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Original Paper

The (Socio)Linguistic Identities of Islam in Northern Cameroon

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Abstract

This paper hypothesizes that such sociolinguistic identities as Kanuri, Shuwa Arabic, Fulfulde and Wandala which are all Cameroon languages are so much linked to Islam in Northern Cameroon that their development are parallel that of Islam in this part of the country. In order to verify this, observation, three hundred questionnaires and communication with Muslim faithful were used in three Friday mosques in Maroua, Garoua and Ngaoundere, the main cities of this half of the country. The second dimension of Spolky's (2006) theory on language and religion was used as frame. The paper finds that there is mutuality between these languages and Islam not just due to historical factors, but also because of the influence on the making of a sociolinguistic repertoires and the building of (new) religious communities. As these linguistic identities are reminiscent of Islam, they stand as the main linguistic vehicles of Islam in Northern Cameroon.

Keywords

Islam, Shuwa Arabic, Kanuri, Fulfulde, Wandala, Language, religion

1. Introduction

A brief glance at works conducted in the field of language and religion shows that the interplay between these two sides of the same coin has been examined more from the perspectives of language variation, shift, maintenance, policy and planning (Albakry & Ofori, 2011; Bitja'a-Kody, 2001; Kouega, 2008, etc.). The study of the intricacies of the combination between language and religion was somehow stuck due to lack of a comprehensive theoretical framework. It really started gaining ground after Spolsky (2006) developed his four-fold theory on the relationships between language and religion, perhaps as a reaction to Fishman's (2006) plea for the elaboration of a theoretical framework that can serve as a sort of anchorage for the many case studies. It found a positive echo in his "Decalogue of

basic theoretical perspectives for a sociology of language and religion" (Fishman, 2006) which certainly served as an inspiring landmark for Spolsky (2006). As this subfield is developing, so too are the orientations related to it. Religious Languages, language use and practice, religious language management, etc., are making this sub-branch of sociolinguistics very vibrant. Indeed language and religion are very closely intertwined. Religious identity is based on, and perpetuated in narratives expressed in a specific language. Language and religion are related; in our secular age, however, that relationship is no longer consistent. The two may feed upon one another; language may substitute for religion; or religion may trump language.

The spread of religions (especially those of the book, that is Judaism, Christianity and Islam) in the world entailed the spread and even the empowerment of some languages. Language and religion constitute an interesting pair for sociolinguistic investigations. Hardy (2000) discusses cases of language-religion pairs in a bid to highlight cases where they have influence on each other. His theory bases on such pairs as Latin/Christianity, Hebrew/Judaism and Arabic/Islam and discusses cases of parallel development of language and religion. He holds that in parallel development, a religion has stronger influence on the language; in other words, religion fuels the strength of the language while language is the carrier. Al-Serat (1988) examines the linguistic influence of the Qur'an and the impact of its revelation on Arabic. He argues that, while the Arabic language was extremely effective as the medium for the revelation of the Holy Qur'an and the dissemination of the new faith, the language benefited enormously from the new role it acquired with the advent of Islam.

The revelation of the Qur'an in Arabic set the scene for a unique and lasting relationship between the language and Islam. On the one hand, Arabic provided a very effective medium for communicating the message of the religion. On the other hand, Islam helped Arabic to acquire the universal status which it has continued to enjoy since the Middle Ages, emerging as one of the principal world languages. It has been argued that Arabic has not simply remained 'ancillary to Islam' but that it has also been significant as a means of cultural and national revival in Arabic-speaking countries. Arabic is a rich and expressive language and has played an important role in the cultural preservation of the Arabic-speaking people. However, without the bond it has had with Islam, Arabic would probably not have undergone the internal revolution it did, nor expanded beyond the borders of the Arabian Peninsula with such speed and magnitude. This view is shared by Hardy (n.d.) who holds that language and religion each have an influence on the other during the ongoing course of development. With the varied forms of language and the many different religions of the world, this influence does not always take the same form. One case of the many that can be focused on is when the religion and the language develop in parallel. Religions that develop parallel to a language are more likely to influence the development and growth of the language than the language is to influence the religion. When a language is adopted by a religion the religion will be influenced more strongly by the language until the point of where the two are held together so strongly that the development is parallel.

According to Rana (1993), the relationship of Islam and the Qur'an to Arabic involves more than just

the use of a language to communicate a divine message. There are a number of factors which set this relationship apart from that which exists between other holy books and the languages in which they appeared, for Arabic has come to be closely associated with Islam, and in this way has acquired a semi-official status. It is implicit that anyone professing Islam cannot ignore the role Arabic plays in his faith. Embracing Islam, therefore, entails exposure to, and familiarity with, the Arabic language. Such familiarity is necessitated by the fact that memorization and recitation of Qur'anic verses in their original language is necessary for the performance of the daily rituals. Other holy books may have had an impact on the languages in which they originally appeared, but the impact that Islam and the Qur'an have had on Arabic appears to be unique in its extent and durability. It has often been the case that a holy book appears in a given language and is then translated into other languages, in which it continues to be read and recited during the performance of rituals, but, in the case of the Qur'an, although it has been translated into many languages, these translations cannot replace the original language as a language of worship, which continues to be Arabic for all Muslims, native speakers and others. Other holy books also came to be associated with specific languages, such as the Torah with Hebrew, and, perhaps less intimately, the New Testament with Greek and Latin. However, the nature of the relationship between the Qur'an and Arabic is still unique. Other holy books also came to be associated with specific languages, such as the Torah with Hebrew, and, perhaps less intimately, the New Testament with Greek and Latin. However, the nature of the relationship between the Qur'an and Arabic is still unique. Other holy books also came to be associated with specific languages, such as the Torah with Hebrew, and, perhaps less intimately, the New Testament with Greek and Latin. However, the nature of the relationship between the Qur'an and Arabic is still unique. Other holy books also came to be associated with specific languages, such as the Torah with Hebrew, and, perhaps less intimately, the New Testament with Greek and Latin. However, the nature of the relationship between the Qur'an and Arabic is still unique.

In Northern Cameroon, it is hypothesized that the first ethnic groups to get into contact with Islam in history and which are also the ethnic groups having the largest number of Muslim faithful nationwide are the Fulani, Kanuri, Wandala and Shuwa Arabs. They have become very intimate with Islam to the extent that there is no Muslim faithful in this part of the country who is not sociolinguistically proficient or associated with at least one of those identities, which have gained the status of lingua francas and minor lingua francas. While it is true that these languages are not just ethnic languages (in so far as they serve as default languages in cross-linguistic communications), they are the sociolinguistic faces of Islam in this half of the country where Islam is more represented than anywhere else in the country (5Lasseur, 2005; Seignobos & Christian Iyebi Mandjeck, 2004). The present paper thus sets out to verify this hypothesis, bearing in mind that, other sociolinguistic identities may well appear from the analysis of the data without much change, though.

The theoretical paradigm adopted for this study is Spolsky's (2006) theory on language and religion. The most relevant of all four dimensions he puts forward is that on mutuality of language and religion.

As a matter of fact, Spolsky (2006) proposes four elaborate dimensions for the effective study of the interplay between language and religion. These are:

1) Effects of religion on language: Possible research topics include the influence of religion on language choice, language maintenance as well as (lexical) borrowing.

2) The mutuality of language and religion: Research within this dimension deals, for example, with the interplay between religions and languages in the changing sociolinguistic repertoire of multilingual towns. At stake here is the interaction between multilingualism and religious pluralism.

3) Effects of language on religion: A possible focus of study is the contribution of language (such as used in prayer, e.g.) to building a religious community.

4) Language, religion and literacy: Research within this dimension looks, for example, at the influence of language and religion on literacy.

Given the suitability of the second dimension 2, the present paper anchors itself in this theory in order to unravel possible mutualities between some languages and Islam in Northern Cameroon.

2. Methodology

Three different instruments were used to collect the data for the present paper. It is worthy to note that, for more representativity, urban centers were preferred. The cities of Maroua, Garoua and Ngaoundere were thus selected. For practical reasons, the data were collected around the mosques. These instruments are taken in turn below.

2.1 Observation

It was deemed wise to observe the linguistic habits of the Muslim faithful, prior to any investigation. Observation took place around the mosques as the Muslim faithful were about to pray. During this stage, focus was laid on the languages they used, notably within-group languages. The languages used in out-group communications were also observed. The objective was to establish their sociolinguistic identities.

2.2 Interviews

Though it would appear that questions on the linguistic and/or ethnic identity in religion are sometimes considered taboos, a certain number of interviews were granted by some key informants. These were people who share the idea that people should not hide their ethnolinguistic identity. A total of nine interviews were conducted in the three cities, that is three in each.

2.3 Questionnaires

A ten-item questionnaire was distributed to one hundred people in each town, for a total of three hundred for the whole study. The number of returned questionnaires is presented alongside the distributed questionnaires in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Distribution of Questionnaires

City	Maroua	Garoua	Ngaoundere	Total
Questionnaires	**100**	**100**	**100**	**300**
Returns	**80**	**66**	**74**	**220**
Percentage	**80%**	**66%**	**74%**	**73.33%**

The coverage of data collected through questionnaire was 73.33%, which is a reasonable average.

3. Results

The analysis of the data followed the structure of the questionnaire. As a matter of fact, the informants were asked what their native language is, the language(s) they use with children at home, and in their residential areas. They were also asked what languages they used with the other Muslim faithful and the language (s) used in sermons. For more practical reasons, the analysis and discussions of the data were split into the subsections below.

3.1 The Native Languages of Muslim Faithful in the City of Maroua

The informants were asked to indicate their native languages in the questionnaires. Their answers are summarized below.

Table 2. The Native Languages of Muslim Faithful in Maroua

	Fulfulde	Kanuri	Wandala	Shuwa Arabic	Mofu	Guiziga	Total
Number	15	10	05	08	20	22	80
Percentage	18.75%	10%	5%	10%	20%	27.5%	100%

The main ethnic groups of Muslim faithful in the city of Maroua were found to be Guiziga, Mofu, Fulfulde, Shuwa Arabic, Kanuri and Wandala respectively.

3.2 Languages Used by the Muslim Faithful in the City of Maroua

This section considers the languages used by the faithful in Maroua. It takes in turn 3.2.1), the languages used in the households, 3.2.2), the language used in Muslims residential areas, 5.1.3, the languages used in out-group communications, and 3.2.3), the languages used in sermons.

3.2.1 Languages Used in the Households by the Muslim Faithful

The family is considered the first level of socialization. The language(s) family members use in their daily conversations can help discriminate between mother tongue and native language.

The informants were asked to indicate the language they use with their family members. The answers to this question collected from the three towns are shown below.

Table 3. Languages Used by the Muslim Faithful in the Households in Maroua

	Fulfulde	Kanuri	Wandala	Shuwa Arabic	French	Total
Number	48	12	10	09	01	80
Percentage	60%	15	12.5%	11.25%	1.25%	100%

Table 2 shows that Fulfulde comes first as the language spoken in the households, followed by Kanuri, Wandala, Shuwa Arabic and French.

3.2.2 Languages used in Muslims' Residential areas in Maroua

In order to identify the languages used outside the households, the informants were asked what language(s) was/were used by the faithful in their residential areas.

Table 4. Language(s) used in Muslims' Residential Areas

Language	Fulfulde	French	Total
Number	75	05	80
Percentage	93.75%	6.25%	100%

Fulfulde and French were found to be the languages used in out-group communications in Muslims' residential areas. The predominance of fulfulde is evident, while the use of French can be accounted for by the fact that Maroua is a cosmopolitan Francophone hub where French, the first official language is the language used by the young educated people who most often than not switch from Fulfulde to French.

Though only French and Fulfulde were the only languages indicated by the respondents, it does not mean they are the only languages spoken by the residents. They are just default languages used in out-group communications. In effect, as indicated above, some other languages are spoken by the Muslim faithful at home but when it comes to out-group conversations, Fulfulde or French is preferred. They can rightly be referred to as lingua francas.

3.2.3 Languages Used in Sermons in Maroua

It is evident that classical Arabic is the main language used in the Islamic faith. Previous works conducted in this line (Kouega & Baimada, 2012; Baimada, 2011, Baimada, 2018b, etc.) testify to the fact that sermons are not conducted solely in Arabic. Due to lack of proficiency in this religious language, translation is required. But most often than not, depending on the sociolinguistc profile of the largest portion of faithful and cosmopolitanism, default languages are used. Table 5 below summaries the answers provided by the respondents.

Table 5. Languages Used for Sermons in the Mosques of Maroua

Language	Fulfulde	Arabic	Total
Number	78	02	80
Percentage	97.5%	2.5%	100%

It was reported that when the sermon is conducted in Arabic, translation into a more intelligible language is needed. This default language is Fulfulde which is understood by the largest majority of Muslim faithful. In 97.5% of cases, Fulfulde is used for sermons, without any translations.

Through personal communications with some worshipers, it was found that, in the city of Maroua, Fulfulde is spoken by the largest majority of worshipers, except the Shuwa Arabs and the Musgum people who constitute a non-negligible size of the Islamic population in this part of the country. In effect, it was observed that some Muslim faithful from these two ethnic groups do not communicate in this language. They rather choose French as their default language.

3.3 The Native Languages of Muslims in Garoua

The informants sampled in Garoua were relatively fewer in number, compared to those of Maroua as indicated in the methodology section above. They were asked to indicate their native languages. Their answers are summarized in Table 6 below.

Table 6. The Native Languages of Muslim Faithful in the City of Garoua

Languages	Fulfulde	Kanuri	Fali	Shuwa Arabic	Hausa	Guidar	Total
Number	12	05	20	06	08	15	66
Percentage	18.18%	7.57%	30.31%	9.09%	12.12%	22.73%	100%

Six different languages were identified as the native languages of the Muslim faithful, namely Fali, Guidar, Fulfulde, Hausa, Shuwa Arabic and Kanuri.

Fali, Guidar and Fulfulde are known as local languages in North Cameroon (Lewis 2009) but Kanuri and Shuwa Arabic are from neighboring Far North (Mayo Sava and Logone and Chari Divisions).

3.3 Languages Used by the Muslim Faithful in the City of Garoua

Three sub-questions were asked under this section. They are considered below.

3.3.1 Languages Used in the Households by the Muslim Faithful

The question as to what language(s) was/were used in the households was answered and summarized in Table 7 below.

Table 7. Languages Used by the Muslim Faithful in the Households in Maroua

Languages	Fulfulde	Kanuri	Hausa	Total
Number	50	10	06	66
Percentage	75.75%	15.15%	9.1%	100%

As Table 7 shows, three languages were identified as the languages used in the households. They are, Fulfulde, Kanuri and Hausa. These languages are also known as lingua francas (Fulfulde) and minor lingua francas (Kanuri & Hausa) by previous works (Kouega, 2007; Lewis, 2009).

Due to their vehicular status, they have imposed themselves on many native languages in many urban centers. Moreover, due to the fact that they are some of the main ethnolinguistic identities of the first Muslim converts in what is today known as Cameroon, these languages are used by the greatest majority of Muslim faithful as default languages for socialization. They have become mother tongues to many children by replacing native languages in households.

3.3.2 Languages used in Muslims' Residential Areas in Garoua

In order to know the language used in the streets of Garoua, the respondents were asked to indicate what language (s) was/were used in their neighborhood. Their answers are summarized below.

Table 8. Language (s) Used in Muslims' Residential Areas in Garoua

Language	Fulfulde	Total
Number	66	66
Percentage	100%	100%

Fulfulde was found to be the lone language used as default language in Muslims residential areas in Garoua.

3.3.3 Languages Used in Sermons in Garoua

As part of the exercise, the informants had to indicate in what language the sermons were conducted in their mosques.

Table 9. Languages Used for Sermons in Garoua

Language	Fulfulde	Total
Number	66	66
Percentage	100%	100%

The language used for sermons in the mosques of Garoua was also found to be Fulfulde, as reported in table 9 above.

The last setting considered in this study was the city of Ngaoundere which falls among the main urban

centers of the Northern half of the country. The same exercise as in previous cities was applied.

3.4 The Native Languages of Muslim Faithful in the City of Ngaoundere

The city of Ngaoundere, which is the capital city of the Adamawa Region of Cameroon is called after the neighboring Adamawa State in Nigeria with which they share a lot historical landmarks together. It is home to many native languages and stands as a hub and epicenter of Islam which spread to the neighboring Noun Division in the West Region. The native languages of Muslim faithful in this cosmopolitan city are reported in Table 10 below.

Table 10. Native Languages of Muslim Faithful in the City of Ngaoundere

Languages	Mbum	Fulfulde	Bamun	Hausa	Total
Number	26	17	21	10	74
Percentage	35.13%	22.98%	28.38%	13.51%	100%

Mbum, which is the native language of the local people inhabiting the city of Ngaoundere appears first, followed by Bamun, fulfulde and Hausa. This classification is a reflection of the sociology of the majority of the Muslim faithful inhabiting this city.

The Bamun people constitute a very large community, leaving in a quarter were hey make up a majority of the inhabitants. They are from the Noun and were converted into Islam by the Fulani people in history. As far as the Hausa people are concerned, the Adamawa Region is their stronghold. Their number is far more important in this Region in general and in the city of Ngaoundere in particular than anywhere else in the country. The Fulani of the Adamawa Region in general and the Vida Division in particular, called *Wollarbe* (as opposed to the *Yillaga* and *Feerobe* of the North and Far North Regions respectively) also constitute a good portion of the Muslim community of the Region.

3.5 Languages Used by the Muslim Faithful in the city of Ngaoundere

In order to identify the languages used by Muslim faithful in the city of Ngaoundere, three questions were asked in relation to their use in the households, in town and in sermons. Answers to these are provided in the sub-sections below.

3.5.1 Languages Used in the Households by the Muslim Faithful

The Table below shows the languages used by the family members.

Table 11. Languages Used in the Households by the Muslims in Ngaoundere

Languages	Mbum	Fulfulde	Bamun	Hausa	Total
Number	04	39	21	10	74
Percentage	5.40%	52.71%	28.38%	13.51%	100%

Though with different percentages, the same languages which were found to be the native languages of the faithful were identified as the languages used in the households by the Muslims. Fulfulde is used in the households by people from different ethnic groups. This can be inferred from the increase in the percentage. More than half of the respondents reported that they use it at home. A good number of them are from Mbum ethnic groups. It is spoken by the native speakers of all the languages identified.

3.5.2 Languages Used in Muslims' Residential areas in Ngaoundere

Fulfulde was reported as the language used in Muslims' residential areas as indicated in the table below.

Table 12. Language (s) Used in Muslims' Residential Areas in Ngaoundere

Language	Fulfulde	Total
Number	74	74
Percentage	100%	100%

3.5.3 Languages Used for Sermons in Ngaoundere

The informants indicated that the language used in sermons is Fulfulde. This applies both for the first and second sermon.

Table 13. Languages Used for Sermons in Ngaoundere

Language	Fulfulde	Total
Number	74	74
Percentage	100%	100%

The last two sub-sections (3.6.2 and 3.6.3) have permitted to establish the proofs of the strength of Fulfulde in residential areas and in sermons. Contrarily, the question on the native languages of the faithful and the languages they use at home has permitted to show different languages which unfortunately ate limited in scope, reason why they cannot be used in cross-linguistic contexts as default languages such as Fulfulde.

4. Discussion

This paper has examined the sociolinguistic identities of Muslim communities of Northern Cameroon firstly by looking at the micro-structure levels notably the native languages of the faithful, secondly the languages they use daily at home and by examining some macro-structure levels of sociolinguistics, mainly the residential areas and the Mosques. It would appear that due to some historical factors and the close links they have benefited from their early contact with Islam, some language units are default languages used as vehicles and embodiments of Islamic communities in the northern half of Cameroon. By placing Arabic in the heart of the doctrine, Islam promotes its use and contributes to spread it

around the world. It is clear that wherever Islam is, Arabic will de facto be, though not in the form of a vehicular language, but like an exceptional language. It was sometimes thought that proficiency in Arabic encourages Islam. Many researchers have proven for example that Arabized education results into increased *Islamisation*.

In a research work conducted in Algeria, Coffman (1995) demonstrates that the correlation between Arabic and Islam cuts across all ethnic groups, even among Berbers, the most fervently pro-western and anti-Islamist group in the country. Young people who recently graduated from Arabized programs show more Islamic attitudes than their parents and older siblings. A question then arises as to know why Arabic encourages Islam. The researcher accounts for his finding by the fact that Arabized education results in increased *Islamisation*. His first explanation is Arabic's different symbolic order. While he notes that it is easy for a teenager to tell his girlfriend 'I love you', it is quite difficult to say it in Arabic. He then attempts an answer to this: the Arabic language, he says is a language that has gone through the funnel of Islamic thought. Arabic is a prisoner of Islam. It is a sacred language and, remains the language of modesty. The particular structure of the Arabic language and its allusions mean that a child who studies and thinks in Arabic will develop distinct historical and cultural references, cognitive approaches, attitudes, and styles of reasoning. Secondly, Arabic and Islam are complementary and mutually reinforcing. *Arabization* and *Islamisation* are inseparable parts of a single cultural ideal that now pervades the Arab world. The Arabized students prefer the Arabic-language press and radio, which differ in ideological orientation from the Francophone media. The Arabic language media clearly have a more Islamic and anti-Western approach to political and social issues; and the radio stations' choice of music is Arab, in contrast to the Western music on French-language radio. During the current period of great social upheaval and uncertainty, these students tend to gravitate toward movements and activities more in harmony with their Arabophone references. Arabized individuals find the Islamic groups' symbols, linguistic style, and cultural referents more familiar and persuasive.

In Northern Cameroon for example, Arabic is taught in Qur'anic schools alongside Islamic dogma. These schools are attended only by young Muslims and run by an Imam. In some Franco-Arabic schools, Arabic is taught formally alongside French (and sometimes English), but there again, Islamic faith remains compulsory for students. It is therefore difficult for non-native speakers (especially in non-Arab countries) to learn Arabic without being a Muslim.

As it spread across Africa, Islam has encountered and influenced many ethno-linguistic identities. If this is more visible in North Africa, in sub-saharan Africa it has completely changed the ethnic and linguistic habits of the main groups which converted. Some of these ethnic groups are not only predominantly Muslim, but also culturally and linguistically different from others. In Nigeria for example, Literature on language in/and Islam has also looked into the impact of the religion on the ethnic identities of its worshipers. Oladipo (2006) argues that the Islamic religion via Arabic, its language of liturgy has impacted the Yoruba language. He demonstrates that a number of lexical items

covering aspects of material and intellectual cultures which were foreign to Yoruba before the contact with Arabic-Islamic culture have been borrowed. Invoking the Whorfian principle of linguistic determinism, he shows that Islam, via Arabic, has not only impacted Yoruba lexicon but also has caused changes in Yoruba world view, providing illustration from Yoruba naming practices where the influence of the Islamic religion on Yoruba personal identity is immense. A Yoruba person who converts to Islam drops their Yoruba indigenous names for Arabic-Islamic names. Although the history and narratives surrounding names are still very important to the Yoruba, with Islam some attempts at accommodation are evident in attempts to relate such histories to the lives of past prophets or important personalities in early Islam.

After identifying the native languages of the faithful, it was found that they were not necessarily used in the households, nor do they serve as tools for communication beyond the family level. Some languages frequently emerged, depending on the setting. As such, in the city of Maroua, Shuwa Arabic, Fulfulde, Kanuri, Wandala, Mofu, Guiziga were identified as the native languages, but in religious activities and activities of religious socializations, Fulfulde and French prevail. In the city of Garoua, Fulfulde, Kanuri, Hausa, Fali, Shuwa Arabic, Guidar were found to be the native languages of the faithful, the first three being used in the households. In the streets and in the Mosques, only Fulfulde was reported to be used (in sermons). Finally, in the city of Ngaoundere, Mbum, Fulfulde, Bamun, Hausa were identified as the languages of the faithful. All four languages were also said to be used in the households, but only Fulfulde was found to be used in the streets by the Muslim faithful and in sermons. Thus, while some language units have just the status of native language, others are used in the households, in Muslim quarters and even in the sermons. The languages which impose themselves on others at home, in the streets and in religious services permit to build up (new) religious language communities, speaking and socializing in some specific languages. This, putatively makes conversion into Islam a gateway to proficiency into one or at least one of these languages.

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