

**THE LINGUISTIC ACTIVITIES OF THE SOKOTO
JIHAD LEADERS: A SURVEY OF A PRE-COLONIAL
MODEL OF LANGUAGE POLICY**

BY

**DR. DAHIRU MUHAMMAD ARGUNGU
DEPARTMENT OF MODERN EUROPEAN LANGUAGES
USMANU DANFODIYO UNIVERSITY SOKOTO**

**BEING PAPER PRESENTED AT THE CONFERENCE OF
ULAMA ORGANISED TO COMMEMORATE THE TWO
HUNDREDED YEARS OF SOKOTO CALIPHATE HELD AT
THE ATTAHIRU DALHATU BAFARAWA INSTITUTE OF
QURANIC AND GENERAL STUDIES, SOKOTO
FROM 23-25TH JULY, 2004**

Introduction

Modern nation-states have a tendency of attributing everything that is seen to be associated with progress, civilization or development to them or beginning with their emergence on the political map of the world. Even worse is to see everything modern or civilization in the colonized world as a product of colonialism or the political independence these countries were given by their colonial masters. Yet in many pre-colonial societies powerful cultures, empires and civilizations emerged comparable to today's systems, when seen in the context of their times. One particular example is the Sokoto Jihad Leaders who not only established a government based largely on religious ideals but also instituted many policies in the fields of politics, administration and economy. Thus this paper aims to examine the linguistic activities of the Sokoto Jihad as a model of pre-colonial language policy. The paper is divided into five sections with the following sub-headings: language policy, socio-linguistic background, ideology and language, a pyramidal language policy, summary and conclusion.

Language policy

Language is the chief medium of human communication. It permeates almost every aspect of our life, be it religious, political, economic or some other activities. Because of its central role in our life, therefore, language cannot be taken for granted or left without some form of planning. In the modern, secular state language is seen as a powerful national symbol and an important criterion in what constitutes a political entity. This means governments attach importance to language, and, in fact, do care about who says what, where when and how. As a result, governments pursue language matters and look for solutions to them. Thus a language policy is the organized pursuit of solutions to language problems, whatever their nature, in society. Linguists consider language as a national resource like any other resource such as oil, agriculture or water resources, hence the need to plan it. When language planners (or socio-linguists) are called upon by governments to advise on

language matters, they make decisions mainly on two issues. First, they advise governments on which language or languages (or varieties of them) are to be chosen and serve which function in the community. Second, they examine these languages and identify any deficiencies or inadequacies they may have and correct the (such as the development of scientific vocabulary or standardization of sounds or the creation of a writing system for the chosen language). When language is treated in this way, it is said to be planned and when decisions are backed by law and implemented in society, a language policy comes into force.

Sociolinguistic Background

The Sokoto Caliphate was a product of intense religious, intellectual and jihad activities led by the Shehu Usman Danfodiyo culminating into its establishment in 1804. The Caliphate was established against a complex sociolinguistic background following several years of intermingling of people of diverse cultures, languages and religions. Linguistically, the territories under the control of the Caliphate contained some of the major groupings of languages as classified by Greenberg (1972). These included such families of languages as the Afro-Asiatic of which Hausa is a major member representing its Chadic branch. There are also a number of languages belonging to the Niger- Kordofomian group, among them Fulfulde. Within the Nilo-Saharan family, we have such languages as Songhai and Zarma. For several centuries, these languages had established themselves as the lingua francae of the various communities living there. In short, by the time the Sokoto Jihad was accomplished and the Caliphate established, about two hundred different languages (or varieties of them) existed in an area of about 150,000 square miles made up of thirty emirates with numerous sub-emirates (Usman, 1979:34). Against such a complex sociolinguistic background, coupled with their desire to accomplish their intellectual religious goals, it was inevitable that the Sokoto Jihad leaders had to manage not only religious, educational and administrative matters but language issues as well. In other words,

language became central to the Jihad activities and for this reason policies had to be devised. Which language (or its varieties) was to be chosen and to serve which purpose, where, when and how, within the contexts of their diverse intellectual activities.

Ideology, Society and Language

Every ideological undertaking, whether religious or secular, has to be backed by an efficient medium of communication, if it is to succeed. In the Sokoto Caliphate, the linguistic diversity of its territories provided a sound basis for the choice of various languages for religious teaching and propagation. In such a society languages diffused and spread with ease and among the people multilingualism was common. In other words, many people could speak more than one language, a phenomenon that facilitated social mobility and provided sound inter-ethnic relations in society. For instance, the Shehu himself was said to be fluent in such languages as Tamashek and Zarma while his fluency in Fulfulde (his own mother-tongue) included his ability to speak the dialects of Fouta Toro, Fouta Jallon, Adamawa and Sahara (Saidu, 1979). We are further told of his additional linguistic ability

Ka sani cewa Shehu shina tsara asalin Addini
kuma shina fassarawa cikin Halshen mutanen da
ke halarce wurinsa.

Know that Shehu used to prepare lessons On the
fundamentals of religion, and he Used to translate
these in the languages Of the various people that
attend to his Teachings

Similarly, the Shehu's immediate deputies, among them his brother Abdullahi and Muhammad Bello, his son, and Nana Asma'u, his daughter, and several others in the Ulama (scholars) camp of the Caliphate were polyglots, typical of the complex sociolinguistic of their society.

A Pyramidal Language Policy

The language policy in Sokoto was pyramidal because it centered on three major languages, namely Arabic, Fulfulde and Hausa. This is confirmed by the writings of the Jihad leaders, which number hundreds. Today much of religious education in northern Nigeria and beyond is nourished by these writings in many areas of knowledge - grammar, literature, philosophy, medicine, etc.

As for the implementation of the policy, each of the three major languages above was accorded a role. At the apex of the pyramid was Arabic, which was used mainly by the intellectual cream of the Jihad. Thus the use of Arabic in society was largely restricted to the writing of classical literature aimed mostly for scholars and their immediate students who later translate the literature to the public through teaching and preaching, a tradition that has continued even today. A case in point with regard to the use of Arabic is the Shehu's *magnum opum*, the *Ihya-us-Sunnah* and Adullahi's many *Diyas*, among them *Diya-ul-Rukkam*. They wrote these and many others in classical Arabic. Talking about the deep knowledge of Arabic of the Jihad leaders, Smith noted with astonishment.

The breadth of their knowledge of Arabic writings is particularly remarkable when it is realized that none of them ever visited North Africa or the Middle East.

It is believed that the Sokoto Jihad leaders did most of their writings in Arabic. Through this intensive and extensive intellectual jihad, the Ulama in Sokoto promoted the use of Arabic, thus contributing to its spread in society.

As for Fulfulde and Hausa, these two languages constituted the base of the pyramid with each serving an ethno-linguistic function in grass root religious teaching and propagation. Unlike Arabic that for certain reasons was restricted in society, Fulfulde and Hausa were/are the popular media upon

which the bulk of the Islamic teaching (through translation) fell. Thus in order to reach down to the people the jihad leaders concentrated much of their teaching and preaching in Fulfulde and Hausa, both in oral and written spheres of the languages. No doubt, other languages such as Tamashek were used, but these didn't have the appeal and popularity of Fulfulde and Hausa.

Summary

In a nutshell, the linguistic activities of the Sokoto Jihad leaders have demonstrated to us. Their awareness and response to language matters because they knew the value and the inevitable links between language and ideology. Also, they were aware of the constraints imposed by their complex multilingual society to which they had to find an appropriate and efficient response in matters of teaching and preaching of Islam. The strong desire to impart religious instruction on a mass basis and within a multilingual and semi-literate society of their time all necessitated a viable language policy, and the Jihad leaders were able to meet up the challenge through their prudent management of language matters. We should remember that the Sokoto Ulama did all these at a time when neither the newspaper nor the radio nor television existed. They channeled their efforts mainly through writings involving long hours of massive copying of texts and orations to the public.

Conclusion

The linguistic activities of the Sokoto Jihad Ulama certainly have shown that the development of language policy neither emanated with the modern, secular nation-state nor the post-colonial era or, to be more appropriate the European colonialists. Indeed, contemporary governments have a lot to learn from the linguistic policies of the Sokoto Ulama. Among the most important observations about their handling of language issues are: first, that because of their commitment to a higher ideal (i.e. the teaching of Islam), they were not beclouded by linguistic chauvinism. For instance, they could have instituted or promoted Fulfulde at the expense of other languages around, as is common in

some modern-day policies where some languages are consciously promoted, in favour of more widely spread and prestigious and functional languages. Second, the Sokoto leaders didn't see multilingualism as a problem, as is often the case in many modern societies where linguistic pluralism is seen as a curse. Instead, the Ulama in Sokoto saw multilingualism as a positive thing and converted the situation into a more profitable linguistic venture where language was accorded a role and function to serve their religious goals. Third, the many oral and written poems they produced in various languages has helped to expose the importance of literature in any educational and literacy undertaking especially in public enlightenment campaigns. This is in addition to exposing of the beauties of the languages they used in their religious campaigns and propagation. And as we earlier said, they achieved these successes when mass media included neither radio, television nor newspaper, but only the popular sermons or the hand-written word in one form or another.

References

Smith, A. (1979) The Contemporary Significance of the Academic Ideals of the Sokoto Jihad in Studies in the History of the Sokoto Caliphate, edited by Y.B. Usman, New York.

Usman, Y. B. (1979) The Transformation of Political Communities: Some Notes on a Significant Dimension of the Sokoto Jihad in the History of the Sokoto Caliphate, edited by Y.B. Usman, New York.

Sa'idu, A. G. (1979) The Significance of the Shehu's sermons and poems in Ajami in the History of the Sokoto Caliphate, edited by Y.B. Usman, New York.

Wilks, I. (1970) in African Historiographical Traditions, Old and New in Africa Discovers Her Past, edited J.D. Fage, London.

Hiskett, M. (1975) A History of Hausa Islamic Verse, London.

Smith, A. (1979) The Contemporary Significance of the Academic Ideals of the Sokoto Jihad in Studies in the History of the Sokoto Caliphate, edited by Y.B. Usman, New York.

Usman, Y. B. (1979) The Transformation of Political Communities: Some Notes on a Significant Dimension of the Sokoto Jihad in the History of the Sokoto Caliphate, edited by Y.B. Usman, New York.

Sa'idu, A. G. (1979) The Significance of the Shehu's sermons and poems in Ajami in the History of the Sokoto Caliphate, edited by Y.B. Usman, New York.

Wilks, I. (1970) in African Historiographical Traditions, Old and New in Africa Discovers Her Past, edited J.D. Fage, London.

Hiskett, M. (1975) A History of Hausa Islamic Verse, London.