



## **Chapter Two - Historical Overview of Traditional System of Qur'anic Education in Borno**

**Authors:** Usman Al-amin  
**Submitted:** 30. October 2023  
**Published:** 6. December 2023  
**Affiliation:** Department of History. University of Maiduguri. Borno State, Nigeria  
**Languages:** English  
**Keywords:** Qur'anic Education, Borno, Nigeria, Traditional Education, Islamic Scholarship, Challenges  
**Categories:** News and Views, Humanities, Social Sciences and Law

### **Abstract:**

Borno is famously known for its remarkable role in the dissemination of Qur'anic education and scholarship in West Africa in particular and Africa in general, before, during and after the colonial era. Today, despite many challenges and the misconceptions and backwardness attributed to the Qur'anic education and scholarship in the polity, it goes hand-in-hand with the Islamiyah system of education and the Western type of education. This paper attempts to combine both the anthropological and historical approaches to describe the processes of traditional Qur'anic education and scholarship in Borno, especially the recent trends. It examines the origin, types, methods, and stages of the Qur'anic education. The paper concludes that the status of Qur'anic education and scholarship in Borno is set for the heights regardless of the socio-cultural challenges and the misconceptions and backwardness attributed to it. It further suggests ways to fortify the development of the Qur'anic education and scholarship in Borno against all the emerging challenges and problems.

# **JOSHA**

josha.org

**Journal of Science,  
Humanities and Arts**

JOSHA is a service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content



# Chapter Two

## A Historical Overview of the Traditional System of Qur'anic Education in Borno

Usman Al-amin, Ph.D.

[alaminusman81@gmail.com](mailto:alaminusman81@gmail.com)

Department of History, University of Maiduguri, Maiduguri, Borno State,  
Nigeria

### Abstract

Borno is famously known for its remarkable role in the dissemination of Qur'anic education and scholarship in West Africa in particular and Africa in general, before, during and after the colonial era. Today, despite many challenges and the misconceptions and backwardness attributed to the Qur'anic education and scholarship in the polity, it goes hand-in-hand with the Islamiyah system of education and the Western type of education. This paper attempts to combine both the anthropological and historical approaches to describe the processes of traditional Qur'anic education and scholarship in Borno, especially the recent trends. It examines the origin, types, methods, and stages of the Qur'anic education. The paper concludes that the status of Qur'anic education and scholarship in Borno is set for the heights regardless of the socio-cultural challenges and the misconceptions and backwardness attributed to it. It further suggests ways to fortify the development of the Qur'anic education and scholarship in Borno against all the emerging challenges and problems.



## Introduction

The Muslims believe that the Qur'an was revealed to mankind, after a long interval without guidance (Revealed book, divine law and Prophet) through Prophet Muḥammad. This interval refers to the period when Prophet Isa (Jesus) was taken to the Heaven and the divine law he preached was broken and shattered and the people who accepted his teachings had deviated from the right path. Therefore, the divine book (the Qur'an) was sent to mankind through Prophet Muḥammad for human guidance, to take them out of darkness and ignorance and lead them to light and knowledge. He dwells on the usefulness of the Qur'an to the Ummah of Prophet Muḥammad. According to him, the Qur'an was revealed to amend all that had been destroyed after Prophet Isa was taken to Heaven. The Muslims in Borno and elsewhere believe and accept the Qur'an as the divine light that leads them out of ignorance of darkness into the light of goodness and piety. According to them, this divine light gives hope to those who have lost their way in the wilderness of darkness.<sup>1</sup> Every family is therefore expected to have a copy of the Qur'an. To the Muslims of northern Nigeria, belief in the Qur'an is like belief in the angels and the remaining articles of faith. The Qur'an being the only animate miracle that Prophet Muḥammad himself claimed in attesting to the truth of his message of Islam, Muslims and non-Muslims have developed a tradition of quoting Qur'anic verses or Hadith in their daily conversation. In essence, these Qur'an verses and Prophetic traditions in their expression either support their opinion or emphasize their importance to the Muslims.

This paper provides an overview of Qur'anic schools in Northern Nigeria, shedding light on their historical, educational, and socio-cultural significance. These schools, known as "*Tsangaya*" or "*Makaranta*," have been integral to the region's educational landscape for centuries. They primarily focus on Qur'anic and Islamic education, imparting religious teachings, memorization of the Quran, and basic literacy skills. This paper explores the evolution of Qur'anic schools in Northern Nigeria, their pedagogical methods, the challenges faced, and their role in shaping religious identity and social norms in the region. It also touches on contemporary efforts to reform and integrate these traditional schools into the formal education system, addressing issues of poverty, child welfare, and religious extremism. Through a comprehensive examination, this paper aims to provide a nuanced understanding of the Qur'anic school system in Borno and its implications for both the region and the

---

<sup>1</sup> Olali narrated the same situation in Swahili see Olali (2012: 177).



broader field of education. The Qur'an explicitly encourages the pursuit of knowledge and education as well as extols the value of learning from experience. The first in the Qur'an which was revealed to Prophet Muhammad called upon him and the entire humanity to seek education and acquire knowledge in accordance with the divine guidance. It is in line with this command that the history of Islam in Kanem Borno has been that of study of the Qur'an which has survived to date. Qur'anic schools in Borno play a significant role in the region's cultural and religious landscape. These schools have a rich history of imparting Islamic education to generations of students. However, they also face numerous challenges, including issues of curriculum modernization, teacher training, and the need for improved infrastructure. As Nigeria continues to develop and evolve, finding a balance between preserving traditional Qur'anic education and adapting it to meet the demands of the modern world will be crucial for the continued relevance and success of these institutions in the northern region.

## History of Qur'anic Education in Northern Nigeria

Qur'anic education began in Kanem-Borno invariably with the introduction of Islam in the empire in the eleventh century.<sup>2</sup> The Qur'anic education started in the palace of the Mai (title for the ruler of Borno) and it was introduced by Muhammad Ibn Mani who stayed long in the empire to spread Islam and teach Islamic sciences. He taught five rulers of the Kanem-Borno Empire the Qur'an and the *Risaala* of ibn Abi Zayd al-Qirawani (d. 996).<sup>3</sup> Mai Humme Jilmi (1085-1097), for instance, was among the rulers who were taught the Qur'an by Mani and he was said to have committed the whole Qur'an into memory.<sup>4</sup> It was reported that during this period in Borno, Muḥammad bin Mani taught Qur'anic recitation while Tura Tazan taught its calligraphy, known as *Zayyana*.<sup>5</sup> It is believed that the idea of *Zayyana*<sup>6</sup> came from Spain to Borno through the Maghreb via Qairawan in the eleventh century.<sup>7</sup> As a result of this, the beautiful style of calligraphy initiated and developed in the

---

<sup>2</sup> Gazali 2005, 17.

<sup>3</sup> Dahiru 1995, 27, see also El-Sheriff and Imam 2005, 14.

<sup>4</sup> El-Sheriff and Imam 2005, 14.

<sup>5</sup> Dahiru 1995, 141.

<sup>6</sup> *Zayyana*, in the context of northern Nigeria, is a decorative arts and calligraphic design in the handwritten Qur'anic and non-Qur'anic manuscripts such as the colourful artistry (pertaining to representing different characters of the alphabets and their vocalisations), the separation artistry of colourful identifications of chapter and section endings as well as many other artistic and printing potentials are abundantly available to assist the reader in knowing the divisions of the text. For more information on *Zayyana* in the context of northern Nigeria see Biddle 2011.

<sup>7</sup> Dahiru 1995, 141.



Kanem-Borno region came to be widespread all the way through the central Bilad as-Sudan. The script utilized in this region under the *Sayfawa* dynasty was undoubtedly the most ancient style of calligraphy employed in the Bilad as-Sudan.<sup>8</sup> This style of calligraphy takes its origin from the historic Kufic script, and the official Qur'ans predominantly used in North Africa which originated from the earliest Qur'ans commissioned by Uthman ibn Affan in the first century of Islam. The Borno courts, therefore, developed a type of *Kufic-Ifriqi* which was uniquely its own which I have termed as "*Barnawi-Ifriqi*."

The foundation of qur'anic education in Kanem Borno, according to Gazali, was laid on solid ground from the reign of Mai Humme Jilmi (1085-1097) who was said to have read the Qur'an and other Islamic sciences which equipped him with the knowledge, motivation, determination and zeal to propagate Islam, while the most remarkable turn towards advanced studies of the Qur'an and general knowledge of Islam started during the reign of Mai Dunama Humemi (1108-1163). The Diwan and Girgam had it that Mia Dunama Humemi built a mosque and a school in Fustat (Cairo) for Borno students, which enabled about three hundred slaves and students to undergo advanced studies.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, scholars have noticed the close similarity between the mode and style of memorization, recitation, orthography, and writing of the Qur'an in Morocco, Algeria, Libya and Tunisia with Borno. This may further suggest that Kanem Borno enjoyed the service of Ulama from these places.<sup>10</sup>

By the end of the twelfth century, the *Sangaya* traditional system of Qur'anic education had produced its competent scholars who were not only famous in Borno but were known to the outside world.<sup>11</sup> It was reported that by the thirteenth century, the early phase of educational development reached its zenith. It is also confirmed that there are other indigenes of Futa Toro and Spain who did not only teach but were said to have cultivated the tradition of Islamic scholarship for which Kanem and Borno had been very famous.<sup>12</sup> Lavers reports this system was well-established by the fifteenth century. During this period, for instance, in Birni Gazargamu, the capital numerous schools were organized by mālams, the principal school was in the main mosques which were provided with a library, where not only

---

<sup>8</sup> Bivar 1959, 5.

<sup>9</sup> Gazali 2005, 26.

<sup>10</sup> Gzali 2005, 29.

<sup>11</sup> Dahiru 1995, 27.

<sup>12</sup> Sifawa 1991, 8.





reading, writing, and calculating were taught but also other sciences.<sup>13</sup> The school of Shaykh Ahmad Machena Kalumbardu was another educational centre where more advanced studies were pursued.<sup>14</sup> The Mai (a title for Borno ruler) himself was said to have supported students by his generosity and the patronage of the court ensured a welcome for outstanding scholars of Borno and abroad who came both to learn and to teach.

By the nineteenth century, Borno was famous for its beautiful calligraphic Qur'anic manuscripts and copies were exported to Egypt and the rest of the Maghreb from the fifteenth century through the nineteenth century.<sup>15</sup> In 1822, Major Denham related that the handwritten Qur'ans beautifully written by the people of Kanem-Bornu had been dispatched and marketed in Egypt and North Africa for a sum equivalent to nearly forty to fifty dollars.<sup>16</sup> Last stated that the Qur'ans from Bornu were of high quality and created a demand throughout the *Bilad as-Sudan* and North Africa.<sup>17</sup> He further points out that in the early nineteenth century, students used to go to Borno to learn calligraphy and to study the Qur'an; and they still do to date.<sup>18</sup> Borno, for instance, due to its fame in Islamic scholarship, many learned men in Borno and some neighbouring areas would consider their knowledge as incomplete and unsatisfactory if they did not expose themselves to the city of Borno. For instance, most of the nineteenth-century Jihad leaders in the region such as Ardo Adama, Buba Yero, Goni Mukhtar, Ibrahim Zaki and others visited Birni Gazargamu for their advanced studies.<sup>19</sup>

The production of a handwritten Qur'an became one of the most highly respected skills of scholars and is considered a pious act. Not only scholars or professional calligraphers are engaged in the production of a handwritten Qur'an, but also ordinary devout Muslims. It is also a common practice among pupils in the Qur'anic schools (*makarantar allo*) to have beautifully designed wooden slates with a few verses of the *Surat al-Baqarah* (the second chapter of the Qur'an) written *zayyana* style – meaning calligraphy. The wooden slates decorated with *zayyana* become their certificate which would be presented to the pupils on the day of their graduation ceremony (Hau. *Saukar Kura'ani*) as proof of academic proficiency. It is

---

<sup>13</sup> Lavers 1975, 35.

<sup>14</sup> Lavers 1975, 35.

<sup>15</sup> Dahiru 1995, 141.

<sup>16</sup> Denham, Clapperton and Oudney 1826, 1985 2, 144; see also Mohammed 1993, 37 and Dahiru 1995, 137; see also Laminu 1985, 28; see also Last 2011, 187.

<sup>17</sup> Last 1984, 4.

<sup>18</sup> Last 2011, 187.

<sup>19</sup> Lavers 1975, 35.



an aspect of the intellectual tradition which was previously observed only in the *makarantar allo* but is now, in the town<sup>20</sup> and other places. Presently, the most famous copying industry of the Qur'an is in the whole of Borno.

Teaching and scholarship in Borno followed the classical pattern of a traditional system of Qur'anic education in *Bilad as-Sudan*. The method of learning could be described as 'a master seeking method' i.e. it largely depended on the teacher who offered the instruction, guidance, and prescribed textbooks for an individual student until he perfected and mastered a particular branch of knowledge.<sup>21</sup> The method of teaching, the place, the regulations and the discipline were later known as *tsangaya* (Kanuri: *Sangaya*).<sup>22</sup> The *tsangaya* took two basic forms in the seventeenth century when the villages and cities grew both in size and population following the influx of students and scholars from far and wide.<sup>23</sup> The first is elementary-level schools, the *kuttab* or *makarantar allo*, as it is known in Hausa, and a higher-level *madrassa* or *makarantar ilmi*. Yet, due to some special circumstances, the area under study has produced a third type of school or class, which is intermediate between the two, with intermediate students known as *gardawa*. Nevertheless, both *makarantar allo* and intermediate levels usually operate under the system of elementary stage, which is devoted to reading, writing, and recitation with the objective of complete memorisation of the Qur'an. These two stages are called the Qur'an (schools) stages. While the *makarantar ilmi* deals with learning religious books as well as other relevant Islamic sciences. The nature of the traditional system of Qur'anic education in Borno and its intermittent changes, challenges, and solutions through the period of time shall be discussed in this paper.

## Makarantar Allo (The Primary Level of Education)

*Makarantar Allo* is generally concerned with the teaching of the Qur'an and the Qur'anic sciences. The objective of this school is, therefore, to understand the Qur'an with its proper *tajwid* (science of pronunciation), its memorization and its orthography (*kitaba*) so that the Qur'an can be preserved in its original purity; after graduation, the students are expected to master both the recitation of the Qur'an and its distinctive writing.<sup>24</sup> But to all intents and purposes, the *makarantar allo* is primarily a Qur'anic institution. It also provides the basic skills in reading and writing

---

<sup>20</sup> During my recent fieldwork, I witnessed this in Umar bin Abdulaziz Islamic School in Nguru.

<sup>21</sup> Muhammad Sani Zahr Din 1976, 160.

<sup>22</sup> El-Sheriff & Imam 2005, 13; see also Anwar 1997, 71-2.

<sup>23</sup> Laminu 1992, 11.

<sup>24</sup> Abubakar Mustapha 1987, 104. However, Qur'anic education has been a fundamental duty upon every Muslim for over 1400 years.



Arabic, and in some cases *Ajami*<sup>25</sup> as well as some theory and practice of elementary *fiqh* such *al-Taharah* (purification) and *al-Wudu* (ablution) including all necessary Islamic teachings a child ought to know in the early stage of his life. The school is open to all children of both sexes and requires no fixed age or examination for pupils to be admitted. Children begin their education at an early age of six or as long as a boy is circumcised.<sup>26</sup> Between the ages of six and 14, the student could have memorized the Qur'an and acquired enough knowledge of the Arabic language based on the Qur'an. The most important thing to consider, in Borno and other parts of the sultanate of Borno, when registering a child in this type of school is Qur'anic *silsilāh*, the chains of Qur'anic scholars and reciters that link the world of Central Sudanic learning to the classical scholars of the Islamic heartlands. The importance of these chains of learning, as well as, their apparent popularity, lie in the central position the Qur'an occupies in the Borno educational system and even when scholars take up the study of other Islamic sciences, the Qur'anic *silsilāh* are still cherished, usually for the purposes of *tabarruk* (seeking blessing).<sup>27</sup>

## The Settlement of *Sangaya* (*Tsangaya*)

The study of the Qur'an in Borno is centred on an institution or a setting or a settlement called *tsangaya*. The *tsangaya* can be anywhere, but it is normally established either in the town, city or the outskirts of them (or in a completely independent settlement detached from other members of the society). *Tsangaya* settlements that are founded in the towns and cities are usually situated in *mālam*'s house/his host or a small facility, usually attached to a house or in front of a house donated by the host community, but the principal setting was the mosque. Two types of *makarantar allo* or *tsangaya*, have been identified during my fieldwork, namely urban and rural. The first settled *makarantar allo* which have permanent sites depending on their location. The place served as the compound or residence for students and visiting teachers, a feature common to all types of *tsangaya*. At the centre of the compounds was the residence of the *Goni* or *sayyina* who managed and directed as well as instructed the entire process of learning in the *tsangaya*.<sup>28</sup> This kind of *tsangaya* was found in many towns and villages of Borno, and the structures of some of them have survived to date. The second is owned and

---

<sup>25</sup> Hassan 1992, 48.

<sup>26</sup> Madauci 1999; see also 41; Song 1990, 111.

<sup>27</sup> Bobboyi 1992, 25.

<sup>28</sup> Laminu 1992, 11.





operated by itinerant teachers who travel with their students from one village, town or city to another.<sup>29</sup>

*Makarantar Allo* or *tsangaya* could be established by an independent scholar resident in the town or migrant in the town or village level and serve as a central figure in the school.<sup>30</sup> The *mālam* was often the head and sole administrator of the school and also presides over *darasi* for advanced students while assisting the *mālam* are a large number of advanced Qur'anic students. These serve as monitors (*'Urafa*) to look after the elementary-level students. As the head of the intellectual community, he should be learned to the status of; *mālam* or *Goni* and skilful in pronunciation and recitation of the Qur'an for his job. He might be a product of the same tradition. He appropriately manages and controls his school.<sup>31</sup> The *mālam* or *sayyina*, during the session, occupies a special position usually sitting in front of his students facing them during the class session. In most *Makarantar Allo*, girls are seated separately from the boys. The girls are always seated on the teacher's right hand and the boys on the left. This kind of separation, according to Hassan, despite the young age is reminiscent of and a continuity of the separation and segregation between males and females in Borno and the Islamic injunction against mixing sexes.<sup>32</sup> Girls in this school usually drop out before the age of puberty. Moreover, there are basically two types of students in the *Makarantar Allo*, which are differentiated in terms of residence and locality. The first category of students is residents in the town, but they live with their families or relatives in other compounds close to the school. Some of them attend the *Makarantar Allo* in the morning and *Makarantar Boko* (western modern school) or Islamiyah School in the afternoon.<sup>33</sup> The second category of students are those who come from different localities, who left their towns, villages or families for the sake of learning and in search of scholarship. This category of students is known in Borno and some other parts of Borno as *almajirai* (sing: *almajiri* derived from the Arabic *al-Muhajirin*).<sup>34</sup> They are also known as *fagurawa* (sing. *Fugura* from Ara. *Faqir*) in proper Borno.

---

<sup>29</sup> Hassan 1992, 49.

<sup>30</sup> Laminu 1992, 45.

<sup>31</sup> The rulers and the host community usually supported both the teachers and the students.

<sup>32</sup> Hassan 1992, 50.

<sup>33</sup> Hassan 1992, 52.

<sup>34</sup> The term *almajiri* refers to the category of students who are placed with an itinerant teacher, or those of rural origin sent by their parents to urban areas and distant towns to live with a settled teacher (*mālam*). It has been observed that due to changes at the societal level. *Almajirai* has been used in many instances to refer to all categories of needy people, the destitute or beggars.



## The System of Enrollment into *Sangaya* (*Tsangaya*)

The *Makarantar Allo* or *tsangaya*, though primarily an educational institution, also operates as a socio-economic unit. An almajiri, when he enrolls into the *Makarantar Allo*, is not only joining a school but also a new extended family, with the *mālam* at its helm. The students should engage themselves in all traditional household chores and cultivation of a collective farm to produce food supply for the *mālam*.

### Remuneration

These schools were mostly community-based, and community financed but the tasks of maintenance were spearheaded by *mālam* who considered that as a rewarding religious duty. There was no salary paid to the *mālam* apart from alms given to him by some individuals. Of course, if the parents of the pupil are well-to-do, then they send gifts to the teacher, perhaps a gown, a turban, or kola nuts. The society and parents offer *zakat* (alms giving) and *ṣadaqa* (offerings) to *mālam* for the purposes of *tabarruk* (seeking blessing) but the students are on their own. It is also apparent civic responsibility of the community to share meals with the students. Another important activity that generates revenue for the members of the *tsangaya* is the art of copying, principally of the Qur'an. This is done either on contract or for the general book market and the Borno Qur'ans are valued as far afield as North Africa and Egypt.<sup>35</sup>

### Ranks and Titles in *Sangaya* (*Tsangaya*)

There is no watertight division or chronology between ranks and titles in the school, but six hierarchies of scholarship are distinguishable according to the stage of learning, and level of knowledge. These are: The *kolo/kotso* is a newly admitted pupil who usually engages in street begging. The *titibiri* is an adolescent student who always leads the *Kolo* in street begging. The *gardi* is a mature student who normally engages in intensive and laborious services such as truck-pushing, wood-felling etc. as a means of livelihood.<sup>36</sup> The *mālam* is purely an academic rank to the teacher who committed to his memory a great portion of the Qur'an.<sup>37</sup> The *alamma* is an academic rank to one who committed the Qur'an into memory and can write off the heart. The *goni* or *gwani* is also an academic rank to one who not only committed the Qur'an into memory and can write off heart but also mastered it

<sup>35</sup> Bobboyi 1992, 47.

<sup>36</sup> Interview with Mallam Musa Sani Zakar in Gumel on 17<sup>th</sup> September 2015. See also Muhammadu Koki, 1977, 21-22.

<sup>37</sup> For a detail discussion of the meaning and status of *mālam*, and other terms related to it see chapter three.



and becomes an expert.<sup>38</sup> The *gangaran* is the highest rank in the system given to one who almost knows everything about the Qur'an.

## The teacher-student relationship

The teacher-student relationship is marked by total obedience and respect from both sides. This is, because, the majority of the students are like *amana* (trust) which is entrusted to them officially by their parents. The teacher is therefore seen by the students as a person who combines five distinct statuses in one. The students mostly consider the teachers as fathers, teachers, guiding counsellors, spiritual guides, and a model for them to emulate while the teacher considered them as his own children.<sup>39</sup> For instance, as a sign of extreme respect, students and people in the community greet the *mālam* by kneeling and taking their shoes off. Lowering their voice, they also used special formulas of greeting reserved for *mālam* and the elderly such as *Allah Ya gafarta Malam* (may Allah forgive the *mālam*), *alaramma*, *alhaji* or *mālam*. In rare cases, the general character, behaviour and progress of the child is from time to time communicated by the teacher to the parents.

## School Days and Sessions

Teaching and learning were conducted in three different sessions; the early morning session which starts immediately after the *Subh* (dawn prayer) or (*walaha*) early morning prayer and ends between 8-9 am, the evening session starts immediately after *Zuhr* prayer, a break is then taken for *Asr'* prayer and continued until when the sun is about to set. Lastly, the night prep starts after *Isha* prayer and ends on Wednesday. Thursdays and Fridays are study-free days for the students, and they have two weeks of holidays on all the Muslim festivals: *Id el-Kabir*, *Id el-Fitr* and *Maulud al-Nabi*. These provide them the opportunity, especially the grown-up students to engage in some independent means of income. The major tool of the school and its symbol is the wooden board known as *allo* which is locally made, and (*taawadaa/ink*) ink and *alkalami* (pen) are used for writing.<sup>40</sup> The *allo* is reusable, and all it requires is to wash and clean the *allo* and a new lesson can then be re-written. The principal *Qira'at* in Borno is that of 'Uthman b. Sa'id, popularly known as *Warsh* (728-812), himself a student of the Madinah scholar, Nafi' b. 'Abd

<sup>38</sup> *Gwani* is an Arabic word which simply means a highly expert or skilled person.

<sup>39</sup> Hassan 1992, 53; See also Stefan Reichmuth 2000, 424.

<sup>40</sup> See chapter three for more details on the different types of *tawada* (ink), *allo* (slate) and *takarda* (paper).



al-Rahman (d. 169/785), one of the seven major authorities in this field. The other six *Qira'at* (readings) are also taken seriously.

## Pedagogic Method

The pedagogy is exceedingly grounded in veneration of the divine written word, as not just because parrot learning or rote memorization has been the basic technique applied in all the stages of learning in *makarantar allo*. The language of instruction in these schools must be one of the vernacular languages such as Kanuri, Hausa, Fulfulde etc. The technique of studying the Qur'an, had, therefore, been perfected by merging the Arabic spirituality with indigenous language orality aimed particularly at a young learner. This is because learning especially at the early stage was a key point in the transition of the learner's mother tongue from orality to scripturally. This method has greatly helped in making the Islamic learning tradition not exclusively literate affairs, as that is written is meant to be recited and memorized;<sup>41</sup> but also the only method that can guarantee the preservation of the Qur'an in its purity (*tartil*).<sup>42</sup> This technique was faulted by many scholars that it was not "genuine literacy."<sup>43</sup> For instance, some argued that using the written text alone in learning the Qur'an might lead one to *tashif* (*misreading the words*). Others pointed out that this method deliberately encourages passivity in learners.<sup>44</sup> Yet in traditional Islamic education, memorization of the text is considered the starting point in the mastery of religious sciences. This is reflected in what Eickelman calls the "Qur'anic Presence," as a social paradigm of understanding in traditional Islamic education. This paradigm was first articulated by al-Ghazali (1058-1111) and Ibn Khaldun (1332-1406).

## Stages of Learning in *Makarantar Allo*

The learning of the Qur'an in Borno, however, can be the preoccupation of a lifetime and the principal objective of a Qur'anic student is to become a *Hafiz* or *Goni*. This process of becoming *Hafiz* (memorizer) is elaborate and well-regulated and generally involves six main stages depending on the locality as it is for the earlier nineteenth century.<sup>45</sup> The first stage is referred to as *kwaikwayo* stage and pupils listen to the recitation of their respective elders and start mimicking by rhythm of the recitation. The second stage is known as *biyawa* stage in which the pupils receive

---

<sup>41</sup> Allan Christelow 2000, 375.

<sup>42</sup> Hassan 1992: 45. *Tartil* refers to the art of chanting the Qur'an. However, there are about ten *qira'at* (the style of recitation) in Islamic tradition.

<sup>43</sup> Chamberlin 1975, 147-150.

<sup>44</sup> Brigaglia 2017, 78.

<sup>45</sup> Throughout northern Nigeria, the curriculum and method of the Qur'anic school is strikingly uniform.



instructions orally and learn to recite short verses of the Qur'an. The third stage is called *Babbaku*, *kolo/kotso* is normally introduced to the letters of the Arabic alphabet, demonstrating examples from the Qur'an written piece by piece on the *allo* without any diacritical marks or vowels. The fourth stage of the learning process is *Farfaru* whereby the pupils learn the Arabic alphabets that are vocalized and one of the distinguishing features of this stage is known as *Zube*.<sup>46</sup> The fifth stage is known as *Hadda/Haddatu* or *Hajjatu*. *Hajjatu* is a process whereby the pupils are expected to commit to memory some chapters of the Qur'an while the teacher listens very attentively to catch the slightest error and correct it.<sup>47</sup> The most important features of this stage are many variants.<sup>48</sup> *Tishe* or *tilawa*,<sup>49</sup> *Kiskadi*,<sup>50</sup> *Satu*,<sup>51</sup> *Zuku*.<sup>52</sup>

The sixth stage is called *Saukar Kura'ani* or *Saukar fari*. *Sauka* refers to the stage of completing a full reading and recitation as well as mastering certain parts of, or the whole, Qur'an on *allo*; and the ceremony accompanying this occasion.<sup>53</sup> There are different types of *sauka* identified in Borno and other parts of Borno as well as Hausaland. First, when a pupil reads and commits a portion or the whole Qur'an to memory to the satisfaction of the teacher, it is called *Saukar Hadda* and it is considered the best of them, but when the reverse is the case is called *saukar zuku*. When one reads several times until the read portion becomes very soft on his tongue is *saukar laushi*, but when one learns the Qur'an paper by paper until he memorizes the read portion is called *saukar biye*.<sup>54</sup> The ceremony for graduation is called *Saukar fari* which is marked by a symbolic ceremony, the traditional display of

---

<sup>46</sup> It is a situation whereby a pupil writes portion of the Qur'an daily and wash without necessarily mastering it.

<sup>47</sup> Mohammed 1973, 15. *Hajjatu* in Hausa, according to Hassan, simply means ability to read in syllables and it is a stage when the pupil can read some vocalised words, phrases and sentences, with the help of his teacher.

<sup>48</sup> Interview with Malam Isa A. Sani in Nguru.

<sup>49</sup> It is an act of constant recitation of the Qur'an off heart for memorization early in the morning and late evening. It is almost the same with *Hadda*.

<sup>50</sup> It is the act of going to the outskirts of a town and repeating the Qur'an aloud and to memorization. It is identified with the itinerant pupils who do so on the instruction of the teacher to avoid noise making areas.

<sup>51</sup> It is a stage in which a pupil can write on a slate without being word perfect. The student in this stage may have completed the Qur'an already.

<sup>52</sup> It is the opposite of *Hadda* whereby a student is expected to recite, memorize or learn by heart. He is rather expected to write a specified portion of the Qur'an daily except for Thursday and Fridays which are declared public holiday. It is a situation whereby a pupil writes great portion of the Qur'an daily and wash without necessarily mastering it

<sup>53</sup> The term *sauka* in Hausa, literary means to dismount or to descend, but in the daily usage it refers to "lifting off a heavy load" "helping to unload it. Hassan 1992:95. It seems to be a kind of "celebration of initiation" for detail see Andrea 2017; Hassan 1992; see also Stefan Reichmuth 2000, 424. Abubakar Mustapha 1984.

<sup>54</sup> Interview with Malam Isa A. Sani in Nguru.



wealth and the demonstration of the student's educational accomplishment.<sup>55</sup> Sometimes, when the pupil eventually completes the recitation of the *Qur'an*, the ceremony would be deferred till he or she would be due for marriage. Then, the *Qur'anic* graduation would be combined with the wedding ceremony. It was usually an elaborate occasion, which attracted people from far and near.<sup>56</sup> Preparation for the ceremony starts long before the actual date set for the final celebration and the big feast. When a date is set, *mālam* notifies the parents and invites other *mālams* as well as relatives and neighbours. As part of the preparation, *allo zayyana* (the decorated slate or board) is made. (It has been described in detail in chapter three). The *allo zayyana* is considered a diploma or certificate of accomplishing *sauka*. The *allo* is bought by the parents and decorated by a calligrapher and a decorator, which normally takes him two to three days to finish. The *sauka* is traditionally conducted on Wednesday in the evening.

## **Sauka (Graduation Day)**

On the *sauka* day, several people gather at the parents' or *mālams* house for the occasion. The occasion is normally marked by slaughtering an animal which may be a goat or a cow, depending on the parents' wealth. The venue for the occasion is prepared by having mats and rugs spread on the ground for people to sit on and food and drinks are served. The student is dressed in a new *babbar riga* (gown) made especially for the occasion. The student is seated in the middle of all the people, his colleagues, parents, teachers and other attending guests. The occasion is opened with a prayer. During the ceremony, his teacher or parents may hand over beautifully designed wooden slate with a few verses of the *Surat al-Baqarah* (the second chapter of the *Qur'an*) written in *Zayyana* style (*Qur'anic* ornamentation or illumination which is an aspect of calligraphy). The wooden slate with *zayyana* is like a certificate which would be presented to the pupil on the day of the graduation ceremony (*sauka/saukar Kur'ani* in Hausa).

---

<sup>55</sup> Mohammed 1973, 17. However, gifts, either in cash or in kind, are typically offered to the teacher in the form of *sadaka* (voluntary almsgiving). This is not considered as a reward or payment for the teacher's efforts but rather as an appreciation of his initiative and goodwill.

<sup>56</sup> For detail on the course of the activity see Ibrahim Madauci et al, 1999, 42-3; Hassan 1992:97. However, some scholars have been reported similar occasion to *Sauka fari*, with different details, in several Muslim West Africa. For similar occasion in Gambia see Sanneh 1972; see also Donald 1974: 73:74 for similar occasion in Sierra Leone. It is suggested that the origin of this tradition is probably North Africa, linking it with the fatwa of Shams al-Din Ibn Muhammad Ali al-Lamtuni to Jalal al-Din al-Suyuti in fifteenth century, in which he asked him about the sanctity in Islam of several customs and traditions practiced by West African Muslims. Al-Suyuti positively approved with fatwa.





Subsequently, the eligible student, in public faces a panel of examiners, headed by the *mālam* and consisting of the local Qur'anic scholars and colleagues invited for the occasion. The student is asked to recite from memory several chapters from the Qur'an upon request from the *mālam*. As a public display of his mastery, credentials and proficiency, the student tries very hard not to commit any mistakes. The *mālam* and other *mālams* and his colleagues in the audience listen carefully and correct his reading in recognition of which he can expect the occasional small gift of money from friends, family, and well-wishers. Describing the ceremony, Hassan remarked that *sauka* is more than a graduation ceremony but a major rite of passage or an initiation into the world of scholarship and work, in which the student is filled with great relief, joy, and satisfaction.<sup>57</sup> After the *sauka*, those who wish to advance their studies to have a career in Islamic scholarship, have two options. First, one might choose to become a Qur'anic teacher and, thus the student could proceed to perfect his copying and chanting with the objective of memorising the whole Qur'an until he has become *hafizi* (memorizer of the whole Qur'an). Second, one who chooses to study *ilm* should therefore join *makarantar ilmi* to study Islamic sciences.<sup>58</sup>

## Conclusion

The paper discussed the traditional system of Qur'anic education in Borno and it has been indicated that it is one of the cornerstones of Islamic education system. During the precolonial era, the system was made popular, widespread, self-sustaining, and functional. The system because of its acceptability and popularity still flourishes. Its popularity is not due to the absence of secular schools or because it is cheap but because it provides the kind of orientation and knowledge Muslim parents consider essential for the preservation of their children's Muslim identity. The Muslim parents considered the system as the best in terms of basic elementary education that is beneficial to their children. They consider the system as most suitable in making the children proficient in the recitation of the Qur'an, becoming conscious of their responsibility to Allah, their parents, relatives, and the society at large as well as making them conscious of their God-given rights.

Today, the system has degenerated into a sorry state whereby begging, truancy and such other abuses have become the hallmark of the institution. But in spite of the shortcomings associated with the system today, not only does it remain popular but

---

<sup>57</sup> Hassan 1992:98.

<sup>58</sup> Hassan 1992, 100.



also many a parent in both urban and rural centres still patronize it. It is noteworthy to mention that presently all the states of the federation including the capital territory have one form of Qur'anic education or the other.



## References

1. Bobboyi, H. (1992), "The 'Ulama of Borno: A Study of the Relations between Scholars and State under the Sayfawa," 1470-1808. PhD. Dissertation, North-western University, Evanston, Illinois.
2. Brigaglia A, (2001), "The *Fayda* Tijjaniyya of Ibrahim Nyass: Genesis and Implications of a *Sufi* Doctrine," *Islam et Societes au sud du Sahara*, 41-56.
3. .... (2011), "Central Sudanic Arabic Scripts (Part 1): The Popularization of the Kanawī Script," *Islamic Africa*, 2: 51–86.
4. ....(2013-2014), "Sufi Revival and Islamic Literacy: Tijani Writings in Twentieth Century Nigeria," in *Annual Review of Islam in Africa*, Issue No. 12/1. PP. 102-111.
5. ....(2017), "Sufi Poetry in Twentieth-Century Nigeria: A Khamriyya and a Ghazal by Shaykh Abū Bakr al-'Atīq (1909–1974)," *Journal of Sufi Studies* 6, no. 2, 195-197.
6. ....(2017), "*Fī Lawḥin Maḥūz*: Towards a Phenomenological Analysis of the Qur'anic Tablet," in Brigaglia, A. and Nobili, M. eds., *The Arts and Crafts of Literacy: Islamic Manuscript Cultures in Sub-Saharan Africa*, Germany: De Gruyter. 2017. 69-102.
7. Barth, H. (1857, rep. 1965), *Travels and Discoveries in Northern and Central Africa*, 3 vol, London: Frank Cass.
8. Biddle, M. (2017), "New Strategies in Using Watermarks to Date Sub-Saharan Islamic Manuscripts," in Brigaglia, A. and Nobili, M. eds., *The Arts and Crafts of Literacy: Islamic Manuscript Cultures in Sub-Saharan Africa*, Germany: De Gruyter. 27-68.
9. Bivar, A. D. H. (1959), 'Arabic Documents of Northern Nigeria', *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 22: 324– 349.
- 10.....(1960), "A dated Kuran from Bornu," *Nigeria Magazine* 65, 99–205.
- 11.....(1968), 'The Arabic Calligraphy of West Africa', in *African Language Review*, 7: 3-15.



12. Bivar, A.D.H. and Hiskett, M. (1962), "The Arabic literature of Nigeria to 1804: A Provisional Account," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 25. 104-148.
13. Dahiru, Umaru (2011), *Qur'anic Studies in Borno: Developments in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, Maiduguri: ED-Linform Services.
14. ....(2014), *Contributions of the Fulfulde Poetry to the Islamic Literary Tradition in Northern Nigeria*, Imtiyaz Academic Publishers.
15. Denham, D. Clapperton, H. Oudney, W. (1826), *Narrative of Travels and Discoveries in Northern and Central Africa: In the Years 1822, 1823, and 1824 II*, London: John Murray.
16. Gazali, K.A.Y. (2005), *The Kanuri in Diaspora: The Contribution of Kanem-Borno Ulama to Islamic Education in Nupe and Yorubalands*. Lagos: CSS Press.
17. Hassan, S.M, (1992), *Art and Islamic Literacy Among the Hausa of Northern Nigeria*, Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press.
18. Laminu, Z. H, (1992), *Scholars and Scholarship in the History of Borno*, Zaria: The Open Press Ltd, 1992.
19. Last, M. (1984), "The West African Book Trade Before 1900: A Plea for Research," in *Africa: the Changing Role of the Ulama*, March 28-31, 1984, by the Program of African Studies, Illinois: Northwestern University.
20. ....(2011), "The Book and the Nature of Knowledge in Muslim Northern Nigeria," in Krätli, G. and Lydon, G. eds., *The Trans-Saharan Book Trade: Manuscript Culture, Arabic Literacy and Intellectual History in Muslim Africa*, Leiden & Boston: BRILL.
21. Lavers, J. E. (1975), "Islam in the Borno Caliphate: A Survey," in Odu, A *Journal of West African Studies*, vol. 5 No. 35.(April, 35
22. Gazali, A.K.Y. (2005): "The Kanuri in Diaspora" the contribution of Kanem Borno „Ulama" to Qur'anic education in Nupe and Yorubalands. Published by CSS Bookshop Limited, Lagos, Nigeria.
23. Nachtigal, G. Fisher, A.G.B. Fisher, H.J. (1980), *Sahara and Sudan*, C. Hurst & Co. Publishers.



24. Mustapha, A, (1987), "The Contribution of Sayfawa 'Ulama to the Study of Islam c. 1086-1846 A. D.," PhD thesis, Bayero University, Kano.
25. Mutai, M.B. (2014), "The Qur'an in Borno: A History of its Orthography and Calligraphy," M.A. Thesis, Department of Arabic and Islamic Studies, University of Maiduguri, Nigeria.
26. Sifawa A.M. (1991), "Role of Kanem-Borno Ulama in Intellectual Development of the Bilad as-Sudan" a conference paper, 8<sup>th</sup> May 1991, University of Maiduguri on the role of Ulama in the Bilad as-Sudan.
27. Zahradeen, M.S. (1976), "Abd Allah b. Fodio's Contributions to the Fulani Jihadist Nineteenth Century Hausaland," PhD. Thesis, McGill University, Montreal.



## About the Author

Usman Al-amin, Ph.D. is a lecturer in the Department of History, University of Maiduguri, Nigeria. He received his B.A. and M.A. in social and intellectual history from the University of Maiduguri. Dr. Al-amin bagged his Ph.D. from the Centre for the Study of Manuscript Cultures, University of Hamburg. A specialist in the documentation and history of Arabic Literature, Sufi traditions, and Islamic manuscript cultures, his main fields of research include Islamic history, Sufism, and book history of Islamic manuscript cultures dealing with content, thematic, codicological, and paleographical analysis in the context of Nigerian social and intellectual history, in particular, the formative period up to the 20th century, and the historiography of Islamic sects in modern and contemporary Nigeria. He has collaborated on several international projects about Islamic manuscripts and recently carried out a research project on one of the Tarjamo Kanembu Qur'anic manuscripts attributed to the seventeenth-century Bornoan scholar Goni Musa. Dr. Al-amin's current research project focuses on the digitization of Islamic manuscripts and books across the Yobe/Borno axis in Nigeria. He has published extensively in journals and presented many academic papers at local and international conferences. In addition, he has been invited to research, write papers, and make presentations for several government functions and civil society fora.