Chapter Three - Makarantar Ilmi 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.
Chapter Three

Makarantar Ilmi and its Curriculum in Northern Nigeria

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Abstract

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.
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), hadith (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 Makaranantar 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.
Makaranter Ilimi or Makaranatar Zaure (The Advanced Level of Education)

The makaranter 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

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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: tafsīr (Qur’anic exegeses), hadīth (prophetic traditions); fiqh (jurisprudence); and usūl (sources of the law). Affixed to that was a deep study of grammar, literary style, logic, theology and ‘aqlīda (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 (‘amal) based on the predominance of the Maliki Madhhab (School of Law). The students were taught the Risāla of Abū Zayd (d. 996), al-Muqaddimah al-‘Ashmawīyya of Abū al-Bari al-‘Ashmawi al-Rufaiyyu (d. after 1086/1675), Mukhtasar al-Akhḍarī fī ‘l-‘ibādat of Sheik al-Allama ‘Abdu‘r-Rahman al-Akhḍarī (d. 983/1585) and other fundamental text regarding worship and social behaviour. Some of the recommended books in this section include: a virtual vocabulary of rules and regulations of Tauheed (oneness of Allah) called Qawa’īd, of unknown authorship. Mukhtasar al-Akhḍarī fī ‘l-‘ibādat of Sheik al-Allama ‘Abdu’r-Rahman al-Akhḍarī (d. 983/1585), Qurdabi of Yahaya Al-Qurtubi (d.1171), al-Muqaddimah al-‘Ashmawīyya of Abū al-Bari al-‘Ashmawi al-Rufaiyyu (d. after 1086/1675), Nathmu Muqadimaati ibn Rushd of Ibn Rushd (1126-1198), Izīyya of Abil Hasni Aliyu Malikiyyi Al Shazaliy (d. 1532), Risala of Muhammad ‘Abdullah ibn Abū Zayd al-Qayrawānī (d. 385/996), Irshad al-salik of Ibn ‘Asḵar (d. 1332), Mukhtasar Allamatul Khalil of Sheikh Dhiya’ul Deen Khaleel bn Isḥaqq Al Maliki (d.1374/66) and At-Tas’heel of Ibn Malik (d. 1274), Shurb al-Zulal of Muhammad b. ‘Abd al-Rahman Hajrami (d. 1755), Qawanin al-Ahkam al-Shar’iyya of Abu ‘l-Qasim Muhammad b. Ahmad Ibn Juzayy (d. 1340), Musrid al-aMu’in of ‘Abd al-Wahid b. Ahmad Ibn ‘Ashir al-Ansari (d. 1040/1631). Talkhis al-Miftaah of al-Qazwīnī (d. 1338)

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 Fodio.
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.¹²This 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 Ājjūrām (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 Buhari of Muhammad Bukhari (810-870), Jam’ius Sageer¹⁴ of al-Suyuti (1445-1505), and Al-Usuul of as-Subki (d. 1370), which was a commentary upon the al-Mahallī’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, Matnîl Qadrûn-Nada wa-Ballîl sada, Mulaţhatul-Liîrabi, Ibn Duraid, Lamiyat al-af’al,

¹² Field notes.
¹⁴ See Al-Jami’il-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, Ishriniyat of Abi Bakarim Muhammad bn Malikyyi 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-Hamadhni (969-1007), An-Naadhim of Abu Mugra’, Ar-Rajaaz of Abd’l-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’ân/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’ân (Qur’anic sciences) in the town include the al-Muqaddimah al-Jazariyya of Abu ‘I-Khayr Shams al-Din Muhammad b. Muhammad al-Dimashqi (1350-1429) on Tajwid, the Hizr al-Amānī 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’ân 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 (qawaafis), Al-Khazrajiya concerning logic and philosophy, Al-Faru’ 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-Shīfā’ bi-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

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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. 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. 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.

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16 The 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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Usman Al-amin, PhD, 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 so many academic papers in 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.