



Chapter Three - Makarantar Ilmi and its Curriculum in Northern Nigeria

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Makarantar Ilmi and its curriculum occupy a special and important position in the transmission of knowledge in Northern Nigerian society, shedding light on its significance in fostering education, preserving traditional knowledge, and promoting social cohesion. In Chapter Three, Al-amin examines Makarantar Ilmi and its curriculum in the context of northern Nigeria. He argues that understanding its curriculum is essential for appreciating the rich tapestry of education in Nigeria, where traditional and formal systems often coexist and complement each other in shaping the nation's future generations.

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Chapter Three

Makarantar Ilimi and its Curriculum in Northern Nigeria

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Abstract

Makarantar Ilimi and its curriculum occupy a special and important position in the transmission of knowledge in Northern Nigerian society, shedding light on its significance in fostering education, preserving traditional knowledge, and promoting social cohesion. In *Chapter Three*, Al-amin examines *Makarantar Ilimi* and its curriculum in the context of northern Nigeria. He argues that understanding its curriculum is essential for appreciating the rich tapestry of education in Nigeria, where traditional and formal systems often coexist and complement each other in shaping the nation's future generations.



Introduction

In northern Nigeria, the traditional system of teaching and learning is centred on an institution known as *Tsangaya* (Kanuri: *Sangaya*), which consists of two units, *Masjid* (the Mosque), *Maranji* or *makarantun allo* (Hau: Qur'anic schools; singular *makarantar allo*).¹ *Makarantar allo* is where students learn proper recitation and writing of the Qur'an. While the second unit is *makarantun ilimi* (Hau: advanced schools; singular *makarantar ilimi*),² where the graduate of *makarantun allo* undergoes studies in branches of knowledge such as *fiqh* (jurisprudence), *naḥw* (Arabic grammar), *tafsīr* (Quran exegesis), *shi'r* (poetry), *'arūḍ* (prosody), *ḥadīth* (traditions of the prophet), etc. After graduation, *'ijāzāt* sing. *'ijāzah* would be issued to the student. The issuance of *'ijāzāt* is considered an "endorsement" of the student into the circle of specialized scholars in the field. *Makarantar Ilimi* or *Makaranatar Zaure*, represents a vital educational institution deeply embedded in the cultural and historical fabric of Northern Nigeria. In recent decades, *Makarantar Ilimi* has adapted to changing educational paradigms, incorporating modern subjects and pedagogical methods. This evolution has enabled these institutions to bridge the gap between traditional and contemporary education, ensuring that students receive a well-rounded education that aligns with both their cultural roots and the demands of the modern world.

This paper explores the multifaceted nature, curriculum and mode of transmission of knowledge in *Makarantar Ilimi* in Northern Nigerian society, shedding light on its significance in fostering education, preserving traditional knowledge, and promoting social cohesion. Historically, *Makarantar Ilimi* emerged as centres of learning and cultural preservation, dating back centuries. These institutions played a pivotal role in imparting Islamic education, Quranic studies, and classical Arabic literature to generations of students. Moreover, they served as repositories of indigenous knowledge, including oral traditions, folk wisdom, and local customs, thereby safeguarding the rich cultural heritage of the region. Furthermore, *Makarantar Ilimi* has played a crucial role in fostering social cohesion and community development in Northern Nigeria. These institutions have often served as community hubs, promoting unity and providing essential services beyond education, such as healthcare and counselling.

¹ After graduation, the student will be issued with a certificate or Qur'anic *Salasil*, the chains of Qur'anic scholars and reciters that link the world of Central Sudanic learning to the classical scholars of the Islamic heartlands. This Qur'anic *Salasil* are still cherished because are considered as *tabarruk* (seeking blessing) by the people. For more explanation of this tradition in Borno proper see Bobboyi 1992, 25-28; see also Dahiru 2011, 122-140.

² Idris 2010, 18. However, for more discussion on the structure, methodology, curriculum of these schools see Bobboyi 1992.



***Makarantar Ilimi* or *Makaranatar Zaure* (The Advanced Level of Education)**

The *makarantar ilmi* deals with teaching religious books as well as other relevant Islamic sciences and it is a school where the students begin to acquire more elaborate knowledge and intensive study of the various complicated religious issues relating to the Islamic sciences. The advanced level of education began after the student finished the whole Qur'an and the fundamentals taught by the teacher. These were the kind of students who had already undergone the basic Qur'anic studies and had moved to the stage of visiting the various *tsangaya* for intermediate studies leading towards specialization.³ They are known as *gardawa* or *ma'ajirwa* (sing. *ma'ajir*) or the post-Qur'anic students. In their pursuit of knowledge, they undertook a deeper study of the Qur'an (*tafsir*) so that they could explain and interpret it by themselves and learn other subjects on Islamic sciences.⁴ This level is usually regarded as the equivalent to the university level in Western education system.⁵ In this level of education, the disciple studies under one or more scholars depending on his level, type and depth of specialization. The teachers of this level were most often great *shaykhs*, retired *qadis* or jurists who were involved with the application of Islam and the actual governance of the society. In fact, it was an assembly of heads of various *makaranatar allo* and intellectually ambitious ones especially those individuals who were preoccupied with the governance of society or those who wanted to become jurists, magistrates, scribes and theologians.⁶

Some of the schools were small where a single *sheikh* taught a small group of students while others were bigger where at least three teachers taught a large group of students.⁷ The *darasu* were conducted in the form of modern-day seminars of different sizes which sometimes served as a forum to discuss and display their depth of knowledge.⁸ The teaching method used in this school involved the reading of the passage of the text by the teacher followed by an explanation. At times, the student reads the text for himself in front of the teacher, and in turn, the teacher gives an explanation or translates the text into the lingua franca which might be Hausa, Kanuri or Fulfulde. But sometimes, the most senior among the students will

³ Many of these students were teachers who taught the Qur'an to children during the daytime and at night they attended the various educational centers for lectures from the prominent scholars.

⁴ Laminu 1992, 11.

⁵ To some, it is believing that a student graduated through such Islamic traditional system of education is more competent than the one graduated through western education system.

⁶ Hiskett 1984, 55.

⁷ Hiskett 1984, 55-6.

⁸ Laminu 1992, 12.



read all the books brought by his fellow students while the teacher explained. Like the Maghreb, students are free to ask questions.

These schools in northern Nigeria were usually concerned with specific branches of Muslim learning and often a circle of multi-disciplinary study but for a much wider audience, there were recitation and exposition (*iqrā* and *tasrīd*) of individual commentaries of a very wide scope curriculum. The curriculum may be divided broadly into four categories or faculties: *tafsir* (Qur'anic exegeses), *hadith* (prophetic traditions); *fiqh* (jurisprudence); and *usūl* (sources of the law).⁹ Affixed to that was a deep study of grammar, literary style, logic, theology and *ʿaqeeda* (beliefs) defined by the list of books each “faculty” has as recommended for reading. The study of these disciplines enables the prospective student to understand the basic principles of Islam and to discharge his all societal responsibilities when required to do so, effectively. Readings of these books are done in most cases concurrently and from cover to cover.

The first cluster of books (at least 10) concerns the science of jurisprudence (*fiqh*) and the laws of worship (*ʿamal*) based on the predominance of the Maliki *Madhhab* (School of Law). The students were taught the *Risaala* of ibn Abi Zayd (d. 996), *al-Muqaddimat al-ʿAshmawiyya* of Abd al-Bari al-ʿAshmawi Al-Rufaiyyu (d. after 1086/1675), *Mukhtasar al-Akhdari fi ʿl-ʿibadat* of Sheikh Allama ʿAbdu'r-Rahman al-Akhdari (d. 983/1585) and other fundamental text regarding worship and social behaviour. Some of the recommended books in this section include: a virtual encyclopedia of rules and regulations of *Tauheed* (oneness of Allah) called *Qawaʿidi*, of unknown authorship.¹⁰ *Mukhtasar al-Akhdari fi ʿl-ʿibadat* of Sheikh Allama ʿAbdu'r-Rahman al-Akhdari (d. 983/1585), *Qurdabi* of Yahaya Al-Qurtubi (d.1171), *al-Muqaddimat al-ʿAshmawiyya* of Abd al-Bari al-ʿAshmawi Al-Rufaiyyu (d. after 1086/1675), *Nathmu Muqadimaati ibn Rushd* of Ibn Rushd (1126-1198), *Iziyya* of Abil Hasni Aliyu Malikiyyi Al Shazaliy (d. 1532), *Risala* of Muhammad ʿAbdullah ibn Abi Zayd al-Qayrawani (d. 385/996), *Irshad al-salik* of Ibn ʿAskar (d. 1332), *Mukhtasar Allamatul Khalil* of Sheikh Dhiyaʿul Deen Khaleel bn Ishaq Al Maliki (d.1374/66) and *At-Tasʿheel* of Ibn Malik (d. 1274), *Shurb al-Zulal* of Muhammad b. ʿAbd al-Rahman Hajrami (d. 1755), *Qawanin al-Ahkam al-Sharʿiyya* of Abu ʿI-Qasim Muhammad b. Ahmad Ibn Juzayy (d. 1340), *Murshid al-aMuʿin* of ʿAbd al-Wahid b. Ahmad Ibn ʿAshir al-Ansari (d. 1040/1631).¹¹ *Talkhis al-Miftaah* of al-Qazwīnī (d. 1338)

⁹ Saed 2010, 27-8.

¹⁰ It has been allegedly argued that the book was written by one of Yan Doto scholars based around Zamfara / Katsina axis before the 1804 *jihad* of Usman Dan Fodiyo.

¹¹ Bobboyi 1992, 54.



concerning the sources of the law (*usuul'l-fiqh*), *As-Sugra*, the *al-Wusta*, and the *al-Mudawwana al-Kubra* of Muhammad b. Yusuf al-Sanusi (d. 1486) regarding the science of *tawheed*.¹² This field of learning is not only essential for the discharge of a Muslim's religious obligations but also for the proper conduct of the socio-political affairs of the state. As noted earlier, the study of Maliki *Madhhab* starts at the *Tsangaya* with the study of *al-Akhdari*, *Risala*, *al-Ashmawi* etc.

The second faculty is regarding prophetic traditions (*ahadeeth*) or the Hadith studies. In the first place, the student at this level had to memorize at least 40 prophetic traditions along with a deep comprehension of Arabic grammar using the *Al-Ajurumiyya* of Ibn Ājurrūm (d. 1223), and the *al-Alfiyat* of Muhammad bn Abdulbaqi bn Malik Al'andalusi (d. 672/1274) as well as other sources of the law (*usūl*). Books in this faculty (also at least 10), therefore, included *Arba'un Hadith* (forty Hadith collection of Imam Al-Nawawi (d. 1277) focusing on general guidance for pious living). Books studied in conjunction or earlier than *Arba'un Hadith* include *Majmu'ul Baharain* of Kamal Deen Adamu Na Ma'aji. Others include *Lubabul Hadith* of Abdul Rahman bn Kamal Al Suyuti (d. 1445-1505), *Mukhtarul Ahadis* (Hashimi), *Bulugul Maram* of Ibn Hajr al-Asqalani (d. 1372-1448), *Riyad As-Salihin* of Abi Zakariya Yahya ibn Sharaf al-Nawawi (d. 1233-1277), *Muwatta* of Malik b. Anas (d. 796).¹³ The next stage is that of pure specialization in which there are at three different routes and Hadith scholars. These include *Sahih Bukhari* of Muhammad Bukhari (810-870), *Jami'us Sageer*¹⁴ of al-Suyuti (1445-1505), and *Al-Usuul of as-Subki* (d. 1370), which was a commentary upon the al-Mahalli's book *Al-Alfiyat* of Zayn al-Din 'Abd al-Rahim b. Hussayn al-Iraqi (d. 806/1403-4), regarding the science of traditions (*ilm 'l-ahaadith*).

The third learning faculty is devoted to intensive Arabic grammar, *nahwu*, linguistics (*lugha*), morphology, *Balāgha* (Rhetoric), *Sin'at al-shir* (prosody), *Arud* (Metric), *Qawaf* (Rhyme), logic (*manṭiq*), lexicon, poetry and fiction; and doctrinal theology under the tutelage of capable Islamic scholars. Of these, only the study of grammar formed an essential part of a scholar's education, the rest are designed to refine his learned capabilities or else earn him more versatility in juristic and deductions and in Muslim doctrine. Grammar and Lexicology include books such as *Matn Ajuruma* of Hashim bn Muhammad Al-Shaqawi, *Al-Ajurumiyya* of Muhammad ibn Dawud, *Matnil Qadrin-Nada wa-Ballil sada*, *Mulhatul-Liirabi*, *Ibn Duraid*, *Lamiyat al-af'al*,

¹² Field notes.

¹³ Saed 2010, 27-8.

¹⁴ See *al-Jami'ul-Sageer* by Sheikh Abdul-Rahman Al-Suyudi is a widely utilised set of hadith traditions that is in two volumes.



Alfiyya of Muhammad bn Abdulbaqi bn Malik Al'andalusi (d. 672/1274), *Hisnul Rasin* of Abdullahi Fodio (d. 1829), poetic works such as *Hamziyya* and *Al-Burda* of Sharaf al-Din Muhammad al-Busiri, *Ishrinayat* of Abi Bakarim Muhammad bn Malikiyyi bin Al Fazazi (d. 1230), *Badamasi*, *Tantarani* (Anon), *al-Maksura* of Abu Bakr Muhammad b. al-Husain Ibn Duraid (837-933), *Daliya* of Abi Abdullahi Muhammad bn Nasiril Dar'i, *Shu'ara*, *Muqamat Al-Hariri* of Badi' al-Zamdn al-Hamadhdni (969-1007), *An-Naadhim* of Abu Mugra', Ar-Rajaaz of Abd'I-Karim al-Maghili (1440-1505). Another important discipline related to this group id tawhid (theology), particularly 'ilm al-kalam (scholastic theology) as developed by Abu I-Hassan 'Ali b. Isma'il al-Ash'ari (260-324/874-936) and his successors.

Tafsirul Qur'an/Tarjamo (Qur'anic exegesis) or the science of Qur'anic exegesis (*tafsir*), is the final stage of scholastic learning in the entire Borno Sultanate and it occupies primary importance. The students were taught one of the elementary texts on this subject. The period when Borno *Mufassirun* (sing. *Mufassir*) began to study tafsir is difficult to determine, but it is a well-known fact that the famous *al-Jalalayn* of the two Jalāls: Jalāl al-Din al-Maḥallī (d. 864AH/1459) and Jalāl al-Din al-Suyūṭī (1445-1505) was the most widely used book in Borno and of course in most of the ancient cities of Borno Sultanate and Hausaland.¹⁵ The principal texts used for teaching the 'Ulum al-Qur'an (Qur'anic sciences) in the town include the *al-Muqaddimat al-Jazariyya* of Abu 'I-Khayr Shams al-Din Muhammad b. Muhammad al-Dimashqi (1350-1429) on Tajwid, the *Hizr al-Amani wa-wajh al-tahani*, also known as the *Shatibiyya*, of Muhammad b. Firruh al-Shatibi (d.590/1194) on the seven *Qira'at* (reading) and the *Mawrid al-Zam'an fi rasm ahruf al-Qur'an* of Muhammad b. Muhammad al-Khurraz (d. 718/1318) on Qur'anic orthography. Other books mastered at this level included the *Al-Hikam* of Ibn Ata'illah (1259-1310), concerning the science of the purification of the heart (*tasawwuf*), *Al-Hashimiya* concerning the science of astronomy (*'ilm'-falak wa'n-nujuum*), concerning poetry (*shi'r*) and rhyme (*qawaafi*), *Al-Khazrajiya* concerning logic and philosophy, *Al-Furu'* of Ibn Abi Haajib concerning the branches of the law. Others are *Al-Mudawwana* of Abd's-Salaam Sahnun (d. c. 776/77-854/55), *Muwatta* of Imam Malik (d. 796), *Kitāb al-Shifā' bī-ta'rif ḥuqūq al-muṣṭafā* of Qadi 'Iyad (d. 544 AH/1149 CE) concerning the reality and judgment of Allah about the standing of the Messenger of Allah, and *Al-Jami al-Mi'yar* of

¹⁵ Lavers suggested sixteenth century as the period when Qur'anic studies commenced in Borno and it has reputation more than any other cities in Maghreb. He goes further to account that most scholars of the Niger-Chad, especially Jihad leaders had to visit Borno as necessary part of their Qur'anic studies. See Lavers 1971 and Saed 2010, 27-8.



al-Wansharisi (1430/31-1508), the collection of the legal decisions (*fatawi*) and judgments (*hukum*) etc.

The study of these books, manuscript or printed form, is done in most cases concurrently and is sometimes read more than twenty times until the student masters them along with their commentaries (the same method was employed as in the intermediate level). When these books were completely mastered by the students and the scholars were satisfied with the development of the student, he would be given a certificate (*ijāzāt*) which certifies him to teach that branches of knowledge to others.¹⁶ This *ijāzāt* specified the books completed as well as the level at which they were studied. Most students took lessons from more than one scholar, thus acquiring for themselves many *ijāzāts* which contain the chain of the transmitters of knowledge up to the authors of the books as a sign of the quality and authenticity of education acquired by the student. Two benefits stand out of this: First, learning under various scholars individually or in groups aided their cognitive and vicarious scholarship understandings. This enabled them to gain wide recognition for their learning abilities among the circles of scholars. Second, this would eventually secure their acceptance as a scholar of excellent worth.

This system of learning is the same across the Borno and Hausa land, perhaps with slight modifications as to the types of books studied. Intermediate and advanced levels in twentieth-century Borno sultanate were pursued in many educational centres and some students travelled to other centres of learning in the Islamic world either with the specific intention of study or more commonly as a part of their pilgrimage.¹⁷ However, the concepts of *Riyasa* (academic leadership) and *Subha* (teaching relationship between shaykh and student) in relation to Islamic education exist in Borno but they differ from those of the Middle East. *Riyasa* and *Subha* taken together, define the very essence of the *Tabaqat* (strata) of Borno 'Ulama. The *Riyasa* could be applied to individual fields of learning. In this regard even Borno's leading *shuyukh*, while able to teach almost every Islamic text, have been known to excel in one or the other of these fields; as a result of natural development and not on state appointment or intervention. It is the community of scholars that recognized one's pre-eminence and academic leadership and not the sultan or his agents. The concepts of *Subha* may also express themselves not in the relationship between the shaykh and his student but in the solidarity of the whole group

¹⁶The *ijaza* when it is given out to the student, it became the *sanad* (pl. *asnād* or *asānīd*), an important historical document for tracing the sources of scholastic transmission. See for example, *Asānīd al-Faqīr* of Shehu Usman dan Fodio.

¹⁷ Lavers 1975, 35.



associated with him. This group sometimes stays together even after the death of the shaykh and transfers its loyalty to his principal disciple (*sahib*).

Conclusion

Makarantar Ilimi, or Islamic schools, have played a vital role in the educational landscape of Northern Nigeria. These institutions have not only preserved and propagated Islamic knowledge but have also served as centres for social and moral development. Over the years, *Makarantar Ilimi* has faced various challenges, including inadequate resources and modernization pressures. However, their resilience and commitment to educating generations in the Islamic tradition continue to be a testament to the rich cultural and educational heritage of Northern Nigeria. As the region continues to evolve, it is essential to recognize the significance of *Makarantar Ilimi* in shaping both religious and educational identities in this part of the country.



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