Using Arabic Script in Writing African Languages, Revisiting ISESCO's Experience 25 Years Later: Field Successes and Shortcomings

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ABSTRACT

25 years ago, Acting upon UNESCO's pioneering experience of using Arabic script in transcribing African languages, ISESCO took upon itself to carry on this project, initiated in early eighties by the Senegalese Director General of the latter organisation Amadou-Mahtar M'bow with the intention of conducting forcefully literacy programmes in native African languages and rehabilitating related oral traditions and cultures. At the time, the project in question looked extremely complex and very intricate given the number of local languages in presence as well as both social and political hurdles strewn in its way.

In the implementation of this ambitious cultural and educational undertaking, ISESCO set forth a number of objectives given here below:

1. To refine the Arabic script, develop it phonetically and technically and adapt it to writing the various languages of Africa in an accurate scientific way;
2. Safeguard the cultural heritage of the African peoples and develop their languages and cultures with the view to keeping pace with the scientific and technological revolution and developments in communication and telecommunications;
3. Secure mutual linkage among the languages of the African peoples by means of adopting a common Standard Arabic Script, being a bond connecting them with the language of the Qur'an and further securing communication and exchange between the speakers of these languages; and
4. The development of an acceptable and simple script for the local languages that were, hitherto, unwritten in order to use these languages in literacy programmes.

To implement efficiently this programme, ISESCO adopted a scientific methodology based on the following approach:

1. Determine the frequency of the distinctive features of non-Arabic sounds in the African languages in question in order to design machines for printing these non-Arabic languages in Arabic script;

2. Check the characters adopted on the basis of a scientifically accurate analysis of symbols, and original sound forms of languages, and examine them on various levels with a view of finding the distinctive sound features of the languages in question;

3. Set up acceptable writing symbols in the light of historical, pedagogical, linguistic and aesthetic factors; and

4. Renew the distinctive sound features and the transcription symbols (characters) of special glottal stops.

The standardisation of the Arabic script, to allow its use in the transcription of target African languages was not an easy task to undertake, it took seven years of hard labour and several workshops and seminars all over the African continent with the active participation of linguists, educators, literacy experts and officials before agreeing on a set of symbols that became the official Arab-African Alphabet (AAA).

The African languages, whose writing has been standardised using the Arabic script by adopting a sound system in conformity with their phonetic identity and phonological imprint, are as follows:

1. Tamasheq;

2. Pular/Fulfulde;

3. Haoussa;

4. Soinke/ Sarakolé;

5. Mandingue;

6. Sosso;

7. Knouri;

8. Songhoy/ Zarma;

9. Wolof;

10. Yoruba;

11. Swahili;

12. Dinké;

13. Comorian;

14. Oromo;

15. Loughanda;

16. Loughbara;

17. Tajrini;

18. Nobia;

19. Somalian;

20. Zagawia; and

21. Alamba/Woday.

As a follow-up to this painful standardisation, ISESCO produced, the first Arab-African typewriter that was distributed all over Africa to government authorities and NGOs working in the field of literacy and adult education starting 1994. As result, many Arabic script or Adjami associations came into existence both in west and east Africa and started using this new script in literacy, adult education, informal education, health education and HIV awareness campaigns. At the same time, local newspapers and publications saw the light of day, first in Fouta Djalon in Guinea and later in Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso.

Encouraged by this positive African response, educational institutions such as the International University of Africa, based in Khartoum, Soudan offered an MA programme to students on the Arab-African script to encourage them to do research on this topic. The university is currently developing related software with the help of commercial institutions and international standards organizations.

Currently, ISESCO, at the request of some Asian Islamic countries is undertaking the necessary measures to launch the programme officially in Asia, following the success achieved unilaterally by Brunei Darussalam in switching from Latin alphabet to Arabic alphabet in everyday life.

In this paper, I will deal with the African languages transcribed in Arabic script and the success they have achieved and failures they have registered in the use of the script in literacy and adult education programmes and the rehabilitation of oral literature and history. In addition to what went right and what went wrong in the

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experience and ways of encouraging and promoting the approach in the African continent.