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ORCID: 0000-0002-6723-4333 ***Maqāma* as Small/Minor Literature in Nigeria¹****Abstract**

In this paper, I explore the development of Arabic language in Nigeria across different historical dimensions and its implications for the intellectual production of those scholars who use it for literary purposes today. Arabic, as one of the prominent languages in Nigeria, continues to serve as an important medium for education, scholarship, and erudition, despite not receiving official recognition. I focus on the recent evolution of the *maqāma* (pl. *maqāmāt*) as a result of the enduring Arabic literary tradition, particularly influenced by classical *maqāma* works such as *Maqāmāt Al-Ḥarīrī*. I investigate how the knowledge and writings of Arabic literature have enabled “Arabists” in Nigeria to redefine their literary positionality within the national literary landscape. Additionally, I examine to what extent their Arabic works, particularly their *maqāma*; conform to the concepts of “minor” or “small” literature, drawing on the analyses of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari regarding Franz Kafka and Pascale Casanova’s interpretations of the concept.

Keywords: *Maqāma*, Arabic literature, Nigerian literature, theory of literature, history of literature

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Introduction: the historical context of minority status of Arabic in Nigeria

The historical context of Arabic, and Arabic literature, in Nigeria is a topic of significance, particularly when considering its development within the global landscape of Arabic literature. The concept of small literature, as conceptualized by Pascale Casanova, refers to literature produced by minority groups in a major language or vice-versa. In this context, the *maqāma*, a classical Arabic genre, can be classified as “small literature” in its Nigerian context.² How this works out is the focus of this paper through the general survey of the Arabic linguistic and literary landscape of Nigeria.

To understand this dimension of Arabic in Nigeria, it is essential to explore its historical roots, particularly during the precolonial era. The emergence of Arabic in West Africa predates the spread of Islam in the region.³ Initially, Arabic was the primary written language used by the inhabitants of West Africa. Although historical records from the initial period are scarce, indications suggest that Arabic was employed for administrative, commercial, and ancillary purposes by the people of the Ghana Empire and later by the Mali and Songhai Empires.⁴ While Islam played a crucial role in solidifying and maintaining the presence of Arabic in West Africa, scholars such as Farias de Mores, Nehemia Levtzion, and John Hunwick have alluded to the presence of Arabic writing in the region as early as the eleventh century CE.⁵ By the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, Arabic had evolved to the extent that indigenous scholars were producing valuable scholarly works for local audiences. Arabic had become a *lingua franca* and was utilized for academic and administrative purposes. Thus, a speech community sprang up where religious and social communication of different dimensions took root in Arabic.⁶

From the sixteenth century onwards, Arabic scholarship flourished in the Sudanic Africa, with scholars producing works of creative and scholarly merit. This period marked the ascendancy of Arabic as a language of scholarship and governance, with scholars such as Ahmad Baba of Timbuktu (1556–1627) gaining renown for their erudition and prolific literary output not only in the region but also across the Islamic world of the time.⁷ Arabic served as a medium of communication not only among scholars but also among the elite and a significant segment of the population. Thus, knowing Arabic became

² Jordan Ljukanov, based on Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's theory, defines minor literature as the “literature a minority makes in major language”, which, he claims, is in tandem with Pascale Casanova's concept of “small” literature. For more, see: Jordan Ljukanov, ‘Introduction: Translating a Small Literature to the Global Market. The Bulgarian Case and Beyond’, *Studi Slavistici* 11 (2014), p. 215.

³ Cf. John O. Hunwick, ‘West Africa and the Arabic Language’, *Sudanic Africa* 15 (2004), pp. 133–144.

⁴ For more, see: David C. Conrad, *Empires of the Medieval West Africa: Ghana, Mali, and Songhay*, New York 2005.

⁵ One of the earliest uses of Arabic, as mentioned by Hunwick was inscription found on tombs in a Sudanic African region, see: John O. Hunwick, ‘West Africa and the Arabic Language’, p. 135.

⁶ John O. Hunwick, ‘The Influence of Arabic in West Africa: A Preliminary Historical Survey’, *Transactions of the Historical Society of Ghana* 7 (1964), p. 25.

⁷ On Ahmad Baba and his works see: John O. Hunwick (ed.), *Arabic Literature of Africa, Volume 4: The Writings of Western Sudanic Africa*, Leiden 2003, pp. 17–31. See also: John O. Hunwick and Alida Jay Boyle,

a lucrative job which made scholars to be at the center of decision-making.⁸ Despite its widespread usage and scholarly development, Arabic did not become the language of the majority; rather, it remained in the domain of the educated and political elite.⁹

This flourishing trend in the use of Arabic during this time was in part because the language remained the only factor that unified the multilingual West African societies. Since there was no orthography in other indigenous languages, Arabic became the important recourse when there was need to document intellectual, political and transactional accounts. Even when it was problematic to use the language for documentation, its Alphabets were adopted for putting down thoughts in local language, this was later to be known as *Ajami* and there were important intellectual properties bequeathed to humanity through this avenue.¹⁰

In the eighteenth century, Arabic assumed a pivotal role in West African regions, particularly within Islamic and Jihadi states like Sokoto. Arabic was adopted as the state language in Borno Empire, Sokoto Islamic state, and the western Sudanic Tukuloor Empire spearheaded by Al-Hāḡḡ 'Umar Tāll (d. 1864), to mention but the prominent ones.¹¹ Although Arabic maintained its academic prestige and governmental status, it did not become the predominant language among the general populace. Arabic coexisted with local languages such as Hausa and Fulfulde, which were more commonly spoken by the masses. The popularity and scholarly achievements associated with Arabic language during this period influenced the development of intellectual works in local languages using Arabic scripts (*Ajami*).¹² Thus, the minority status of Arabic in the social circles persisted while its majority position was hitherto flourishing among the elites.¹³ The popularity accrued to Arabic language, however, could not be paralleled by other languages since it cut across the region, bridging tribal and socio-political gaps.

The Hidden Treasures of Timbuktu: Historic City of Islamic Africa, with 193 Colour Illustrations, London 2008, pp. 133–134.

⁸ John O. Hunwick, 'The Influence of Arabic in West Africa: A Preliminary Historical Survey', pp. 33–34.

⁹ For more, see: Dorrit van Dalen, *Doubt, Scholarship and Society in 17th-Century Central Sudanic Africa*, Leiden 2016.

¹⁰ *Ajami* as a terminology depicts writings in African languages using Arabic scripts. For more on its development in West Africa see: Fiona Mc Laughlin, 'Ajami Writing Practices in Atlantic-Speaking Africa', in: *The Oxford Guide to the Atlantic Languages of West Africa*, Oxford 2024, pp. 605–619; Lameen Souag, 'Ajami in West Africa', *Afrikanistik Online* (2010), pp. 1–10; Falou Ngom, *Muslim Beyond the Arab World: The Odyssey of 'Ajami and the Muridiyya*, New York 2016.

¹¹ Roman Loimeier, *Muslim Societies in Africa: A Historical Anthropology*, Bloomington 2013, p. 108. For more on Sokoto Jihad, see: Murray Last, *The Sokoto Caliphate*, London 1967; for Borno and its 'Ulama, see: Hamidu Bobboyi, 'The 'Ulama of Borno: A Study of the Relations between Scholars and State under the Sayfawa, 1470–1808' (PhD diss. Northwestern University, 1992); for Al-Hāḡḡ 'Umar, see: Hunwick, *Arabic Literature of Africa, Volume 4*, pp. 214–222; Amir Syed, 'Al-Hājj 'Umar Tāl and the Realm of the Written: Mastery, Mobility and Islamic Authority in 19th Century West Africa' (PhD diss., University of Michigan 2017).

¹² For more, see: John O. Hunwick, 'The Arabic Qasida in West Africa: Forms, Themes, and Contents', in *Qasida Poetry in Islamic Asia and Africa*, Leiden 1996, pp. 83–97.

¹³ Jan Záhořík, 'Languages in Sub-Saharan Africa in a Broader Socio-Political Perspective', *Acta Orientalia Vilnensia* 11/2 (2010), pp. 77–90.

The impact of colonialism on West Africa significantly influenced the status of the Arabic language. Colonial powers replaced Arabic with their own languages, such as English and French, in official and administrative functions. Consequently, Arabic transitioned from being a semi-majority language, utilized in administration and commerce, to a language that has become marginalized.¹⁴ The academic status of Arabic language was also to be restricted to private hands of the scholars and was thus localized. Despite this marginalization, Arabic continued to be valued by Muslims for its religious significance. Following independence (between 1957 and 1960s), European languages, such as English, French, and at some point, German, continued to maintain their dominance in the entire West Africa, relegating Arabic to a secondary status. The post-independence literary landscape in West Africa, especially Nigeria, has been characterized by efforts to preserve linguistic diversity and promote local languages. While Muslims place significant importance on the Arabic language due to its religious significance, the development of Arabic as a means of communication and education during this period was largely optional, with scholars utilizing it to assert influence within their communities. Rather than focusing on the advancement of Arabic by the postcolonial Nigerian government, there was a concerted push to elevate local languages, gradually integrating them into national, official, and academic spheres. Despite its unifying nature as a language that unified many people in Nigeria based on its religious importance, the linguistic disparities and inconsistent language policies that characterized post-independence West African nations have engendered challenges for the preservation and viability of Arabic, even as a secondary language.¹⁵

Consequently, post-independence literary ambience in West Africa has been characterized by a multifaceted struggle between languages and, so to speak, literatures. For example, many languages in Nigeria, such as French and Arabic, move back and forth from one position to the other in the list of national languages officially recognized to be used and taught in schools.¹⁶ While English language maintain its official status as language of overall state administration and education, the three most spoken local languages Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo maintain their indigenous national statuses most especially in the areas where they were mostly spoken, Arabic suffers a series of attack and relegation from this official list. Only in the Northern Nigeria can one find a kind of partial official recognition for the Arabic language. Even there, it is usually restricted to some circles of Arabic-oriented institutions majorly known as Qur'ānic schools.¹⁷

¹⁴ For the argument on the colonial partition of the Sudanic Africa and how Western Africa was strategically marginalized from the North, which resulted in the wider marginalization of the Sudanic Africa from the Arabic-Islamic world, see: Ousmane Oumar Kane, *Beyond Timbuktu: An Intellectual History of Muslim West Africa*, Cambridge 2016, pp. 23–28.

¹⁵ Herbert Igboanusi, 'Linguistic Inequalities in Nigeria and Minority Language Education', *Sociolinguistic Studies* 1/3 (2007), pp. 516–517.

¹⁶ For instance, Arabic was the second official language for some times during the 1990s, see: Ibidem, p. 516.

¹⁷ Cf. Helen N. Boyle, *Quranic Schools: Agents of Preservation and Change*, New York 2004; This is not peculiar to the region as Qur'ānic schooling was also a common phenomenon in the medieval Islamic time, see:

Despite the setbacks, Arabic continues to flourish in the hand of private scholars who took it upon themselves to not only promote the language but also to work towards making Arabic-Islamic education their top priority.

Towards the end of the colonial time in Nigeria, many modernized Arabic schools alongside the numerous traditional ones were established both in the North and in the South, majorly through various efforts of adaptation, national and international cultural assimilation and charitable affiliations. In contemporary Nigeria the number of those Arabic schools continues to rise, and Arabic continues to thrive in the private educational institutions and Qur'ānic schools. Despite facing challenges to its official recognition, Arabic remains a vital medium of communication for scholars, students, and stakeholders in Arabic-Islamic education. While Arabic literature may not receive the same level of representation in the national literary landscape as the so-called national literatures, i.e. the body of literary works produced in English or other native languages and represented in the national literary discourse,¹⁸ its enduring significance as a language of Islam and academic excellence remains intact.¹⁹ This political and invariably the cultural minority status of Arabic has made its literature not to be represented in the discourse on the Nigerian national literature.

Development of Arabic Writing and the Public Reception

Before examining the impact of Arabic language challenges on its literature in Nigeria, it is important to acknowledge that literary works have been consistently produced throughout the various phases of Arabic language development. Even during the colonial era, when Arabic faced a decline in popularity, scholars continued to write in Arabic for diverse purposes. Therefore, it is pertinent to provide a brief overview of the Arabic literary tradition in the central Bilād as-Sūdān region (now covering parts of Niger, Nigeria and Chad) across different historical periods. It is worth noting that the academic environment within the Nigerian Arabic-Islamic society is primarily characterized by an

Muhsin Jāsim al-Mūsawī, *The Medieval Islamic Republic of Letters: Arabic Knowledge Construction*, Notre Dame 2015, p. 1.

¹⁸ For more, see: Christopher Clausen, “‘National Literatures’ in English: Toward a New Paradigm”, *New Literary History* 25/1 (1994), pp. 61–72.

¹⁹ For the development of Islamic schooling in West Africa, see: Louis Brenner, *Controlling Knowledge: Religion, Power, and Schooling in a West African Muslim Society*, Bloomington 2001; Louis Brenner, ‘Two Paradigms of Islamic Schooling in West Africa’, in: *Modes de transmission de la culture religieuse en Islam*, ed. Hassan Elboudrari, Cairo 1993, pp. 159–180. For the Nigerian context, see: Stefan Reichmuth, ‘Islamic Education and Scholarship in Sub-Saharan Africa’, in: *The History of Islam in Africa*, eds. Nehemia Levtzion and Randall L. Pouwels, Ohio 2000, pp. 419–440; Stefan Reichmuth, ‘Islamic Learning and ‘Western Education’ in Nigeria: Concepts, Institutions, and Conflicts’, in: *Échanges franco-allemands sur l’Afrique: lettres et sciences humaines*, Bayreuth 1994, pp. 175–184; Muhammad Sani Umar, ‘Education and Islamic Trends in Northern Nigeria’, *Africa Today* 48/2 (2001), pp. 127–150.

informal, private system of knowledge dissemination.²⁰ This society comprises scholars and students who are integral members of the Nigerian Muslim community, with the production and transmission of Arabic and Islamic knowledge predominantly in the hands of individuals who inherit and pass on the tradition to others.²¹

The earliest evidence of Arabic writing in the Bilād as-Sūdān region dates back to the eleventh century, coinciding with the spread of Islam in the area.²² This period marked the beginning of a literary culture that gradually evolved alongside the advancement of Arabic usage. Despite the lack of comprehensive documentation, notable literary works, such as *Ta'liqāt 'alā Maqāmāt al-Ḥarīrī* ("Comments on the Assemblies of Al-Ḥarīrī") of Abū Ishāq Ibrāhīm Ibn Ya'qūb al-Kānimī (d. 608/1211 or 609/1212) (see below), emerged during this time, shaping the intellectual history of West Africa. The literary activities of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries provide insights into the writing, teaching, and learning practices of Arabic in West Africa. This era witnessed the establishment of literary traditions for educational and literary purposes, resulting in a flourishing autochthonous tradition of writing.²³ The Arabic literary landscape during this time encompassed various genres, including academic, devotional, polemical, and secular writings. Nigerian Arabic writers began to create early and basic forms of derivatives, including commentaries, summaries, and abridged versions of classical texts, alongside original prose and poetry. Genres on which both primary and derivative works are produced include but not limited to jurisprudence, theology, Qur'ān and *Tafsīr*, Arabic sciences, and literature. Poetry emerged as a dominant genre, while prose also held some significance within the scholastic endeavors of the region.²⁴

The writing traditions that originated in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries persisted throughout the precolonial era, with writers either adhering to ancestral models or drawing inspiration from works in the Arabophone world. However, there were attempts at modernizing knowledge in the postcolonial period, leading to some reformation and innovation in traditional writing practices. While these attempts initially coexisted with traditional approaches, they eventually paved the way for the creation of more original and creative literary works. These innovative works, encompassing genres such as novels, plays, and *maqāmas*, began to emerge as distinct categories within West African Arabic literature, as from the latter part of the twentieth century.

²⁰ For classification of Muslim society in West Africa and how knowledge and its activities have been used as source of power and agency see: Rüdiger Seesemann, 'Embodied Knowledge and "The Walking Qur'an": Lessons for the Study of Islam and Africa', *Journal of African Religion* 3/2 (2015), pp. 201–209.

²¹ Cf. for instance: Sakariyau Alabi Aliyu, 'Transmission of Learning in Modern Ilorin: A History of Islamic Education, 1897–2012' (PhD diss., Universiteit Leiden, 2015).

²² For more, see: Nehemia Levtzion, *Islam in West Africa: Religion, Society and Politics to 1800*, S.I. 2018.

²³ For more, see: John O. Hunwick, 'West Africa and the Arabic Language', pp. 135–140; John O. Hunwick, 'The Arabic Literary Tradition of Nigeria', *Research in African Literatures* 28/3 (1997), pp. 210–223. See also: A.B.H. Bivar and Mervyn Hiskett, 'The Arabic Literary Tradition of Nigeria to 1804: A Provisional Account', *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 25 (1962), pp. 104–149.

²⁴ Amy J. Devitt, *Writing Genres*, Carbondale 2004.

Resurgence of a Classical Arabic Genre

The resurgence of the *maqāma* genre in Nigeria during the late twentieth century can be attributed to the enduring influence of classical *maqāmāt* by renowned authors such as Abū ʾl-Faḍl Aḥmad Ibn al-Ḥusayn al-Hamaḍānī (358–398/968/1008), Abū Muḥammad al-Qāsim Ibn ʾAlī al-Ḥarīrī (446–516/1054–1122), Abū ʾl-Qāsim Maḥmud Ibn ʾUmar az-Zamaḥṣārī (d. 538/1144), and Nāṣif al-Yāziḡī (d. 1871). The tradition of *maqāma* writing has deep roots in the central Bilād al-Sūdān region, as evidenced by works like the *Taʾliqāt* of Al-Kānimī which exemplifies the prominence of *maqāma* writing in the literary activities of the region. The *Taʾliqāt* stands as the first known commentary work from the region.²⁵ Al-Kānimī, a renowned poet and grammarian who hailed from the Bilma Oasis of the Kanem,²⁶ exemplified the strong Arabic-Islamic cultural heritage of the Bilād as-Sūdān during this period.²⁷ He was not only recognized as a reputable writer in the region but also lived along with other scholars who, together with him, were prominent figures of the Bilād as-Sūdān known across the Islamic world, even beyond the Northern Africa, their closest neighbor.²⁸ The *Taʾliqāt* illustrates not only the profound influence of Al-Ḥarīrī, which remains a key source of inspiration for Nigerian writers, but also highlights the deep integration of the *Maqāmāt* into the socio-educational and literary framework of Nigerian scholars.²⁹ Furthermore, it reflects the extent of literary engagement that Nigerian scholars have undertaken with both Al-Ḥarīrī's works and other classical Arabic texts. This engagement is characterized by notable literary features, such as emulation, critical commentaries, and challenges to Al-Ḥarīrī's original work.

In the Sudanic African context, the *maqāma* genre, especially the *Maqāmāt* of Al-Ḥarīrī, which comprises fifty episodic tales featuring a picaresque hero and a narrator, has been regarded as a hallmark of literary excellence in Arabic literature. The reverence for the *maqāma* form, particularly that of Al-Ḥarīrī, extended to the belief in its unparalleled

²⁵ John O. Hunwick (ed.), *Arabic Literature of Africa, Volume 2: The Writings of Central Sudanic Africa*, Leiden 1995, p. 19; Mohammed Bencherifa, *Ibrāhīm al-Kānimī: (m. 609h/1212–1213), figure, illustre dans les relations culturelles entre le Maroc et Bilād al-Sūdān*, Rabat 1991, pp. 5–18; Ousmane Oumar Kane, *Beyond Timbuktu*, pp. 43–44.

²⁶ Kanem is one of the earliest empires in the central part of southern Sahara, see: Vincent Hiribarren, 'Kanem-Bornu Empire', in: *The Encyclopedia of Empire*, ed. John M. MacKenzie, 2016.

²⁷ John O. Hunwick, *Arabic Literature of Africa, Volume 2*, p. 18; Mohammed Bencherifa, *Ibrāhīm al-Kānimī*, p. 18.

²⁸ Many classical and medieval Arabic reference works, such as Al-ʾUmarī's (d. 749/1348) *Masālik al-abṣār fī mamālik al-amṣār*, attest to Al-Kānimī's reputation as an important scholar from the area, see: Aḥmad Ibn Yaḥyā al-ʾUmarī, *Masālik al-abṣār fī mamālik al-amṣār*, Volume 27, eds. Kāmil Sulaymān al-Ḡabbūrī, and Maḥdī an-Naḡm, Bayrūt 2005; see also: ʾAbduḥ Badawī, *Aṣ-Ṣuʾarāʾ as-sūd wa-ḥaṣāʾiṣḥum fī aṣ-ṣiʾr al-ʾarabī*, Al-Qāhira 1973, pp. 277–278.

²⁹ While the *Taʾliqāt* itself has not endured in its original format, remnants of its parts can be found in: Ibidem, p. 278; Mohammed Bencherifa, *Ibrāhīm al-Kānimī*, p. 19. For an exposition of the remnants of the *Taʾliqāt*, see my forthcoming article: 'Two "Muʾaraḍah" of al-Ḥarīrī's "Maqāma" #12 ("al-Dimashqiyyah")'.

nature, with the work being perceived as unattainable by an average Arabic writer.³⁰ This perception of the *maqāma*'s "inimitable" status in Nigeria is influenced by a socio-cultural factor whereby Nigerian scholars of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries held the *maqāma* in such high regard that it was deemed beyond the capabilities of ordinary writers, reflecting a sense of deference and admiration for their literary predecessors.³¹ The admiration for Al-Ḥarīrī's *Maqāmāt* especially stems from its role as a foundational model and source of inspiration for subsequent *maqāma* works, as exemplified by Al-Kanīmī's *Ta'liqāt*. The *Maqāmāt al-Ḥarīrī* has held significant socio-educational value, serving as an essential learning text in Nigeria's traditional Arabic educational context, both before and after the colonial time. Even today, it continues to shape contemporary Arabic writings, solidifying its status as one of the most enduring literary works that have navigated the transitions between classicism and modernism.³² Several Nigerian Arabic scholars have contributed to the revival of the *maqāma* genre, with more than ten notable collections of *maqāma* currently in existence.³³

The *maqāma* genre, as can be seen from above, has a significant impact on the entire landscape of Nigerian Arabic literature, encompassing both northern and southern regions with their diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. However, the latest wave of the *maqāma* literary activity has primarily emerged among Yoruba Nigerians, who are predominantly Southerners and who have produced new *maqāma* works that draw inspiration from the classical compositions of Al-Ḥarīrī and other notable *maqāma* authors. This development does not exclude the *maqāma* creations from being considered integral to Nigerian Arabic literature, as they enjoy national recognition beyond being associated solely with the Yoruba community. Indeed, Arabic literature in Nigeria functions on a national scale, transcending regional boundaries, based especially on its religious affiliation with Islam. Thus, the new *maqāmas* are more accurately described as Nigerian rather than exclusively Yoruba. The Arabic language serves as a unifying force among all tribes that engage with it.

The first known Nigerian *maqāma* work is Mas'ud Abdul-Ganiyy Adebayo's (1947–2023) *Al-Maqāma al-Oyowiyya*, an undated manuscript that has been circulating

³⁰ Devin J. Stewart, 'The *Maqāma*', in: *Arabic Literature in the Post-Classical Period*, eds. Roger Allen and D.S. Richards, New York 2006, pp. 145–158. For a general history of the *maqāma* development, see: Jaakko Hämeen-Anttila, *Maqāma: A History of a Genre*, Wiesbaden 2002.

³¹ That *Maqāmāt al-Ḥarīrī* is considered "inimitable" is a pre-modern Arabic phenomenon, see for more: Matthew L. Keegan, 'Throwing the Reins to the Reader: Hierarchy, Jurjānian Poetics, and Al-Muṭarrizī's Commentary on the *Maqāmāt*', *Journal of Abbasid Studies* 5/1–2 (2018), pp. 105–145.

³² For *Maqāmāt al-Ḥarīrī*'s influence on Nigerian Arabic literature, see: Barihi Adetunji, 'Dirāsa naqdiyya li-maqāmāt Al-Ḥarīrī wa-āṭārūhā fī al-Adab al-'Arabī ān-Nayḡīrī' (PhD diss., University of Ilorin 2004).

³³ For a general overview of the development of the classical Arabic *maqāma* in Nigeria, see: Sulaiman Adewale Alagunfon, *The Classical Arabic Maqāma in Yorubaland, Nigeria: Texts, Contexts, and Scholars*, Leiden 2025.

since 2002.³⁴ Adebayo, a graduate of Markaz³⁵ and Al-Azhar University of Cairo, is recognized for his sophisticated use of the Arabic language, which is evident in his autobiographical *maqāma* focusing on his experiences while contending for the Imamship of Oyo town, his home town.³⁶

Another celebrated *maqāma* work in Nigeria is *Maqāmāt al-Ilūrī*³⁷ by Muḥammad al-Awwal Abdul-Salam Ṣāhibul-Qurʾān Al-Ilūrī (b. 1973), first published in 2003.³⁸ This collection covers a wide range of contemporary issues and has been instrumental in religious propagation within the society. Ahmad Ibn Yusuf Ajegunle (b. 1980), known for his classical Arabic proficiency, has authored a *muʾāraḍa*³⁹ on the *Maqāmāt al-Ḥarīrī*, meticulously imitating its style while infusing Nigerian contexts into his work. Barihi Adetunji, a prolific academic in Yorubaland, has also made significant contributions to the *maqāma* genre with his work *Kiswat al-ʾarī fī maqāmāt ʾAbd al Bārī*, which has been widely celebrated as an exemplar of the genre.⁴⁰

The *Maqāmāt al-Ḥarīrī* holds a special place in Nigerian Arabic-Islamic education, influencing a wide array of cultural and scholarly activities.⁴¹ The text has been studied extensively and has even been utilized for talismanic and spiritual purposes.⁴² Glosses, such as the one by Al-Kānimī above and another by Muḥammad Bābā Ibn al-Muḥṭār al-Kuntī (931/1523–1014/1606) are also available on the classical text.⁴³

³⁴ See: Musa Tijani Beekolari, 'Dirāsa taḥlīliyya lil-Maqāma al-Oyowiyya taʿlīf aṣ-Ṣayḥ Masʿūd ʾAbd al-Ganī Adebayo' (Long Essay, University of Ilorin 2003).

³⁵ Markaz at-Taʾlīm al-ʾArabī wa-āl-Islāmī, Agege, Lagos, Nigeria is one of the popular Arabic schools in Nigeria today. Established in 1952 by the acclaimed historian and scholar Shaykh Adam Abdullah Al-Ilori (d. 1992). For more, see: Kazeem A. Omofowewa, 'Markaz and the Development of Arabic Language in South-Western Nigeria', *Journal of Oriental and African Studies* 18 (2009), pp. 267–276. On the founder, see: Razaq 'Deremi Abubakre (ed.), *Shaykh Adam Abdullahi Al-Ilori in the Tableau of Immortality*, 2 vols. (Ilorin/Riyadh 2012); Stefan Reichmuth, 'Islamische Bildung und Emanzipation der Muslime. Ṣāḥi Adam al-Ilūrī, Nigeria, und seine Schriften', *Die Welt des Islam* 30 (1990), pp. 201–210.

³⁶ Oyo is an ancient town in the Western Nigeria. It has served as the capital of the Yoruba in the pre-colonial Oyo Empire. For more, see: Henry John Drewal, John Pemberton III, and Rowland Abiodun, *Yoruba: Nine Centuries of African Art and Thought*, ed. Allen Wardwell, Japan 1989, pp. 148–162.

³⁷ Muhammad al-Awwal Abdul-Salām al-Ilūrī, *Maqāmāt al-Ilūrī*, Bayrūt 2017.

³⁸ Muḥammad al-Awwal Abdul-Salam Ṣāhibul-Qurʾān Al-Ilūrī (b. 1973) is an Ilorin-born scholar who belong to the Makondoro flock of modern ulama in Nigeria. For more, see: Rasheed A. Raji, 'The Makondoro Muslims of Nigeria: Continuity Through Learning Strategies', *Institute of Muslim Minority Affairs. Journal* 11/1 (1990), pp. 153–163. See also: Sulaiman Adewale Alagunfon, 'The Dynamics of Makondoro's Arabic-Islamic Pedagogy in Western Nigeria', *Islamic Studies* 62/1 (2023), pp. 43–63.

³⁹ See: Arie Schippers, 'Muʾāraḍa', in: *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, Vol. VII, Leiden 1993. See also: Beatrice Gründler, 'Originality in Imitation: Two *Muʾāraḍas* by Ibn Darrāj al-Qastallī', *Al-Qanṭara* 29/2 (2008), pp. 179–207; Amidu Olalekan Sanni, 'The Arabic Theory of Originality and Imitation in a New Light', *Asiatische Studien/Études Asiatiques* 54/3 (2000), pp. 597–608; Mattityahu Peled, 'On the Concept of Literary Influence in Classical Arabic Criticism', *Israel Oriental Studies* 11 (1991), pp. 37–46.

⁴⁰ Barihi Adetunji, *Kiswat al-ʾarī fī maqāmāt ʾAbd al-Bārī*, Ibadan 2017.

⁴¹ Stefan Reichmuth, 'Islamische Bildung und Emanzipation der Muslime', pp. 1–10.

⁴² Adetunji, 'Dirāsa naqdiyya li-maqāmāt al-Ḥarīrī wa-ātāruhā fī āl-adab al-ʾarabī ān-nayḡūrī', pp. 328–330.

⁴³ For more on him and the work, titled *Qitʾa ʾalā Maqāmāt al-Ḥarīrī*, see: Hunwick, *Arabic Literature of Africa, Volume 4*, pp. 34–35.

***Maqāma* as a Small/Minor Literature**

The analysis presented so far aims to assess the status of Arabic language and its literary products, particularly the *maqāma* genre, within the context of Nigerian literary landscape. Over the centuries, Arabic has served as a primary means of communication and has cultivated a rich literary tradition in the region. However, by applying the theoretical frameworks of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, as well as Pascale Casanova's concept of "small literature", we can evaluate how Arabic literature in Nigeria aligns with these paradigms. As put forward by Pascale Casanova, "[E]very literary space... has been subject to domination at one moment or another in its history".⁴⁴ This applies to the presence of Arabic literature in the Nigerian literary landscape, which has endured a complex history of dominance, subjugation, and resilience.

According to Deleuze and Guattari, minor literature involves using a major language in a minor way, marked by deterritorialization, political undertones, and collective value.⁴⁵ They based their analysis on the situation surrounding Franz Kafka's writing endeavors as a Jewish-German who tried to revolutionize and rationalize the writings of minority in a majority literary space. In the case of Arabic literature in contemporary Nigeria, these attributes are evident albeit with nuanced interpretations. Nigerian Arabic writers have successfully deterritorialized Arabic by infusing it with local languages and cultural contexts. They have localized the *maqāma* works, challenging the notion that Arabic literature belongs solely to the Arab world. Despite facing linguistic imperialism and political marginalization, Nigerian Arabic writers have revolutionized the literary space, altering the rules of engagement both nationally and within the global Arabophone literary sphere. They have made their works "to pass through the mirror and achieve recognition by changing the rules of game in the center".⁴⁶

The efforts of Nigerian *maqāma* writers to localize the genre have challenged established assumptions about West African literature and its place within global Arabic literary discourse. By reclaiming their position in the postcolonial literary landscape, these writers have defied marginalization and highlighted the literary achievements of the Sudanic African scholars. The struggle for recognition and immersion within national and international literary circles underscores the complexities of navigating the politics of national identity.

Casanova's concept of "small literature" resonates with the Nigerian literary context, emphasizing literary poverty, greatness, and the pursuit of literary freedom within dominated spaces as the foremost attributes of a small literature. With the *maqāma* genre, the Nigerian Arabic writers have carved out their own literary space within a national arena that often overlooks minor languages and literatures. Instead for their works to be tested by what

⁴⁴ Pascale Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*, (trans.) M.B. DeBevoise, Cambridge 2004, p. 175.

⁴⁵ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, (trans.) Dana Polan, Minneapolis 1986, pp. 16–17.

⁴⁶ Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*, p. 175.

Casanova termed “literary destitution”,⁴⁷ they have leveraged their works for socio-political impact and cultural agency, and have, therefore, asserted their relevance and significance, not only in Nigerian society but also in the global Arabic literary realm.⁴⁸

The preceding analysis of Arabic as a minority language in Nigeria, alongside the concept of small literature, serves to provide a framework for understanding the *maqāma* form within a cultural context that produce it. This approach does not aim to undermine its intrinsic value, particularly regarding its esteemed position in the global landscape of Arabic literature. The *maqāma* tradition, I argue, is versatile and serves as a literary expression that resonates within local cultural contexts, even among those who are not native Arabic speakers. The prevailing influence of Arabic and Islamic traditions in West Africa underscores the importance and validity of studying *maqāma* within such cultural settings. Therefore, without seeking to diminish or oversimplify non-Western literary practices through a Western lens, I suggest that cross-cultural literary studies can illuminate on the distinctive adaptations and expressions that emerge from cultural interactions over time and space. The intricate dynamics of Arabic in Nigeria, which prevent its literatures, such as *maqāma*, from achieving the same level of prominence as literatures in major languages like Yoruba, Hausa, Igbo, and English – even among Muslims, who form a significant majority in the population of Nigeria and who utilize the Arabic language for religious and academic purposes – also shape its reception, making Casanova’s theory somewhat relevant.

Conclusion

In sum, the development of Arabic literature in Nigeria can be viewed through multiple lenses, offering insights into its status as both “minor” and “small” literature within the contemporary literary landscape. While efforts to attain global or national recognition face challenges of political and literary domination, the Nigerian Arabic writers of the *maqāma* genre continue to produce works of literary and socio-political importance. Their endeavors reflect a strategic pursuit of recognition and influence, positioning them as essential voices within the Nigerian cultural milieu.

This development reveals the intricate interplay between local and global literary frameworks. Despite the challenges posed by political and cultural marginalization, Nigerian Arabic writers have managed to carve out a niche for themselves in the national and global literary landscape. By examining how they navigate these complexities, it becomes evident that Arabic literature and, specifically, the *maqāma* has a significant role to play in both local and global contexts. Whether classified as “minor” or “small” literature, the efforts of Nigerian *maqāma* writers reflect a vibrant literary tradition that continues to assert itself in the face of adversity.

⁴⁷ Ibidem, p. 181.

⁴⁸ For more, see: Muḥsin Jāsim al-Mūsawī, *The Medieval Islamic Republic of Letters*, pp. 89–118.

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