



AFRICA IN MOVIMENTO / AFRICA ON THE MOVE

MACERATA 17 -20/09/2014

TITLE: NEW INSIGHTS INTO PRE-COLONIAL WEST AFRICA: ARABIC AND ARABIC-BASED SCRIPT AS A MEDIUM OF DOCUMENTATION AND COMMUNICATION

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ABSTRACT: T

Even if we discountenance the Egyptian hieroglyphics because of its crudeness, a dominant view in Western discursive tradition that Africa was a 'Dark Continent' with no documentary historical sources before Colonialism has been proven to be false. The advent of Islam, hence of literacy and numeracy in Arabic to West Africa from as early as the 10th-century further underpins the argument in favour of a deep root in historical antiquity of the use of Arabic by natives in official, personal, local, trans-local, and transnational interactions and narratives. My paper will explore the thematic and generic spectrum covered by this tradition in Nigeria as representative for West Africa. Moreover, evidence of the use of Arabic-based scripts going back to the 15/16thC for local West African languages, for example, Fulfulde, Wolof, Hausa, Yoruba, Kanembu abound, and the ingenuity of the natives in adapting the Arabic script for such local phonemes or graphemes for which there are no corresponding Arabic equivalents has been quite remarkable. Apart from the use of Arabic-based script in the popularization of religious texts, historical documentation, utilitarian purposes, among others, it has become a medium for personal and cultural narratives. For example, in writing (auto)biographies, prison accounts, short stories, political pamphleteering, commercial advertisements, and proselytism. My presentation, using diachronic and synchronic tools, will examine some of the processes involved in the evolution and standardization (if any) of this medium of local and transnational exchange of ideas within and across the Sudanic African society.

AUTHOR'S ACADEMIC PROFILE:

Amidu Sanni, a professor of Middle Eastern & African studies, has lectured at the Lagos State University since 1984 and has served as a Visiting professor to some European and African universities. With over 170 publications in Arabic and English, his current area of interest includes the West African manuscript heritage as a tool for new knowledge and post-Colonial discourse