

Islamic education in northern Nigeria

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Abstract: Over a quarter of the world's Muslim population today are African, with Nigeria hosting the world's 5th largest Muslim population. In a global context where Islam has often been associated primarily with Arab populations and where the vestiges of colonial racism continue to taint perceptions of Islam in African societies south of the Sahara, it is important both to acknowledge these demographic facts and to pay attention to the long history and diverse realities of Islamic educational practices on the continent. Against this backdrop, this chapter seeks to provide a nuanced discussion of Islamic educational practices in northern Nigeria. It documents their long history in the region, showing how learning practices have evolved in tandem with wider societal transformations, including colonial overrule, the introduction of Western education, and the rise of Islamic reform movements in the second half of the 20th century. The chapter highlights the vibrancy, resilience, and diversity of Islamic educational practices in northern Nigeria. By doing so, it speaks back to securitised framings that look at Islamic education in this region primarily through a narrow lens of security and counterinsurgency, notably in the context of the 'Boko Haram' insurgency that has engulfed northeast Nigeria for well over a decade.

Keywords: Nigeria, Islamic education, Qur'anic schools, almajirai, Boko Haram

Zusammenfassung: Mehr als ein Viertel der muslimischen Bevölkerung der Welt sind heute Afrikaner, wobei Nigeria die fünftgrößte muslimische Bevölkerung der Welt beherbergt. In einem globalen Kontext, in dem der Islam oft in erster Linie mit arabischen Bevölkerungsgruppen assoziiert wird und in dem die Überreste des kolonialen Rassismus die Wahrnehmung des Islams in afrikanischen Gesellschaften südlich der Sahara weiterhin beeinträchtigen, ist es wichtig, sowohl diese demografischen Fakten anzuerkennen als auch die lange Geschichte und die vielfältigen Realitäten islamischer Bildungspraktiken auf dem Kontinent zu berücksichtigen. Vor diesem Hintergrund versucht dieses Kapitel, eine nuancierte Diskussion der islamischen Bildungspraktiken in Nordnigeria zu führen. Es dokumentiert die lange Geschichte dieser Praktiken in der Region und zeigt, wie sich die Lernpraktiken im Gleichschritt mit umfassenderen gesellschaftlichen Veränderungen entwickelt haben, darunter die koloniale Herrschaft, die Einführung westlicher Bildung und der Aufstieg islamischer Reformbewegungen in der zweiten Hälfte des 20. Jahrhunderts. Das Kapitel hebt die Lebendigkeit, Widerstandsfähigkeit und Vielfalt islamischer Bildungspraktiken in Nordnigeria hervor. Damit wendet es sich gegen sicherheitspolitische Rahmungen, die die islamische Bildung in dieser Region in erster Linie durch eine enge Linse der Sicherheit und der Aufstandsbekämpfung betrachten, insbesondere im Zusammenhang mit dem „Boko Haram“-Aufstand, der den Nordosten Nigerias seit mehr als einem Jahrzehnt heimsucht.

Schlagwörter: Nigeria, islamische Bildung, Koranschulen, almajirai, Boko Haram

Introduction

Over a quarter of the world's Muslim population today are African (Pew Research Center, 2011; Ware, 2014), and the vast majority of them live south of the Sahara. In 2010, Nigeria hosted the world's 5th largest Muslim population, equalling 77 million or 4.8% of all Muslims, and the country has been projected to host the world's 4th largest Muslim population, amounting to 230 million or 8.4% of all

Muslims, by 2050 (Pew Research Center, 2011). In a global context where Islam has often been associated primarily with Arab populations (Desilver & Masci, 2017), and where the vestiges of colonial racism continue to taint perceptions of Islam in African societies south of the Sahara (Şaul, 2006; Ware, 2014), it is important both to acknowledge these demographic facts, and to pay attention to the long history and diverse realities of Islamic educational practices on the continent.

While Islam in Africa south of the Sahara has been said to have been marginalised by scholarship and within the public imagination (Boyle, 2017; Ware, 2014), this has not made it immune from ‘securitisation’ which, it has been argued, has shaped perceptions of Islamic educational institutions across the globe (Nweke, 2021; Starrett, 2006). In an environment of widespread fears about Islamic militancy, Islamic schools have often been studied through the lenses of security and counterterrorism/counterinsurgency, with scholarship centring questions around their presumed contributions to radicalisation and violence (Fair, 2007; Winthrop & Graff, 2010). Northern Nigeria has been no exception to this trend, notably in the context of the so-called ‘Boko Haram’ crisis¹ that has engulfed northeast Nigeria since 2009. Qur’anic schools there have frequently been discussed as presumed recruitment grounds for ‘Boko Haram’, even while empirical evidence to substantiate such allegations remains sparse (Griswold, 2014; Hansen, 2016; Soyinka, 2012).

Against the backdrop of the above, this chapter seeks to offer a nuanced discussion of Islamic educational practices in northern Nigeria, starting off by highlighting their long history in the region. The chapter explores how colonialism and the introduction of new hegemonic definitions of what it means to be ‘educated’ have impacted Islamic educational practices in northern Nigeria, and highlights fragmentation and stratification trends since the second half of the 20th century. The paper also unpacks what is and can be known about the nexus between Islamic education and the violent insurgency in northeast Nigeria.

It is important to contextualise the references to political/geographic entities made in the chapter. Current-day Nigeria is a colonial creation, and its constituent regions have different histories regarding the arrival of Islam and establishment and evolution of Islamic learning practices. This chapter focuses primarily on Kano in what is today northern Nigeria and Borno and Yobe in what is today northeastern Nigeria. Northern and northeastern Nigeria host the majority of Nigerian Muslims, most of them Hausa, Fulani, or Kanuri (Borno). Significant Muslim populations also reside in the South though, notably the Southwest, where the Yoruba predominate. In many of the northern states, Muslims are the majority, shaping the political outlook of these states. For example, twelve of the northern states have reintroduced ‘full’ shari’a law (covering criminal as well as civil matters) after Nigeria’s return to democracy in 1999, which is still in force day.

Historically, what is today northeast Nigeria has been a particular hub for Islamic education, and Qur’anic memorisation especially, attracting students from across the region. This has changed over recent decades with insecurity related to the ‘Boko Haram’ insurgency engulfing much of this region. This chapter will outline trends in Islamic education across northern Nigeria but also zoom in on the Northeast and the specific challenges arising for Islamic education in the wake of over a decade of violent conflict there. The next section introduces the research and data on which I draw in this piece. Subsequent sections trace the history of Islamic education in what is today northern Nigeria from the eleventh century to the present, exploring the changes brought about by colonial conquest, independence, and religious reform. I then document what forms Islamic education takes today in the region, and how these different forms have been discussed in society. After that, I shed light on the role of the state in the Islamic education sector and on teaching training. Finally, the chapter scrutinises the

¹ The moniker ‘Boko Haram,’ commonly translated as ‘Western education is forbidden,’ is an exonym which has likely been coined by Hausa medium foreign media and has been disavowed by the insurgency leadership.

notion that Qur'anic schools contributed to the rise of 'Boko Haram' and explores how over a decade of violent conflict has affected Islamic education in the region. I conclude with some reflections on the future prospects for Islamic education in northern Nigeria.

Research and data

My research, which I will be drawing on in this piece, has focused on Kano State (Hoechner, 2018). Kano State is predominantly Hausa and northern Nigeria's most populous state. I lived in Kano for a total of 13 months in 2009 and 2011 and visited for three weeks in 2018. During these stays, I conducted ethnographic research on Qur'anic education in both rural and urban parts of Kano State. This included observations, informal conversations, semi-structured interviews, a review of media discourses, as well as 'participatory' research, including the production of a docu-drama with Qur'anic students about their lives and perspectives (Hoechner, 2015, 2018). I have also remotely collaborated with Sadiyu Idris Salisu on research on how the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted Islamic education in Kano in 2020 (Hoechner & Salisu, 2022). From 2021-24, I have again remotely collaborated with Yagana Bukar, Ali Galadima and Sadiyu Salisu Idris on research in Borno and Yobe States in Nigeria's Northeast (Hoechner & Bukar, 2024), which host a large Kanuri population, and which have been affected by violent conflict related to the 'Boko Haram' insurgency since 2009. Most of my research has been on Islamic educational institutions catering to young people from walking age up to their late teens/early twenties rather than adult learners. The focus of this piece mirrors this.²

Beginnings of Islamic education³

While Western academia, building on racist colonial modes of categorisation, have often studied North Africa and the region south of the Sahara as separate and distinct, Muslims across West Africa have long been engaged in spiritual and intellectual exchanges across the Sahara (Kane, 2016; Ware, 2014). Islam arrived 'on the back of a camel' via trans-Saharan trade routes as early as the eleventh century in the then Kanem-Bornu Empire, covering part of present-day northeast Nigeria (Abdurrahman & Canham, 1978, p. 44). The Muslim faith played an important role both in the economic life of the region and in the vivid intellectual and social exchanges it facilitated across the Sahara. Adopting Islam allowed traders to 'identify with the larger world of Islam' while simultaneously facilitating 'credit and finance' (Paden, 1973, p. 47).

In other parts of present-day Nigeria, Islam was slower to spread. Beginning in the fifteenth century, Islam was the religion of the ruling elites of the Hausa city states further west. Yet, until the nineteenth century, its influence outside the capital cities and the ruling families was limited. The Fulani-led jihad of Uthman dan Fodio in 1804–8, launched against what were perceived as un-Islamic, syncretistic practices, and the ensuing establishment of the Sokoto Caliphate (Last, 1967), strengthened the hold of Islam among the wider population.

Islam reached Yorubaland – today southwestern Nigeria – via the Niger river from the Songhai Empire in present-day Mali, probably as early as the late sixteenth century. By the eighteenth century, the dominant influences came from what is today northern Nigeria. Muslim traders and slaves carried the religion with them. The Sokoto Caliphate extended as far south as Ilorin (Peel, 2003).

Religious knowledge, which was initially restricted to scholarly families, has been a political asset since the inception of Islam in northern Nigeria. Muslim rulers, by submitting to the restraints of a written code, exposed themselves to the judgments of intellectuals educated in that code. In the Kanem-Bornu Empire (9th/11th century - 1983), Muslim scholars were given *mahram* – a privileged status exempting

² I am grateful to Sadiyu Idris Salisu for providing insights into recent developments in the Islamic educational landscape in Kano and feedback on an earlier version of this text.

³ See Hoechner (2018, 2022) for earlier versions of the history sections included in this piece.

them ‘from taxation and military service in return for placing their skills and learning at the service of the [Islamic] State’ (Abdurrahman & Canham, 1978, pp. 45–46). Religious scholars also became influential in the Sokoto Caliphate (1808–1903). As the main literate class prior to colonialism, they were the only ones eligible for certain government positions. Given the scarcity of scholars in the early days of Islam in the region, religious knowledge was acquired by moving away from home to live with a renowned scholar in one of the emerging centres of learning (Kane, 2016). ‘Islamic networks and Qur’anic schools,’ spanning the entire caliphate with their migration routes and networks, ‘were integral to the expansion, reproduction and ideological integration’ of the Islamic state (Lubeck, 1985, p. 372).

Islamic education under colonial rule

British conquest and ‘indirect rule’ in Northern Nigeria from 1903 set in motion social and political changes that fundamentally altered the configuration of Islamic education and status of those educated within this system. Despite its initially narrow base, the introduction of Western education⁴ had a substantial impact on the ‘*ulama* (religious scholars), as it gradually undermined their ‘monopoly over literacy’ and thus their access to prestige, positions, and resources (Umar, 2001, p. 129).

Before the arrival of the British, most written communication in the region had been in Arabic, using Arabic script. Yet, after conquest, Hausa and English became the administrative languages and Roman replaced Arabic script. During the colonial era, as well as post-independence, Western-educated individuals came to occupy most positions within government and the administration. As the Emir of Kano and Nigerian public intellectual Sanusi Lamido Sanusi poignantly put it, the knowledge held by classically trained Islamic scholars was effectively ‘given a value of zero’ (Sanusi, 2017).

At the same time, societal attempts to modernize the classical Islamic education system were mostly thwarted. Initiatives launched in the postwar period by nationalist northerners under the leadership of Aminu Kano to include subjects and ‘modern’ teaching methods in religious schools, were blocked by the colonial authorities due to their political overtones.

Islamic education in independent Nigeria

Since independence, modernising Islamic education has been a major concern for Muslims in northern Nigeria. After independence, Ahmadu Bello, the premier of the northern region, hoped to unite the north under the flag of Islam. One of the first steps of his government was to set up a committee to assist the classical Islamic education system. But after his assassination in 1966, these developments ground to a halt (Thurston, 2016a). After the Civil War (1967–1970), Nigeria was transformed into a federation of smaller states. Responsibility for education was devolved upon state governments, and thereby fragmented.

The developments in the Islamic education sector since the 1970s mirror larger societal transformations, which have led to increasing socioeconomic and religious stratification. The oil boom of the 1970s and the ensuing economic downturn, accentuated by structural adjustment, impoverished large parts of the population, increased income inequality, and fostered the individualization of society. This societal crisis was accompanied by religious reform and fragmentation. Education was at the heart of religious reform efforts. This period saw the rise of new privately run Islamic schools, so-called *Islamiyya* schools, as discussed below (Umar, 2004).

⁴ I use the term ‘Western education’ in this paper as it is commonly used in Nigerian parlance. However, I acknowledge that the label ‘Western’ insufficiently acknowledges that this education system now has its own history in Nigeria, its colonial origins notwithstanding.

Nigeria's Universal Primary Education (UPE) initiative, launched in 1976, did not aim for synergies with the Islamic education system, and, moreover, came to a standstill as the state withdrew from public service provision in the aftermath of the oil boom and ensuing economic restructuring. However, in recent decades, policy makers have begun to attempt to harness the potential of institutions of Islamic learning to achieve universal basic education goals, as discussed below.

Contours and contents of Islamic education today

Islamic educational practices in northern Nigeria today are diverse, mirroring not only the region's richness in terms of religious and cultural practice, but also its divisions/disparities, including those relating to gender and socio-economic status. Below, drawing on observations in Kano, the most common school forms are presented (classical Qur'anic schools or *makarantar allo* in Hausa, *tsangaya* schools, 'modern' Islamic schools or *Islamiyya* schools, and *Tahfeez* schools). It is important to remember though that they do not constitute an exhaustive list, and that these are prototypes. In reality, the educational landscape consists of a broad spectrum of different practices, timetables, curricula, and degrees of formalisation that defy neat categorisation.

Classical Qur'anic schools or makarantun allo

Classical Qur'anic schools (*makarantar allo*, pl. *makarantun allo* in Hausa) are popular across different strata of society, especially for young children. They teach students to read, write, and recite the Qur'an in Arabic script. Teaching often takes place in mosques, or at the (mostly male) teacher's house. Students sit on prayer mats or on the floor. Beginners memorise several short surahs off head before learning to write the Qur'an with quill and ink on wooden boards. Some schools use paper copies of the Qur'an instead. There are neither age grades nor certificates. Students' progress at their own pace. Islamic subjects other than the Qur'an are mostly the preserve of advanced learners.

Such schools serve boys and girls from walking age to their teens from the school's neighbourhood, and sometimes male boarding students (*almajirai*), as discussed below. Day students may attend other schools, including Western schools and/or modern Islamic/*Islamiyya* schools, in addition to Qur'anic school, as the latter often offer early-morning and evening lessons, which don't clash with the timetables of these other schools. The classical Qur'anic schools are largely beyond the state's purview and regulatory interventions. Their teachers receive no salary but live off the support given by the local community, alms received in exchange for spiritual services, the contributions of their students, and supplementary income-generating activities.

Classical Qur'anic education

There are also so-called *tsangaya* (Hausa) or *sangaya* (Kanuri) schools, which teach the Qur'an to exclusively male boarding students, who are known as *almajirai* (Hausa) or *ma'ajir* (Kanuri). Unlike the neighbourhood Qur'anic schools described above, many of these schools are mobile. They move to towns during the dry season, when there is little agricultural work to be completed, and return to the countryside during the rainy farming season. Historically, this system accorded well with the ecology and economy of the Sahel, as children and youth could be dispatched to urban areas during dry-season-induced times of scarcity. Conversely, the labour of Qur'anic school students was available in rural areas during the busy farming season (Khalid, 2006; Lubeck, 1985). Today, *almajirai* engage in a plethora of different activities to sustain themselves, ranging from begging for food and money to farm work, petty jobs, household work and trade. Many *tsangaya* schools lack physical infrastructure beyond a canopied forecourt where the teaching takes place, compelling their students to live in other spaces, such as mosques or neighbours' entrance halls.

Since colonial times, this education system has experienced a steady decline in prestige and community support, as a result both of poverty, the rise of alternative education systems (including Western and

Islamiyya schools), changing norms around childhood, and criticism from ‘reform-oriented’ Muslims.⁵ Classical Qur’anic education has often been associated with so-called ‘traditional’ Sufi Islam, which ‘reform-oriented’ Muslims of a pro-Salafi orientation (see footnote 5), have criticised for being ‘backward’ and ‘unenlightened’. Classical Qur’anic schools have been accused of mixing ‘culture’ and ‘religion’, for example by engaging in practices such as producing and using charms (*laya*) and potions (*rubutun sha*) (Hoechner, 2018). Salafi-oriented thinkers have also criticised the recitation style or *qira’a* used in many classical Qur’anic schools (Warsh rather than the Hafs style preferred by Salafis) and lamented the absence of teaching of *tajweed* (rules of pronunciation).

Classical Qur’anic schools have also come under fire for presumably failing to adequately prepare students for life in a ‘modern’ world and economy. Many better-off urbanites consider begging *almajirai* a nuisance, and voice concerns about the health and safety of the children involved, as well their ability to gain economically useful skills. What is more, *almajirai* have often, rightly or wrongly, been associated with violence and radicalisation in Nigeria, including in the context of the ‘Boko Haram’ conflict which has engulfed northeast Nigeria since 2009 (Bukar & Hoechner, 2024). Depictions of *almajirai* as guileless foot soldiers of violence, and of their schools as breeding grounds for terrorism, have become commonplace among commentators both in Nigeria and beyond (Aghedo & Eke, 2013; Griswold, 2014; Hansen, 2016; Soyinka, 2012). I explore in greater depth below what empirical evidence exists about the relationship between Qur’anic schools and the ‘Boko Haram’ insurgency.

In many parts of northern Nigeria, demand for *almajiri* education persists despite its mostly negative image. The decline of the rural economy, due to the oil boom and structural adjustment, combined with the onset of massive demographic growth in Nigeria with the population more than quadrupling since 1950. This has entrenched poverty, especially in rural areas. Unlike Western schools and *Islamiyya* schools, classical Qur’anic schools do not require students to buy materials such as uniforms or books, and students earn their own upkeep. Most Qur’anic schools do not charge fees (though their teachers welcome donations). This makes them highly accessible even for the poorest. What adds to their appeal is their strong focus on Qur’anic memorisation, which many people in northern Nigeria, especially in rural communities, hold in high regard. Most other Islamic educational institutions, including the *Islamiyya* schools discussed next, place less emphasis on Qur’anic memorisation.

‘Modern’ Islamic education

‘Modern’ Islamic schools have mostly emerged in the context of the Islamic reform movements of the 1970s, which had strong anti-Sufi and pro-Salafi overtones (Kane, 2003; Loimeier, 1997). However, it has been pointed out that educational reform has not been the preserve of Salafi-oriented Muslims, but has been championed by Muslims across the religious spectrum (Brigaglia, 2007). A prominent school type emerging out of the educational reform endeavours of the 1970s are so-called *Islamiyya* schools. *Islamiyya* schools are privately run community schools that use ‘modern’ teaching methods and offer lessons in a broad range of Islamic subjects and in some instances ‘secular’ subjects.⁶ They teach the Qur’an but dedicate less time to it than the classical Qur’anic schools.

⁵ I use the term ‘reform-oriented’ Muslims to refer to Muslims calling for the removal of perceived cultural additions to Islam and return to a putatively ‘pure’ Islam. ‘Reform-oriented’ Muslims include notably those of a pro-Salafi orientation. Thurston (2016b, p. 1) writes that what unites Salafis are references to a shared canon: ‘a set of Arabic texts and a group of twentieth-century Middle Eastern thinkers’ which they invoke ‘as standards of authority in local struggles over who gets to speak for Islam’. It is important to remember that the Salafi community, including in Nigeria, is highly diverse and fragmented.

⁶ Echoing Boyle (2019, p. 145), I acknowledge that ‘secular’ is a problematic term in Islam as Islam didn’t traditionally distinguish between secular and religious knowledge. I use it here to refer to subjects mandated by state sanctioned curricula, such as English, maths, social studies, etc.

Islamiyya schools are popular for teaching the practical knowledge required for religious practice and for focussing on *hadith* (the sayings/traditions of the Prophet Mohammed). They familiarise students with the intricacies of performing ablutions and prayers, and teach them the appropriate supplications (*addu'a*) for specific situations. They have replaced the wooden board and prayer mats of the classical schools with desks, chairs, books, and pens, and use age grading and formal certification. Such schools mostly use the Hafs recitation style and place great emphasis on *tajweed* or the rules of pronunciation of the Qur'an. While boys also attend *Islamiyya* schools, these schools are considered to be particularly well suited to the educational needs of girls, facilitating their acquisition of the basics of religious practice in time before marriage (Boyle, 2017). Most *Islamiyya* schools are economic enterprises whose teachers rely for their livelihood on the money they receive from parents and students in the form of school fees (Boyle, 2019; Brenner, 2007).

In addition to *Islamiyya* schools, so-called *Tahfeez* schools have emerged out of the educational reform efforts discussed above, which mostly operate on a schedule designed to fit around children's attendance at other educational institutions (Western school, *Islamiyya* school). These schools focus on Qur'anic memorisation, but have replaced the wooden board (*allo*) of the classical Qur'anic schools with paper copies of the Qur'an and put emphasis on *tajweed*.

Finally, adult learners who would like to advance their religious knowledge may attend *tafsir* sessions hosted by mosques after the *maghrib* (evening) prayer, engage with a scholar at the mosque premises, or visit a scholar at their home/school. Classical Qur'anic teachers long used to receive visitors and students in the traditionally built entrance room to their house, earning them the name *malamin zaure*, or teacher of the entrance room (Architectural change has displaced some of this learning to mosques). Learning is informal, with individual students focusing on different books which they come to discuss with the teacher.

As highlighted throughout this section, views on what Islamic education should encompass and how it should be acquired vary today in northern Nigerian society, with different expectations, preferences and opportunities for boys and girls, rural and urban children, reform-oriented and more 'traditional' Muslims, the better-off and the poor. The next section discusses the place of the state for regulating/providing Islamic education.

Formalisation of Islamic religious education and the role of the state

Given Nigeria's federal structure, no single education policy framework covers all northern states. Instead, individual states set their own approaches to religious educational institutions and their integration. In a number of states, policy makers have sought to capitalise on the popularity of religious schools, which often enjoy greater community acceptance than government-run institutions and have taken steps to draft them into their efforts to universalise basic education. In Kano State, for example, northern Nigeria's most populous state, significant efforts have been made to register *Islamiyya* schools, encouraging them to include secular subjects in their curriculum. Registered schools receive some government or donor support, and their students can transition into government-run schools relatively smoothly. Similar efforts have been underway, e.g., in Borno State. There have also been attempts to take secular knowledge to Qur'anic / *tsangaya* schools, e.g. by sponsoring teachers to offer lessons / a condensed primary school curriculum to *tsangaya* students on specific days/times during the week agreed with their teacher (Select Committee International Development, n.d.; World Bank Group, n.d.).

However, beyond these often donor-funded projects of limited scope, Qur'anic and especially *tsangaya* / *sangaya* schools have mostly defied absorption into state education systems given their more informal nature, as well as their mobility, with students, teachers, and entire schools frequently moving across state borders. What is more, the approach of state authorities towards this education system has often

been quite hostile/punitive. Several states have passed begging bans, targeted explicitly at the *almajirai*'s practice of seeking alms on the streets of northern Nigeria's cities (Maishanu, 2020). Widespread perceptions of this education system as a "problem" and even "threat" underpin these hostile/punitive approaches, and *almajirai* are generally categorised as "out-of-school" (UNICEF Nigeria, 2022).

During the Covid-19 outbreak in Nigeria, Qur'anic students have been cast as vectors of disease and a biological threat, even in the absence of epidemiological evidence. Such framings build on longer-standing tropes about them as security risk (Nweke, 2021), as discussed above. The 'securitisation' of the *almajirai* has allowed drastic action to be taken against Qur'anic students, including forced clearance of schools and student deportations at the height of the pandemic (Hoechner & Salisu, 2022). I explore below how perceptions of the *almajirai* as a security threat in the context of 'Boko Haram' have also made them vulnerable to violence by the security forces and an erosion of community support.

As outlined in this section, while there have been state and donor efforts to create synergies with the Islamic education sector, most of this sector remains in private or community hands. Many Islamic education providers, notably Qur'anic teachers within the *tsangaya* system, are sceptical today of state interference/control as a result of past hostile/punitive state interventions. However, privatization means that poverty increasingly came to determine children's educational trajectories, as explored above.

Training of Islamic teachers

Approaches to Islamic teacher training mirror the diversity of Islamic educational practices. In the classical Qur'anic education system, there is no formal certification system. In the past, a Qur'anic teacher may have provided a letter of recommendation (*wasika*) to a senior student embarking on travels or wishing to join a school/teacher elsewhere. Mobile phone communication made such letters largely redundant today. Advanced students are expected to await authorisation (*ijazah*) from their teacher, confirming his confidence in their knowledge and ability, before they embark on writing their own copies of the Qur'an. Beyond this, a teacher's reputation and standing depend largely on his ability to attract, and keep, a substantial student following. Often, a senior teacher entrusts a small number of younger students to an aspiring teacher/teacher apprentice, who oversees the progress of the latter. He may also take them on a migratory tour, notably during the dry season. If he is perceived to teach well, his student body will grow as his reputation builds.

With regards to *Islamiyya* schools, teachers' qualification levels vary depending on the school's degree of formalisation and the social strata they are catering to. Local *Islamiyya* schools may rely on secondary school graduates who majored in Arabic/Islamic studies, *tsangaya* graduates, or university students. More established and reputed (and more costly) *Islamiyya* schools are more likely to rely on teachers who graduated in a relevant subject (e.g., Islamic Studies/Arabic Studies) from a university or teacher college and who are paid a proper salary. Registered *Islamiyya* schools often provide formal certificates to their students.

Religious teaching is largely a male-dominated profession in northern Nigeria. Yet, women scholars have long existed in the region too. A much-revered historical figure for example is Nana Asma'u (1793–1864), daughter of the founder of the Sokoto Caliphate Uthman dan Fodio, who was 'a prolific Muslim scholar, poet, historian and educator' (Boyd & Mack, 2013, p. vii). Recent trends of female mass participation in Islamic education through *Islamiyya* schools, have led to the emergence of a new demographic of religiously educated women some of whom further their religious education at colleges and universities and take up religious teaching positions (Umar, 2004).

Presumed links between Qur'anic schools and 'Boko Haram'

As outlined throughout this chapter, suspicions are rife about the role of Qur'anic schools for the 'Boko Haram' conflict. The existing empirical evidence on the nexus between Islamic education and the insurgency cautions against assuming that there is a straightforward connection between any particular educational profile or institution and recruitment into the insurgency. Research with former members has shown consistently that their educational backgrounds vary (Mercy Corps, 2016; Thurston, 2018; UNDP, 2017). In 2009, young university graduates attracted attention as they demonstratively tore up their graduation certificates when joining Muhammad Yusuf's movement, tagged 'Boko Haram'. 'Boko Haram' developed as an offshoot of the Salafi movement in Nigeria, before turning against this movement (Umar, 2012). As outlined before, Salafis have long been critical of classical Qur'anic schools. This challenges the notion that classical Qur'anic schools were the 'natural bedfellows' of Yusuf's movement. This does not of course mean that Qur'anic school students and graduates were wholly immune to recruitment. Our own research suggests *almajirai* had a significant presence inside the insurgency, driven by both voluntary signups and forced recruitment and kidnappings (Bukar & H, 2024).

When making sense of the membership of 'Boko Haram', it is important to bear in mind that participation in Western education is generally low in northeast Nigeria. Over 60% of adults in Borno and Yobe States had no Western education when surveys were conducted in 2008 and 2013 (National Population Commission, 2009; National Population Commission & ICF International, 2014). The fact that Islamic school students and graduates were part of 'Boko Haram' does not automatically imply that their education was central/relevant to the recruitment process. Existing research has cautioned against overestimating the role of ideology for why people joined the insurgency (Nagarajan, Allamin, Barsa & Dietrich, 2018), highlighting instead the importance of security concerns (including fear of violence by the security forces and retaliation from the insurgents), livelihood pressures as well as friendship/family loyalties.

These facts notwithstanding, the trope of *tsangaya* schools as incubators of 'Boko Haram' sympathisers has been powerful in northeast Nigeria and beyond. Research we conducted in Borno and Yobe States in 2021 and 2024 (Hoechner & Bukar, 2024) suggests that widespread perceptions of *almajirai* as presumed 'Boko Haram' supporters have made them vulnerable to violence by the security forces, with many *tsangaya* students being harassed, detained, and even killed, notably during the early phases of the insurgency (Amnesty International, 2015; Human Rights Watch, 2016).

Community support for *tsangaya* schools has also declined because of both mistrust and widespread impoverishment. The teachers in our study found it more difficult than before to find accommodation and assistance for themselves and their students. *Almajirai* struggle today to find enough to eat from begging. Teachers who historically lived off support received in exchange for providing spiritual services and contributions from their students' parents, reported such income drying up.

Our research suggests that continued insecurity and strained social relations in the wake of the conflict have significantly affected and altered the workings of *tsangaya* schools in northeast Nigeria. Historically, many Qur'anic schools were embedded in the rural economy, with farming being a key source of livelihood for teachers and students, as sketched out above. With many schools and teachers being displaced from rural areas due to the insecurity, these livelihood structures have broken down. Similarly, Qur'anic schools have historically been embedded in seasonal migration circuits where urban schools absorbed rural youths during the agriculturally idle dry season. We found limited evidence of such migration circuits surviving the conflict. Several teachers told us that they were reluctant today to accept students/aspiring teachers without a proper referral and had themselves received lukewarm

welcomes when engaging in such migration. These developments raise questions about the shape and resilience of classical Qur'anic education in the region, explored further in the concluding section below.

Future prospects for Islamic religious education in northern Nigeria

This paper has documented the long history of Islamic education in what is today northern Nigeria, showing how it has evolved in tandem with wider societal transformations, including colonial overrule and the introduction of Western education, as well as the rise of Islamic reform movements and ensuing fragmentation and redefinition of the contents and contours of Islamic education. The chapter has sought to highlight the vibrancy, resilience, and diversity of Islamic educational practices in northern Nigeria, speaking back to securitised framings that look at Islamic education in this region primarily through a narrow lens of security and counterinsurgency.

Today, two of the biggest challenges faced by northern Nigerian Muslims are pervasive poverty and growing insecurity. Poverty has been exacerbated by the economic turmoil unleashed by the scrapping of the fuel subsidy by President Tinubu in May 2023 and the devaluation of the Nigerian currency (NGN) in June 2023 and again in January 2024. Northern Nigeria has also experienced a rise in insecurity across both northeastern and northwestern states. Mass kidnappings, often for ransom, have become a frequent occurrence (Ewang, 2024). This context is likely to shape the contours of Islamic learning practices going forward.

Many families have long been struggling to mobilise resources for their children's learning. As outlined in this chapter, Islamic educational institutions are often more accommodating than Western schools of parents/students who struggle financially. This is particularly true of classical Qur'anic schools, which have historically relied on community support rather than fees. However, as parents' ability to contribute to Qur'anic teachers' livelihoods has declined, the latter are likely to increasingly struggle to make ends meet, and teachers may be pressured to look for an alternative source of livelihood. While the future may well bring a renewed interest in classical Qur'anic education as families struggle to access other forms of education, the ability of Qur'anic teachers to support themselves and their students risks declining further.

This chapter has outlined how enduring insecurity in the northeast, formerly a centre of Islamic learning and Qur'anic memorisation, has led to a drastic decline in long-distance enrolments to that region from other parts of northern Nigeria and neighbouring countries. Insecurity and frayed trust have also led to a decline in seasonal migration practices by Qur'anic students and teachers in the Northeast. Given the worsening security situation across northern Nigeria, safety considerations are likely to play a growing role in enrolment and migration decisions across the region going forward.

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