealing it as both a repository of cultural memory and a living discourse that continues to shape the nation's intellectual and social trajectory. Through an engagement with figures such as Shehu Usman Ĥan Fodio and Nana Asma'u, whose works

⁵⁷ Oseni, "Modern Arabic and Islamic Studies in Bendel State of Nigeria"; Oseni, *Al-Mahdubatul Adabiyya Li Tulaab Gharb Afrikiya*.

⁵⁸ Muhammad Awais et al., *The Islamic Economic System: Cultural Context in a Global Economy* (Taylor & Francis, 2024).

⁵⁹ Levtzion and Pouwels, *The History of Islam in Africa*; Zehnle, *A Geography of Jihad: Sokoto Jihadism and the Islamic Frontier in West Africa*.

⁶⁰ Hunwick, "The Arabic Literary Tradition of Nigeria"; Wail S Hassan, "Arabic and the Paradigms of Comparison," in *Futures of Comparative Literature* (Routledge, 2017), 187–94.

exemplify the moral and epistemic richness of Islamic scholarship, and through the modern interventions of scholars like Âdam Abdullah Al-Ilory, the research shows a sustained dialectic between inherited tradition and contemporary exigencies. These intersecting narratives do not merely conserve a historical and spiritual legacy; they actively inform responses to present-day challenges, including ethical governance, educational reform, gender justice, and cultural pluralism.

The analysis further demonstrates how Islamic and Arabic literary discourses operate not in isolation but as mutually reinforcing modalities that mediate identity, ethics, and power within Nigeria's pluralistic society. The pedagogical implications are especially significant: embedding Arabic literary traditions within formal educational structures—while also supporting translation into local languages—could democratise access to this intellectual heritage and stimulate cross-cultural literacy. Similarly, recognising Arabic literature's potential as a medium for interfaith and intercultural dialogue offers a viable platform for confronting the fractures often exacerbated by religious extremism and social exclusion.

Yet, this inquiry is not without its limitations. The study's reliance on translated materials, in lieu of inaccessible original manuscripts, inevitably introduces interpretive constraints. Moreover, the emphasis on northern Nigeria, while methodologically justified by the historical concentration of Islamic scholarship in the region, risks marginalising the diverse contributions from southern Muslim communities. Future research would benefit from a broader regional scope and deeper engagement with vernacular articulations of Arabic-Islamic traditions.

Despite these constraints, the intersection of Islamic thought and Arabic literature remains a potent axis for scholarly, cultural, and civic engagement in Nigeria. Its dynamism lies in its capacity to evolve, to accommodate the moral imperatives of the present without severing ties with the intellectual architectures of the past. As Nigeria continues to navigate the complexities of postcolonial modernity, these converging discourses offer not only critical resources for social renewal but also alternative imaginaries for envisioning an inclusive and ethically grounded national future. Sustained academic and institutional investment in this field is therefore not merely desirable—it is imperative for cultivating a pluralistic, reflective, and culturally self-aware society.

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