

TOWARDS THE STANDARDIZATION OF LEARNING IN THE QUR'ANIC SCHOOL IN NIGERIA: A CASE STUDY OF ILORIN METROPOLIS

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Introduction

The study of the Qur'an occupies a prominent position in Islam so much that Muslims are enjoined not only to learn it but also to disseminate it. The propagators of the Qur'an through its acquisition and teaching are acknowledged by the Prophet Muhammad (SAW) as the best of men¹. Thus, since the penetration of Islam into what is now known as Nigeria around the ninth century, Quadri observed that the Nigerian Muslims like their fellow Muslims elsewhere, have been providing Qur'anic education to their children in order to make them understand Islam, practice it as expected of them and be useful members of the community in which they might find themselves².

It is admitted that in Ilorin (an age-long acclaimed centre of Islamic Scholarship in Nigeria) the quest for learning as well as desire to teach the Qur'an were prevalent. However, little or no attention was being paid to make the Qur'anic

school system live up to challenges of the modern time. This precarious situation informs choice of the topic under study. Although, there exist earlier research works on Qur'anic and Islamic education in Nigeria, we discovered that they are essentially conservative expositions of the system. For instance, while Aliy-Kamal gave historical account on Islamic education in Ilorin with particular attention to the preponderance and management of the traditional Qur'anic schools (*i.e. ile kewu wala*)³, Yusuf highlighted the general traditions of the Qur'anic learning as they affect the admission of pupils, the learning system, funding and management⁴. Moreover, Arikewuyo examined the system of administration of the Qur'anic schools in respect of proprietorship, staffing and qualification, funding, learning period, curriculum and method of teaching⁵.

It is discernible from these studies that the Qur'anic education system in Nigeria is bedeviled with multi-farious challenges. Yet, none of the existing literature made attempt towards standardization of its system. Therefore, the present paper reviews the status quo of the Qur'anic learning with a view to postulating the means for standardization of its system; using Ilorin metropolis as a case study.

The Place of Qur'anic Learning in Islam

To learn the Qur'an is mandatory for the Muslims; because this scripture is the primary source of knowledge in Islam. Besides, it is the basic guide for a faithful believer for it leads from the darkness to the light (Q. 14:1) and salvages him from eternal destruction⁶. The recitation and memorization of the Qur'an also attract spiritual benefits such as intercession for the reciters on the day of judgment⁷. It is also considered as a source of elevation for its companion and provision of divine light⁸. It is presumed that this was why Prophet Muhammad (SAW) often gathered his companions in the mosque or elsewhere to teach them the Qur'an as was revealed to him and he used to enjoin them to commit it to memory⁹.

Qur'anic Education is, by conception, the system of proper recitation of the Qur'an and its meaning; and imparting in the learner the knowledge of its contents¹⁰. Both the Qur'an and the Prophetic traditions are explicit on the manner of teaching the Qur'an. For instance, the Qur'an (38:29) reads:

This is a book, which we have revealed to thee, full of blessings, that they may reflect over its verses and that

those gifted with understanding may take heed.

To corroborate this divine instruction, the Prophet exhorted his companions to handle Qur'anic education meticulously; as such, he impressed it on them thus: "the best of you is he who learns the Qur'an and teaches it"¹¹. The gem of the Prophetic counsels have come down to us through the labour of the *Sahabah* (companions), the *Tabf'un* (followers of the companions) and the *Tab^ci - Tabf'un* (followers of followers of the companions) who preserved and passed them from generation to generation¹². In compliance with the above instructions, the early Muslims used to devote much care to study the Qur'an. Hence, each of them used not to proceed after learning about ten verses, until he knew their meanings and practiced what he had been demanded by them. A specific example was cited of ^cAbdullahi b. ^cUmar who was reported to have spent eight years studying *Surat'ul-Baqarah*, the second chapter of the Qur'an, alone¹³. The legacy of the Prophet and his companions on the dissemination of Qur'anic education was a suffice inspiration to Muslims of the succeeding generations to establish Qur'anic schools or centers; and engage themselves in the teaching and learning of the Qur'an. Pertinently, there abound in Nigeria till date thousands of the Qur'anic schools in uneven distribution sited either in mosques, private houses or premises built for this purpose¹⁴.

It is worthy to remark that there is a wide gap that demarcates the method of imparting the knowledge of the Qur'an in the era of the *Salaf* (i.e. the first three generations of Islam) and the contemporary age. Details of this would be clearer in our subsequent discussions in this paper.

The Tradition of the Qur'anic School System

Historically, Ilorin is a renowned city of Islamic scholarship in Nigeria; with Qur'anic learning as its rudiments¹⁵. Since the inception of Islamic education in the city as far back as the mid-seventeenth century¹⁶, Qur'anic schools sprang up and flourish till today in almost everywhere¹⁷. Although, the number of these schools cannot be established with certitude, response to interview in this research disclosed that usually the individual reputable scholars in each quarter used to establish privately owned Qur'anic schools. The patronage of a particular school out of those that might be available in a given locality was often informed by socio-psychological factors. In other words, children are made to attend such schools that

are traditionally favoured by their ascendants. With further developments however, the establishment of Qur'anic schools and dissemination of learning are no longer confined to the acknowledged scholars alone but they are ventured into by anyone who is literate in the Qur'an and can afford his time for its teaching. Thus, the proprietorship and (or) tutorship are in most cases, altogether personalized; hence, the schools are run according to the discretion of their owners¹⁸.

In a traditional setting, the *Mu'allim* (a learned person which in this case refers to the teacher) gathers pupils in front of his house, under a tree or in a verandah to teach them how to read the Qur'an¹⁹. The pupils will cluster round the teacher in a semi-circle shape; sitting altogether in groups of mates without one group being clearly demarcated from the other and they recite the Qur'an often in a sing-song fashion. The tone of chanting heightens intermittently following a random caning of the inattentive pupils. In most cases, the beginners start with Arabic alphabets being inscribed by the *Mu'allim* on the wooden slate. Upon the mastery (i.e. satisfactory recitation and memorization) of the contents of the slate at any given time, the inscriptions are washed off for the purpose of writing new ones on it either by the teacher or by an individual pupil who is found capable of doing so²⁰. On the other hand, older pupils used to rely on the collection of selected manuscripts of the Qur'anic portions to be studied from their teachers²¹. However, with the development of printing technology, the pupils nowadays make use of printed texts of the Qur'an either in parts or in whole. Further explanations on this development shall be provided in the subsequent units of this paper.

The learning item is essentially the reading of the Qur'an and a pupil graduates only upon the completion of the entire book. There is no specific duration for the programme; rather such is determined by various factors. These include the mental capability of the pupil(s), readiness to learn and regular attendance to the school among others. In addition, commitment of the teacher to this job is as well important especially where he functions at the same time as a mosque official in-charge of naming ceremonies, solemnization of marriages, and other socio-religious obligations in which his services might be required²². He thus opens and closes the school by his own volition. Besides, the learning period may be unduly prolonged because the teacher might engage the service of the pupils at will in domestic duties²³. These acts jeopardize the academic interest of the learners. The Qur'anic

school system runs a tuition free programme because teaching the Qur'an was considered as a service in the course of Allah. It pre-supposes therefore that the *Mu'allim* aspires for divine reward. Moreover, the free tuition system might also explain justification for seeking the services of the pupils by the teacher.

The disseminators of the Qur'anic learning appear not to be conversant with variety of result-oriented and modern methods of teaching. Thus, concentration was just on recitation and rote-memorization²⁴. However, for the purpose of evaluation, the continuous assessment system had always been in vogue. By this system, the pupils are obliged to recall their previous lessons (i.e. recitation of the texts learnt previously) before new ones are acquired. While the successful ones make progress, the weak are delayed until they master the verses. In addition, discipline is often maintained by the use of corporal punishment through flogging either with the horsewhip or long canes. On this note, we wish to align with Sifawa²⁵ that rigidity is a distinctive feature of the Qur'anic school. This assumption is manifest in the conservative method of teaching, evaluation and discipline in the schools.

It is important to observe from the foregoing that rather than upholding the full-fledged formal status of the institutions; the Qur'anic schools continue to drag on. Hence, they were described as semi-formal²⁶; even though it is on record that Islamic education was the first formal education in Nigeria²⁷. None-the-less, the system of learning in the Qur'anic schools had not remained the same; some changes have been introduced to put it on the path of modernization.

Reformation and Standardization of the Qur'anic School System

In the preceding unit accounts had been made of the Qur'anic school system. The rigidity and conservatism of the traditional *Ulama* (scholars) cannot be overemphasized. Pertinently, they resented any attempt to change the status quo. It is on record however that in Ilorin, Shaykh Muhammad Kamalu'd-din Al - Adabiy (d. 2005) championed the course of reforming the stereotyped method of imparting the Islamic learning as far back as 1947²⁸. He introduced the use of blackboard, chalk, benches and tables, formal classroom structure, class attendance register, wider curriculum, printed Arabic books, continuous assessment and examination, grading and certification of pupils among other things in his Az-zumrat'ul Adabiyyah school²⁹. He was then met with vehement oppositions from his contemporaries. Prominent

among the opponents was the late Alfa Yusuf Agbaji, the erstwhile leader of Makondoro group. Shaykh Muhammad Kamalu'd-din however became vindicated in his clamour for the reformation of the Islamic education system when in later years other scholars emulated his approach, partially or completely. For instance, Shaykh Adam Abdullah Al-Ilori (d.1992) adopted the modern approach in his Markaz at Agege in 1955³⁰. The latter also encouraged similar institutions like Dar al 'Ulum, Eruda (but later shifted to Isale Koto) and Markaz Ta'lim al-'Arabi, Oke Agodi both in Ilorin to be established in 1963 and 1967 respectively. Some other institutions that adopted the innovation in Ilorin include Ma'had Zumrat'us-Salihina, Alore (1958) and Ma'had Zumrat'ul Adabiyyah Kamaliyyah, Oke-foma (1979). The former, upon its adoption of the reformation, moved to its permanent site at Oloje in 1983.

The reforms though appeared more manifest in the 'Ilmiyyah schools (i.e. institutions of advanced Islamic learning) as those cited above, the fact is manifest that nowadays some Qur'anic schools outrightly or partially, adopt the new approach. In an attempt to accept the reformation, many Qur'anic schools today adopt the use of specific names as recognition of their institutionalization. There are yet few exceptions who remain conservative. This de-emphasizes the earlier practice where the schools were generally referred to as *Ile kewu wala* (Tablet school) or at best each one was referred to either by the name of the compound where it was established (for instance, *Ile kewu Gbagba*) or the common name of its proprietor like *Ile kewu Alfa Alawuyan*³¹. Moreover, few of these Qur'anic schools adopt the use of uniform, chalkboard, benches and tables as well as the management of time. It is important to observe however that adoption of the modern methods was for now largely based on individual's interest; hence, the tendency still remain for the proprietor to exercise his whims and caprice in determining the mode of his administration and dissemination of learning.

In the light of this, the need to standardize the Qur'anic school system becomes discernible. Towards realization of the desired goal, it becomes imperative for the Qur'anic schools to strive to formalize its system, both structurally and academically. In the foremost, the institutionalization of centers of learning with specific names should be adopted by all and sundry. This will facilitate clear identity and healthy rivalry. To compliment this, the use of uniforms should be introduced. It is expected that the pupils will appear smart and neat enough to level up with

challenges of the western education system. Moreover, the use of the formal classrooms equipped with at least moderate infrastructures to satisfy the academic needs of the learners at this stage should be adopted. All these are desirable for the structural improvement of the Qur'anic schools. Besides, this arrangement will facilitate a better administration of the institutions.

Furthermore, it is understood that the Qur'an is the basic curriculum of study at this level with bias in its recitation and memorization. It is unpleasant however to observe that because the teaching and learning activities were in most cases irregular and informal, it appears as if the Qur'anic learning was without a definite curriculum. In addition, the present dispensation does not allow for a sufficient textual study of the Qur'an, thereby making the criticism of Qur'anic education plausible. Consequently, it behoves us to recommend that for the sake of standardization, the Qur'anic schools should adopt a uniform scheme of work. We wish, therefore, to propose the following order as an attempt to solving the problems of indefinite duration of learning and programmes of study:

AGE	SCOPE OF LEARNING	REMARKS
3-4 years	Preliminary stage	The pupils could be exposed to general teaching of Islam through play-way methods and rhymes
4-6 years	Rote learning: Arabic alphabets, vocalization and rote-memorization of selected short texts.	The pupils hardly identify the alphabets but rely mostly on rote learning.
6-8 years	A study of 15 <i>Ahzab</i> (divisions of the Qur'an) covering from <i>Surat'ul-Fatihah</i> ; <i>Surat'un Nas</i> to <i>Surat'ul-Qasas</i> .	Learning in this stage includes recitation, writing, translation and memorization of short and simple Qur'anic texts.

8-10 years	A study of 20 <i>Ahzab</i> (divisions of the Qur'an) covering <i>Surat'ul Fatir</i> to <i>Surat'ul A'raf</i>	Learning in this stage includes brief commentaries of the Qur'an, <i>Tahdhib</i> (Qur'anic morals and ethics) and preliminary aspects of <i>Fiqh</i> (Islamic jurisprudence).
10-12	A study of 25 <i>Ahzab</i> (divisions of the Qur'an) covering <i>Surat-al An'am</i> to <i>Surat' ul-Baqarah</i>	Learning includes relevant Qur'anic accounts, <i>Tahdhib</i> , <i>Fiqh</i> and <i>hadith</i> (Prophetic Traditions)

A table of proposed programme of study in the Qur'anic school

The proposals in this table bear in mind the age of the learners, maturity, intelligent quotient and the environment. The proposed programme of study also presumes that a child would complete reading rudiments of the Qur'anic studies within the primary school age. Furthermore, the proposals desires to acquaint the learner with the basic teachings of Islam from childhood.

As a corollary of these proposals, there is the need to employ variety of teaching methods in the dissemination of learning in the Qur'anic schools. Traditionally, the Qur'anic teachers rigidly hold to the conventional method of giving a model reading of the verses and pupils follow him accordingly³². The process continued until the pupils mastered the reading (but not the meaning) of the Qur'anic chapters. The method is not only found to be crude but it also does not conform with the taxonomy of learning objectives which are classified into the cognitive, affective and psycho-motor domains³³. Although, the traditional method fosters the cognitive development of the learners, such is yet inadequate. Besides, the approach does not provide opportunity for the pupils to appreciate the beautiful themes of the Qur'an. There is therefore the need to evolve new methods of teaching. There are as many teaching methods as the professional experience and competence of the teacher can afford him. Essentially, a good teacher needs to be

initiative and resourceful. By this, he would be able to determine what approach will suit who. It is important however that he recognizes himself as a role model; which is itself a strong factor and effective method in character building.

Moreover, the teacher should accompany his teaching with relevant instructional materials in order to arouse and sustain the learners' interest and attention. The use of corporal punishment which tends to discourage some Muslim children from attending the Qur'anic schools, would become rare if interesting learning and instructional materials are employed. To facilitate the use of these materials, the professional and academic qualities of the teachers can be improved and updated through seminars, workshops and conferences.

Furthermore, the need to review the assessment procedure in this respect is discernible. There is no doubt that the Qur'anic schools are noted for their characteristic continuous assessment system ever before the Nigerian Government initiated its continuous assessment oriented policy in 1981³⁴; efforts should be made to improve this technique by making it more formal. Evaluation of the students' academic achievement could be carried out through practical, oral and (or) written tests based on the proposals in the table above. A brilliant performance should be reinforced through reward while the weak pupils should be given special attention by the teacher. Moreover, an acceptable certificate ought to be issued upon the successful completion of the programme. This approach will, among other things, ensure the standard of learning on the one hand and encourage a smooth graduation into the *Ilmiyyah* schools for those learners who desire to further their studies of Islamic learning on the other.

The place of fund in the realization of this approach cannot be over emphasized. In the present dispensation, Qur'anic education is free³⁵ and that perhaps justifies its degrading status. Obviously, for the school system to be formalized and standardized as herein opined efforts need to be made to improve the financial base of the institutions. Suffice to say therefore that it is imperative for the Government at various levels to fund Qur'anic education in the same way it funds its counterpart Western education. This is particularly important because religious learning is a vital tool in moulding the character of her citizens. In addition, funding of the Qur'anic education could be made through the payment of school fees, grant-in-aid by various organizations, philanthropic donations, endowments

etc. Other than monetary assistance, the schools can also be provided with teaching and learning materials i.e. infrastructures, textbooks, instructional aids and the like.

To justify its funding, the Government should supervise the activities of the Qur'anic schools. This exercise should be carried out either directly by the Ministry of Education or indirectly through a designated organ set up by the Government itself on the recommendation of the *Ulama* (scholars). A prominent example of this practice found in Nigeria is the Borno State Council for Qur'anic education and the Promotion of Qur'anic Recitation and Memorization founded in 1986³⁶. Similarly, it is a welcome development that in response to the long time yearning of the Muslim populace the Kwara State Government recently inaugurated the Board for Arabic Education³⁷. Notwithstanding its nomenclature, responsibilities of the board, among other things, embraces supervision of teaching and learning in the *Ma^chid* and *Madaris* (i.e. private institutions of Arabic and Islamic Studies) including the Qur'anic schools. It is pertinent to observe that in order to prevent clash of interest and conflict of authority between the school proprietors and the Government, the board should hold strictly to its supervisory role and advisory agency to streamline the activities of the institutions vis-à-vis Government intervention. This is necessary in order to avoid the possibility of any autocratic domination over the proprietor/teacher whose primary objective of establishing the school and (or) of disseminating the learning was divine oriented. The activities and reports of the board would often guide the Government on the justification or otherwise of funding the school (s).

Conclusion

Teaching the Qur'an is de facto a mandate on those who possessed its knowledge. However, we wish to align with the view that there are no common rules or guidelines as to how to establish the institution of Qur'anic learning³⁸ talk-less of its standardization. We are inclined therefore to posit that in view of the prevalent modern challenges, attention should be given not only to the reformation of the Qur'anic school system but also to the standardization of its learning. This is inevitable considering the close rivalry of the western (Christian oriented) education with Islamic education as well as the need to engender functionalism in our educational system. Hence, the paper focused on the approach towards

standardization of learning in the Qur'anic school system in Nigeria citing Ilorin metropolis as a case study.

Pertinently, proposals are being made towards new approaches in the teaching and learning of the Qur'an in the contemporary age bringing to bear the objectives of learning in respect of cognitive, affective and psycho-motor domains. The proposals transcend the conventional rote memorization to be all inclusive of correct recitation, writing and appreciation of the values of the Qur'an. Thus, the dimensions postulated in the paper are geared towards acquiring the full wisdom of the Qur'an by the learner(s). In addition, the proposals are envisioned to satisfy the requirement of the Qur'anic exhortation "... that they may meditate on its signs (verses), and that men of understanding, may receive admonition" (Q.38:29). That not alone, it is hoped that an adoption of these proposals will facilitate the uniformity and standardization of learning in the Qur'anic schools.

Moreover, we advocate Government intervention for the smooth running of the Qur'anic school given the fact that this education system is attended by a teeming population of the young children who ought to be given solid foundation to foster the building of a viable and God-fearing society. Suffice it to say that the paper posited for proper supervision and quality assurance mechanism to ensure standard. Pertinently, we applaud the formal establishment of the Kwara State Arabic Education Board recently inaugurated by the Government in tune with what exist elsewhere in Nigeria for the over-all improvement of the Qur'anic school system among other things.

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