

# A Mufassir Not Just an Interpreter

---

Adewuni Salawu

## Abstract

*In most Muslim spiritual gatherings in Southwest Nigeria, as observed today, preaching is in a mixed Yoruba and Arabic languages. The leading preacher or Mufasiru is often compelled to interpret all Arabic words and sentences to the Yoruba crowd, which does not speak, read and write Arabic language. Ajanansi who is like Mufasiru a bilingual (Yoruba and Arabic) assists the latter in his spiritual work. Arowasi is also part of the team of Tafseer but he is not necessarily a bilingual. Ajanansi and Arowasi are invention of Yoruba Muslim circles necessitated by the adaptation of Tafsiri<sup>1</sup> and Mufassir in Yoruba lands. People often give the trio of Mufasiru, Ajanansi and Arowasi mixed and conflicting meaning of interpreter and commentator. The objective of this study is to clarify the meaning of Mufasiru, Ajanansi and Arowasi. Questionnaires were administered. Data were collated and sorted. A 60% of the respondents were of the view that Arowasi is an interpreter while 10% attribute the interpreter status to Mufasiru and Ajanansi. The study concludes that most grassroots Muslim in Southwest Nigeria give wrong meaning to Mufasiru who combines the function of interpreter and Qur'aan commentator.*

## Introduction

Mufassir is a loanword from Arabic often used in Yoruba Muslim circles of Southwest Nigeria. The word has not only metamorphosed morphologically to *Mufasiru*<sup>2</sup> to satisfy the Yoruba standard of pronunciation, it specially has conflicting meanings. *Mufasiru*, *Arowasi* and *Ajanansi* are three different words often

translated by interpreter. But *Arowasi* and *Ajanansi* are composed words necessitated by the adoption and adaptation of *Mufassir* into the Yoruba vocabulary. *Mufasiru*, *Arowasi* and *Ajanansi* are three different personalities that work for the same purpose, viz the spread and better understanding of Islam in Southwest Nigeria.

### **Objective of the Study**

The work attempts to clarify the meaning attached to the three words of *Mufasiru*, *Arowasi* and *Ajanansi* as regards its interpretation.

### **Research Methodology**

A total of 100 questionnaires were distributed to Yoruba Muslims in Southwest Nigeria to seek their views on the appellation and understanding of the three words, *Mufasiru*, *Arowasi*, and *Ajanansi*. Five video cassettes were also viewed to ascertain the functions attributed to the three characters of *Mufasiru*, *Arowasi* and *Ajanansi*.

### **Contacts with the Arabs**

The trans-Saharan impact on people of West Africa in general and Southwest Nigeria in particular is not negligible and it has spread deep from the towns to the rural villages. Its impact persists in West African life and has greatly affected the orientation and thought of people of the sub-region. At the beginning, Arabs and Berbers were the first and regular business partners of African peoples south of the Sahara. The presence of Europeans in the Bilad-as-Sudan (land of the Blacks) through the Sahara was minimal with Arabs playing the role of middlemen in the exchange of goods and technologies.

The contacts, forceful or peaceful, led to the spread of Islamic religion and Arab culture. Whatever may be their mission, almost all

Arabs who found themselves in the land of the Blacks worked directly or indirectly for the spread of Islam and the culture of Arabs. This resulted in the silent Muslim colonization of Sudan.

In fact, before the introduction of Islamic education and the advancement of the Arabic language, the only form of literature available in traditional Africa in the absence of the scriptures was oral literature. The spoken word appeared to have been of primary importance in the traditional African set up (Seymour 1988:170).

In some parts of West Africa people are so acculturated to Islam that they can hardly believe their ancestors had their own culture. Reflecting on the position of Islamic culture in Sudan, Jan Knappert (1970:85) concluded that the influence of Islam and Arabic words on Hausa, Fula, Manding, Swahili and Somali languages was profound with loanwords. These loanwords such as *Mufasiru* and *Tafsiri* are also remarkable among Yorubas.

In West Africa today, there is a class of Muslim clerics or Marabouts who are always identified with Islam. They know the Qur'aan and are familiar with the Arab culture. They speak Arabic and are privileged to have advanced instruction in their faith. They also speak their African language. Their principal role is to assist in coordinating Islamic activities such as to be an *Imam*, Islamic spiritual leader and a *Mufassir*. Sometimes they play the role of *Cadi* when necessary. This social class was transposed to West Africa across the Sahara (O'Brien 1971:24-29).

During the reign of Askia Muhammed, the *ulama* or Islamic teachers multiplied, and became powerful and influential in the state because they were learned people. Arabic was then the official language (Hodgking 1969:362). Cruise O'Brien thus describes the situation in Senegal:

The marabouts, from an early date, played an important part in the Wolof states as secretaries and advisors to the chiefs. Their ability to read and write was valued increasingly as a means of contacts with neighbouring rulers.

(O'Brien 1971:28)

These *ulama* persist in all corners of Yoruba lands and some are prominent among them and known as leading preachers or *Mufasiru*, that is an *ulama* that masters the spiritual language of Islam, the Arabic and the local language or the language of the converts.

Every mosque is automatically a centre of training and learning. In the medieval era, the historic mosques of Timbuktu and Sankore were centres of excellence during the rule of the Mali and Songhai empires. Generally, the teaching was based on the commentaries of the *Qur'aan*. Its interpretation (*Tafseer*) was the order of the day. Grammar constituted a core of the study. Islamic jurisprudence (*Fiqh*) and the *hadiths*<sup>3</sup> of Prophet Muhammad were at the centre of the lectures. This practice is common even today but some open air schools have metamorphosed into more organised institutions affiliated to modern universities. Today, the trio of *Mufasiru*, *Arowasi* and *Ajanansi* have added new dimensions in the spread of Islam by means of preaching in radios, televisions and video cassettes.

### **Data collation and Discussion**

It all started with observation<sup>4</sup> during public Muslim spiritual gatherings and in the newspapers where different meanings are attributed to *Mufasiru*, *Arowasi* and *Ajanansi*. In most cases, the trio of *Mufasiru*, *Arowasi* and *Ajanansi* are bilingual that is, they speak and write both Arabic and Yoruba language. They all compliment each other during a *tafseer* or *Nasiat*<sup>5</sup>. In recent times, with the advancement in technology the position of *Arowasi* is being made redundant.

*Arowasi* is a composed word of *Aro* and *Wasi*. *Ro* means to transmit, while *Aro* means transmitter. *Wasi* means preaching. *Arowasi*

is the transmitter of preaching. Then, *Arowasi* was transmitting to the large public or crowd, the preaching of *Mufasiru*, the leading preacher. *Arowasi* may not be necessarily a bilingual. He may not know Arabic. He was only there to repeat in Yoruba what *Mufasiru* is saying in Yoruba. Yet the survey carried out, shows a misconception of the public on the functions of *Arowasi*. Out of 100 questionnaires, 60% of the respondents look at *Arowasi* as interpreter and 70% as transmitter of the message of the leading preacher (Appendix 1). Some respondents see no difference between *Arowasi* and *Ajanansi* perhaps because the two characters sometimes interchange their function. While the function of *Arowasi* is phasing out gradually, *Ajanansi* is indispensable for the smooth preaching by *Mufasiru*.

*Ajanansi* (from Arabic word *Nasu* which means narration) commonly used in Yoruba Muslim circles is a composed word of *Aja* and *Nansi*. *Nansi* having metamorphosed from *NASU*, *Aja* is a Yoruba prefix, which means the person that brings or adds. He is fully playing the role of *Qoori*, the Qur'aan reciter. *Ajanansi* is bilingual. He speaks Arabic and Yoruba going by his function. He is a learned Islamic scholar, younger compared to *Mufasiru*. He reads in Arabic verses from the Holy Qur'aan at the request of *Mufassir*. With the survey carried out, 50% admit that *Ajanansi* is a Qur'aan reciter, 30% a spiritual commentator and 10% an interpreter (Appendix 1). By and large, *Ajanansi* helps *Mufasiru* during his religious lecture.

In fact *Mufasiru* according to Abu Ammenah Bilal Philips is 'a person who makes *tafseer* of the Qur'aan' (Philips 1997:83). Going by the definition of *Mufassir* by Philips that he is a maker of *tafseer*<sup>6</sup>, literally we can conclude that a *Mufassir* is an interpreter. Islamically, a *Mufassir* is more than an interpreter, he also engages in explaining the meanings of the Qur'aan. It goes in line with the data collected from the respondents to our questionnaires. Only 10% of the respondents are of the view that *Mufasiru* is an interpreter while 50% agree that he explains and comments on the meaning of the Qur'aan. A higher percentage of 70 from the respondents say that *Mufasiru* is a preacher. There is no doubt about the preacher status of *Mufassir* known to

spread the goodwill of Islam. But the public undermines the interpreter's status of *Mufasiru* with only 10% looking at him as that. This misconception of the public is mirrored in the data collated from the questionnaires. Going by his function, *Mufassir* is first an interpreter because he first interprets in Yoruba what *Ajanansi* reads for him in Arabic and then he goes further to explain. A *Mufassir* or *Mufasiru* (Yoruba pronunciation) is not just an interpreter. There is a similar respondents' reaction regarding *tafseer* with 10% of them looking at *tafseer* as interpretation of the Qur'aan and 50% as commentary or explanation of the meaning of the Qur'aan (Appendix 1). The trend, if not checked, may interchange the meaning of *Mufasiru*, *Arowasi* and *Ajanansi* with time.

**Examples of *Mufasiru*: Sheik (Dr.) Alhaji Muhyideen Ajani Bello, Alhaji Sheik Buhari Musa and Alhaji Abd. Ganiyi Abd. Raheem Lafenwa**

The records of the three Islamic scholars are video cassettes digitally mastered. The title of Sheik Muhyideen A. Bello's track is *Esan* (Nemesis) (2007) while the ones of Sheik Buhari Musa are *Eto Igbeyawo l'Aiye* (Marriage) (2006), *Eto Igbeyin fun Oku* (Last respect for the Deceased) (2006), *Iselu Iro* (False politics) (2007). Alhaji Abd. Ganiyi Abd. Raheem Lafenwa is the third Islamic scholar in his *Suratu-l Munafiqum* (The Hypocrites) (2007).

Having carefully watched the VCD of the chosen *Mufasiru* in their preaching it is noted that they have different approach in the interpretation, explanation and commentary of the Islamic books written in Arabic. Their status of interpreter is carried out differently. Bello employed two *Ajanansi* while Musa is seen always assisted by only one *Ajanansi*. Lafenwa is with no *Ajanansi*. Yet they all are *Mufasiru* in the service of Islam playing the same role. The three *Mufasiru* employed no *Arowasi* whose function has been made redundant with the advancement in technology. The electronic speaker can be heard better than *Arowasi* who had only his voice for the job. Lafenwa combines the function of *Ajanansi* with the function of *Mufasiru*. He reads

first in Arabic, then interprets and finally explains in Yoruba. Musa rather interprets what his only *Ajanansi* reads to him before any explanation. The VCD made the study clearer because one could see how the three characters relate during the preaching. The reading of the Arabic words and their interpretation by *Ajanansi* and *Mufasiru* are done in a musical way perhaps to attract and increase the level of concentration of the public.

## Conclusion

*Mufasiru*, *Ajanansi* and *Arowasi* are three important personalities in Yoruba Muslim circles of Southwest Nigeria. Although, having been replaced by the electronic speaker, *Arowasi* is no longer needed, he is still being addressed as the interpreter by the respondents narrowing the function of *Mufasiru* to just a commentator. Also *Ajanansi*, who is just a *Qoori* or a Qur'aan reciter, is sometimes regarded as an interpreter. *Ajanansi* and *Arowasi* are designed to assist *Mufasiru* in his job as interpreter and commentator. *Mufasiru* is not just an interpreter, but he is also a Qur'aan commentator.

## Notes

1. *Tafsiri* is the Yoruba pronunciation of *Tafsir*.
2. *Mufasiru* is a Yoruba word metamorphosed from the Arabic word *Mufassir* to satisfy the Yoruba alignment of words and sound. Both have the same meaning but differ in spelling.
3. Hadith and Sunna: The tradition of the Holy Prophet, better known as Sunna or Hadith is the second and undoubtedly secondary source from which the teachings of Islam are drawn. The first source is the Qur'aan. The two words Hadith and Sunna are commonly used and differ in their significance. Hadith really means a story or a report, and so represents an account of what happened, whereas Sunna means a practice or a custom. Within the community of Islam, it is only natural these words come to be applied more particularly to matters related to the Prophet and to the customs followed by him

and his immediate followers. Records were collected telling what the Prophet said and did and his reactions to things said and done in his presence (Sambo and Alimiyah 1976:32).

4. Observation can be defined as contact with the world through the use of the senses. ..Observation equips us with the material for thought, reflection, and judgment. What we experience by means of our senses—the sights, smells, touches, noises, and tastes—provides us with the data we require in order to survive. We report our observations in sentences called observation statements.... The observation gives the raw data of the situation. We know the data because we have experienced it with our senses. We report it in a strictly simple sentence form. How we interpret observation material is quite another matter (Gerald, M. and Nancy, S, 1974:44-45).
5. Nasiat: Islamic public lecture (preaching).
6. There are different types of *tafseer*:

*Tafseer* of Qur’aan by Qur’aan: There are many places in the Qur’aan where questions are asked in order to catch the mind of the reader and subsequently answered to increase the impact of the concept in question... This self-explanatory process is referred to as *tafseer* of the Qur’aan by Qur’aan.

*Tafseer* of Qur’aan by the *Sunnah*: On many occasions, the prophet added further clarification to various verses of the Qur’aan. Allah has entrusted the job of explaining the Qur’aan to the Prophet. This trust was expressed in the Qur’aan in no uncertain terms. “I have revealed the Reminder (Qur’aan) to you (O Muhammad) so that you may explain to the people what has been revealed to them” (*Surah an-Nahl* 16: 44). “I have only revealed the Book to you (O Muhammad) in order that you clarify for them the things about which they differ (*Surah an-Nahl* 16:64).

*Tafseer* of Qur’aan by *Aathaar*: Whenever the *sahaabah* could not find the *tafseer* of a passage in the Qur’aan itself or in the *Sunnah*, they would use their own reasoning based on their knowledge of



the contexts of the verses and the intricacies of the Arabic language in which the Qur'aan was revealed.

*Tafseer of Qur'aan by Language:* With the passage of time words took on new meanings and old meanings were lost; foreign words entered into the language; and vast sections of vocabulary fell into disuse. This natural process necessitated the explanation of some of the Qur'aanic words according to their literal and grammatical meanings.

*Tafseer of Qur'aan by Opinion:* Opinions based on a careful study of the first four steps can be considered valid as long as they do not contradict any of those steps.

## References

- O'Brien D. B., Cruise (1971) *The Mourides of Senegal. The Political and Economic Organisation of an Islamic Brotherhood* Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Gerald, M. and Nancy S. (1974) *Patterns of Thinking*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn, Belmont, California: Wadsworth Publishing Company, Inc., 1-349.
- Hodgkin, T. (1969) 'Islam and National movements in West Africa' in P. J. M. McEwan (ed.) *Africa from early Times to 1800*, London: Oxford University Press.
- Knappert, J. (1970) 'Contribution from the study of loanwords to the cultural history of Africa' in David Dalby (ed.) *Language and history in Africa*, New York: Africana, 78—88.
- Philips, Abu Ammenah B. (1997) *The Methodology of Qur'anic Explanation*, Shomolu, Lagos: Al-Waseelat Publishers, 1-344.
- Sambo, M. B. and M. H. Alimiyah (1976) *Hadith*, Lagos: Islamic Publications Bureau, 1-139.

Seymour, W. J. (1988) *How can Africa survive*, New York: Harper & Row Publishers.

### Cassettes

Bello, M. A. (2007) *Esan (Nemesis)*, marketed and distributed by Alhaja Oriola Store, Ibadan.

Lafenwa, G. R. (2007) *Suratul-l-Munafiqun (The Hypocrites)*, marketed and distributed by Jislad Music, Lagos.

Musa, B. (2006) *Eto Igbeyawo l'Aiye*, marketed and distributed by Bablaje Music, Lagos.

Musa, B. (2006) *Eto Igbeyin fun oku (Last respect for the Deceased)*, produced and marketed by Oracle Music Int'l, Lagos.

Musa, B. (2007) *Iselu Iro (False politics)*, produced and marketed by Moh-Saheed Audio Visuals & Comm., Ibadan.

### Appendix 1

**Table: Evaluation of Mufasiru and Tafsiri**

	Qur'aanic interpreter	Qur'aanic Commentator	Islamic Preacher	Qur'aanic Reciter	Repeat the words of Mufassir
<i>Mufasiru</i>	10	50	70	0	0
<i>Ajanansi</i>	10	30	0	50	10
<i>Arwasi</i>	60	0	0	0	70

	Interpretation of Qur'aan	Commentary/explanation of Qur'aan	Preaching of Islam
<i>Tafsiri</i>	10	50	40