
Tsangaya Education in Gombe Metropolis: Challenges and Way Forward

Ali Samaila,¹ Haruna Ubaida² and Abubakar Mohammed Babayya³

Abstract

Tsangaya system is an ancient system of Qur'anic learning been practiced in most countries of West Africa and Nigeria in particular. In Nigeria the system got its origin from Kanem-Borno Empire and later diffused to various States in Hausa land and specifically in Gombe. This system had made reasonable impacts in socio-economic development of Gombe and Nigeria at large whereby its graduates excelled in various facets of life. However, despite the contributions made by this institution of learning, it was later associated with some problems such as street begging, child abuse, lack of proper accommodation for the students. There were many factors that led to the aforementioned problems among which were colonial domination, negligence by the government and the community. This paper attempts to examine the challenges of Tsangaya education in Gombe and to proffer solutions to the problems using the historical methods and sources such as interviews, and other extant literatures.

Keywords: Tsangaya, *Almajiri*, challenges, history, colonialism, schools

Introduction

Islam emphasizes acquisition of knowledge, respects human intellect and make the search for knowledge obligatory upon every Muslim. That is why in Islam a person is not expected to perform any religious function unless he is fully aware of its legal injunctions as either in the Qur'an or the Sunnah of the Prophet (S.A.W) (Gada, 8). In the same vein, the emphasis for seeking knowledge in Islam is clearly manifested in the first revelation received by the noble Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W) which read thus:

Proclaim! (or read) in the name of your Lord, and Cherisher, Who created.
Created man out of a (mere) clot of congealed blood: Proclaim! And lord is
Most Bountiful. He Who taught (the use of) the pen. Taught man that which he
knew not (Q96:1-5).

¹ Ali Samaila, is with the Department of Religious Studies, Gombe State University. He can be reached at ismailaliyyu@gmail.com, 08142635077.

² Haruna Ubaida, is with the Pen Resource Academy, Gombe. He can be reached at harunaubaida46@gmail.com, 08146458441.

³ Abubakar Mohammed Babayya, is with the Department of Religious Studies, Gombe State University. He can be reached at babayya2020gmail.com, 08030768638.

However, Qur'anic education in particular was given a special consideration above all other Islamic sciences; this was largely because of its peculiarities and being the foundation of the Islamic education. The Prophet (S.A.W) was reported to have said that: *"The best among you is the one who learn Qur'an and teaches it"* (reported by Al-Bukhari, vol. 6, 192)

Therefore, it is because of this emphasis and the like that Muslims everywhere in the world and throughout their history devoted seriously in search for Islamic knowledge. Moreover, the Muslim of Africa, the likes of Hausa/Fulani and Kanuri tribes of northern Nigeria are not left behind in this regard, there exists an ancient system of Islamic learning known as *Tsangaya* education which serves as seed bed for educational carrier of every Muslim child. The Qur'an has been the core curriculum of this system of education since its inception because it plays a central role in the life of a Muslim spiritually, politically, socially, economically and otherwise. This system of Islamic learning started since 16th century and practised in different parts of the Nigerian soil (Dahiru, 31).

The *Tsangaya* is a traditional Qur'anic school mostly found in Northern Nigeria, Sudan, Mauritania, and many other countries with different dimensions of approach and expertise. It is mostly under a renowned scholar called *Alaramma, Gwani* or *Ganganan*. The pupils or students in the system are called *almijiri* (sing.) *almajirai* (pl.) derived from the Arabic word "*Al-muhajirun*" which means the immigrant, with different titles according to their expertise, such as *Qolo*, (the beginner) *Titibiri* (intermediate) and *Gardi* (adult student). Pupils mostly partake in only Qur'anic memorization and individual recitation, there are usually two approaches to Qur'anic memorization adopted by the pupils which include *Zuqu* (eloquence in recitation) and *Hadda* (off hand memorization by heart). Usually, students write their lessons on their individual slates (*Allo*) and are given some selected day of washing it after learning of its content and writing the subsequent lesson (interview with M. Danlami Muhammadu Basakkwace). This research therefore navigated into the challenges and problems of *Tsangaya* education and the way to overcome them with reference to some of its schools found in Gombe metropolis.

Concept of Tsangaya

The word *Tsangaya* is adulterated version of *Kanuri* word *Sangaya* which means study center (Interview with Prof. Umaru Dahiru). However, it was given a variety of technical definitions. Firstly, *Tsangaya* refers to the traditional Qur'anic school primarily because of what is visible in it that is wooden slate, ink (*tawada*) pen (*alkalami*) and so on. As such it is called *Makarantan Allo* (slate school) *Makarantan Alqur'ani* (Qur'anic school) *Makarantan Toka* (Ash school) (Jabbo, 33).

In another definition, *Tsangaya* is any place, be it a room, balcony, veranda, hut, guest room, tree shade etc. where male and female children gather for the purpose

of learning the Qur'an. The distinguishing feature is children reciting loudly from their wooden slates (Jabbo, 33). Moreover, Tsangaya in Hausa land denotes an institution where Qur'an is taught on a boarding basis to both children and adults. However, Iguda noted that *makarantar Allo* is a type of *Tsangaya* school that is done on a day basis (1).

History of Qur'anic Schools

The traditional Qur'anic school system commonly known as Tsangaya Education/Almajiri School is almost as old as the history of Qur'anic revelation. The revelation of Qur'an dates back to 610 CE when the Prophet Muhammad (SAW) received the first revelation during his solitary confinement in the cave of Hira in Makka, the present-day Saudi Arabia. Therefore, the conceptual framework of Qur'anic school in scientific way was established during the time of the prophet (SAW). Allah (SWT) appointed Angel Jibril (A.S) as the teacher of the messenger of Allah to whom he taught the Qur'an. The Prophet (SAW) in turn taught his companions. The time of the *Sahabah* was considered as the golden age of Islamic learning. This was because of efforts put by them in learning and memorization of the Glorious Qur'an and putting the knowledge they learned from the Qur'an into practice. The Prophet's mosque in Medina becomes the center of Islamic learning at that time. Lessons were formally carried out in the mosques (Jabbo, 37).

Majority of scholars are of the view that Umar bin Khattab was the first to order the establishment of Qur'anic school with the purpose of teaching children the Qur'an, reading and writing in Arabic. The *katatib* and *Madaris* were real centers of learning through Islamic learning operated and developed (Gada, 23). These *katatib* were established after the *masjid* in areas which Islam spread during the time of Caliph Umar, a time when Muslims felt the need to expand the teaching of Islam and the memorization of the Qur'an by Muslim children. Males were admitted to *katatib* from the age of six until the memorization of the Qur'an was completed or until approximately the age of 14. Females were accepted from the age of six until age nine. The school hours start after Fajr prayer and continue until Asr prayer with a lunch break around Zuhr prayer. The school week ran from Saturday to Thursday (Shehu et al, 11).

This tradition of learning continued to subsequent generation with the broadening of the study of the sciences of Qur'an with the addition of Hadith and later Islamic jurisprudence during the coming of four schools of law i.e. that of imam Abu Hanifah, Malik, Shafi'i and Ahmad bin Hanbal (Shehu et al, 11). In the third century after Hijrah the science of Hadith in terms of its collection, collation and preservation and the study of Qur'an and its various sciences were highly encouraged together with Islamic jurisprudence by the six imams of Hadith namely Imam Bukhari, Muslim, Tirmidhi, An-Nasa'i, Abu Dawud, and Ibn Majah (Shehu et al, 11).

More centers of learning came into existence throughout the conquered territories. The part of Africa where Islam first reached is North Africa. The first thing

done by Muslim to maintain the tradition after introducing Islam was to establish a *Masjid* as a religious and educational Centre (Gada, 23). The Islamic learning flourished up to the time of establishment of the Azhar University in Cairo, Egypt and the college of Cordova in Muslim Spain in the year 900 CE (4th century A.H) (Shehu et al, 11).

Qur'anic School in West Africa

The history of Qur'anic school in West Africa as well as other places where Islam entered is synonymous with the history of Islam in the area because the introduction of Islam came simultaneously with literacy in Qur'an, the primary focus of which is the memorization of the glorious Qur'an as a foundation to the learning of the Islamic sciences. One account had it that West Africa's first contact with Islam were made in the 8th century through the trans-Saharan trade routes from North to West Africa with one route leading all the way to ancient Ghana and another one leading much further to Kanem-Borno region (Fafunwa, 47).

Qur'anic School in Nigeria before Colonial Period

The place where Islam first reached in what is Nigeria today is Kanem-Borno Empire. People started to have contact with Islam in the area around 8th century. Islam was later became firmly established during 11th century when the Kanem ruler Umme Jilmi who ruled between 1085-1097 accepted Islam at the hand of Muslim scholar Hamed Muhammad Mani (Fafunwa, 47). In addition, it is during the eleventh century that there was wide recitation of the Qur'an among the people of Borno and even the king Mai Umme is said to have memorized the whole text (Dahiru, 30).

Moreover, the Kanem-Borno empire developed a system of Islamic education known as Tsangaya. It was originated during the reign of Mai Ali Ghaji (d.1503) C.E. who encouraged scholars to establish educational centers for the spread of Islamic literacy (Dahiru, 31). The system enjoyed a great support and encouragement by the Mais (a title for Borno rulers). The teachers of these schools were at that time given the economic and political protection and motivation they needed. Their students did not need to go about begging for food or a place to sleep. All these were provided by the leadership and members of the Muslim community (Ado, 188).

Nevertheless, after the success of the Sokoto Jihad which took place at the early 19th century another school of Islamic education was initiated similar to that Tsangaya School found in Kanem-Borno. Shehu Usman Ibn Fodiyo directed all those who are learned in the Qur'an to go into all nooks and crannies of the sultanate and impart its knowledge in order not to remain idle on one hand, and on the other hand to rescue the populace from continuously wallowing in the river of ignorance. They complied and started gathering students for this purpose. Parents then considered it a part of their own

contribution to hand over their wards to teachers with a view to enhancing and entrenching the Jihad by having children learned in the Qur'an (Jabbo, 40).

The Qur'anic Schools in the Colonial Period

The incursion of the colonialists into West Africa destroyed the traditional state and political control, and devastated the entire traditional education set up. Many scholars who by their commitment to defend Islam against colonialism were part of the Muslim army killed in war of conquest by the colonialists, some of those who survived fled into exile. Bobboyi (as cited by Ado) described the condition of Qur'anic schools during colonial period in the following caption:

The *mallams* and their students were lost during the British attack, as they stood up behind their emirs. Those who survived became benefactors of their new homes; some left their original homeland to suffer a permanent loss of educational services. Similarly, the remaining scholars were constantly suspected of disloyalty or sedition and put under strict surveillance. Some were accused of *Mahdist* sympathies and were either deported or had their activities restricted. Normal scholarship carried out within a free atmosphere became to many scholars an unaffordable luxury (189).

The colonialists' policies centered on destroying the traditional Qur'anic schools and replacing them with western style of schools. Some people protested this development and gave their children in trust to the Qur'anic schools *ulama* to go to the village or its hamlets to teach them Qur'an. This marked the beginning of Qur'anic school teachers travelling with children in search of conducive place to settle and teach these children far away from European schools (Shehu et al, 13). Additionally, regarding eastward movement of the teachers and their students of Hausa land, researchers explain that it may relate to the encounter between Sultan Attahiru and the colonialists. As a result of this encounter, Qur'anic scholars began to sneak away to the Northeastern boarder of the present-day Nigeria to escape from the evil of colonialism and western system of instruction. Hence forward, migration in search for Qur'anic knowledge came to be known as "*Kaura Zuwa gabar*" in Hausa language, meaning "Migration to the East" a term used for Borno by the people of Hausa land (Jabbo, 47).

From that time the Qur'anic teacher was left as sole proprietor of the Qur'anic school, to manage and run its affairs with responsibilities of feeding, accommodating and clothing of children admitted to the school. Initially students were engaged to work in the teacher's farm. Farming later became an expensive business and the income that the teacher received through the weekly contributions of the children's parents could not shoulder the enormous responsibilities rested on the teacher. Students were made to pay daily stipends to their teachers; to get this the students were made to carry out menial jobs in the market and other public places, hotels etc. The students thus neither

get their educational requirement satisfied nor their material needs. They often grow up into illiterates (even in Islamic education) and unproductive (Jabbo, 47).

Qur'anic Schools in Post -Independence Period

The Qur'anic schools of the post-colonial Nigeria were not very much different from those of colonial period. The style of neglect that started in the colonial era continued with the transfer of government to the neo-colonial elites. Post independent Nigeria can be described as another worse period for the development of Islamic education especially in Qur'anic studies. The government of the defunct northern region made efforts to solve the problem and assist the schools professionally and financially in 1964. However, just five years after the implementation of the policy, the subsequent administration stopped the assistance. Qur'anic schools were once again left under the sole control of their individual proprietors (Ado, 189).

Contemporary Qur'anic Schools

The neglect of the Qur'anic school by the government and the Muslim community continue to affect the system in a negative way. Therefore, some of the children who were taken away from homes for the purpose of this education have continued to suffer in the host community. They appear always dirty, ill-fed and unhealthy. And instead of learning, most of their valuable time is spent roaming about looking for food to eat. This state of Qur'anic studies had for long time disturbing the Muslim of northern Nigeria, especially the governments, the elites, Islamic organization and Muslim intellectuals. But unfortunately, these groups have not been able to institute any systematic mechanism to address the problems in the region.

Effort made by Government towards Promoting Tsangaya Education in Nigeria

The issue of Almajiri has been for long remained worrisome in the minds of Nigerians. This is embarrassing to the country. That is why government and Non-Governmental organizations (NGOs) have been trying for long time to integrate it and make the products of the system relevant in society.

The trail blazer in this development was Sir Ahmadu Bello Sardauna. In 1962 the executive council of northern Nigeria sponsored a team of scholars to study the organization of Qur'anic school in Sudan, Libya and Egypt. The report of the visit shed light in many ways. The then government chose to transform Qur'anic schools. The committee on Qur'anic school was charged to take care of the traditional Qur'anic schools in the north. The committee set up sub committees in each province. The recommendation of the committee to the late premier includes the granting of assistance by government and organizations. It was suggested that consideration should therefore be given to the formation of either a voluntary or a government sponsored Islamic

organization with branches throughout the region (Iguda, 11). The committee further recommended the following:

1. Funds to improve buildings and accommodation.
2. To establish schools solely to teach the Qur'an to students so that they can memorize it by heart.
3. To distribute copies of Qur'an to schools and *Ilimi* books to teachers.
4. To provide school with electricity and water where necessary.
5. To give scholarships to *Mallams*.
6. To build a central meeting place for the very learned *Mallams* where they can meet and discuss religious problems.
7. To give salaries or allowances to those *Mallams* through their native authorities.
8. To provide food and clothes to *almajirai* (Iguda,11).

Another landmark for the transformation of Tsangaya during the lifetime of late premier was taking of a census of Qur'anic schools across the region. All the native authorities were directed to conduct and assist the census exercise. Although Islamiyya schools were merged with Qur'anic schools (Iguda,12). Some of the Northern States and Non-Governmental organization (NGOs) have put efforts in integrating Qur'anic education with conventional school subjects, these states include: Kano, Sokoto, Kebbi, Katsina, Zamfara, Jigawa, Gombe, Yobe and Kaduna States (Iguda,12).

However, in recent times, the Federal Government of Nigeria tried to integrate western education with Islamic education to transform the *almajiris* to functional members of society. To improve enrolment of *almajiris* in schools, the government has built ultramodern schools as well as declared free education across states where *almajiris* exist. The administration of President Jonathan had set up 143 out of the projected 400 *Almajiri* Model schools in the North and few southern states of the country for a targeted population of 10million less privileged children who are out of school (Ogbu).

In Gombe state, three Tsangaya schools were given intervention by the federal government through UBEC, and two schools through SUBEB these include: the Tsangaya of Malam Inna in Gombe town, Kwami and Bajoga, Nafada and Wuro Londe respectively. The Gombe state government also participated in the program, because the state gave the land where the schools were built, employ teachers, provided the necessary facilities required for learning and vocational skills, such as computers, sewing machine, carpentry materials and other things, as well as giving feeding to the boarding student (*Almajiris*) (Burema).

The state government also established some schools through the ministry of education under the activities of SUBEB these include: that of Shehu Manzo in Herwagana, school of Mallam Ajijjiga in *Manawaci* near *Hurumin Da'u*, Pantami *Kasuwar Dabbobi*. In addition, some *Islamiyya* schools whom already combined

Qur'anic studies with western education were not left behind; Imam Malik was renovated in Dawaki quarters. Other schools that were reconstructed include Jibwis College Gombe along Dukku road and Markazu College near Bauchi motor park (Burema).

Tsangaya Schools in Gombe Metropolis

The Gombe metropolis covers the area of modern Gombe (i.e Gombe Doma 1919-date) which includes: Bolari, Koron Giwa, Herwagana, Kumbiya kumbiya and Pantami (Alhaji, 35). The Qur'anic school began to develop in an unprecedented manner after the transfer of capital of Gombe to present Gombe town in 1919. After the transfer of capital Sarki Umar joined hands with so many Ulama in order to ensure the success of Islamic development. At that time a lot of Islamic schools were established in Gombe town. There appeared two types of Islamic schools: the elementary school and the advanced school. The elementary school is known as *Makarantar Allo*, while the advanced school is referred to as *Makarantar Ilimi* (Abubakar, 299). The Tsangaya schools continue to evolve as Emir Umaru encouraged the growth of Islamic education by making the state accommodating for *Mallams* to stay in. He required no taxes from the *Mallams* and adult among the students. In addition to that, he encouraged the rich ones in the town to provide both accommodation and feeding to the Qur'anic teachers and students especially those that came from outside Gombe (Alhaji, 36).

Moreover, the Qur'anic education subsequently, received great attention from the people of Gombe which led to the emergence of many centers of learning and at the same time led to the influx of scholars from far and wide to the area. For instance, during the reign of Emir Abubakar the Emirate was blessed with renowned visiting scholars from within and outside the country who contributed towards the development of Islam and Islamic scholarship in Gombe. Among such scholars are; Sharie Alawi who visited Gombe in 1947, Sheikh Sa'id Attab who came from Ainamali in Algeria on his way to Hajj and spent two days in Gombe. Other scholars who visited the area include Modibbo Ali Gati and Sidi ibn Umar who was at Gombe on 15th march, 1949. In the same vein, scholars of *Qadiriyya* Sufi order also visited the Emirate, among whom were Sheikh Nasiru Kabara of Kano who came in 1950 (Rabi'u, 27).

Presently, there are more than three hundred Tsangaya schools in Gombe (Committee for the Integration of Almajiri Education in Gombe State). Some of the notable *Tsangaya* schools are as follows: -

1. Tsangayar Sheikh Manzo, that is located in Herwagana, Gombe.
2. Tsangayar Sheikh Muhammadu Basakkwace located at Tudunwada/Shamaki Quarters, Gombe.
3. Tsangayar Sheikh Inuwa, located at Wuro-Kesa Gombe.
4. Tsangayar Mallam Ali Yashi, Dawaki Gombe.
5. Tsangayar Badamagari, Mallam Muhammadu Jeka da fari, Gombe.

6. Tsangayar Tsamiya, Mallam Yakubu Yerwagana Gombe.
7. Tsangayar Mallam Ali Gadam Mai Zabura, Shamaki Quarters Gombe.
8. Tsangayar Mallam Alhaji Rabi Bakatsine, Idi Quarters Gombe.
9. Tsangayar Mallam Liman Umaru, Bajuga Quarter Gombe.

10. Tsangayar Mallam Abdulhamid close to Zainab women and children hospital Idi Quarters Gombe.

11. Tsangayar Gwani Sani located at Kwanan Alheri Yalon Guruza Quarters, Gombe.

Challenges of Tsangaya in Gombe Metropolis

The *Almajiri* system of education remains one of the traditional ways of searching for Qur'anic knowledge by the young ones. The practice has a long history and culturally based in Islam but, unfortunately it has been submerged by social vices and future blockage. The challenges militating against the development of Tsangaya education today can be summarized as follows:

1. Begging: The students (*Almajiris*) engage in begging. Socially, begging destroys the dignity and self-respect. It contributes to the backwardness of a society in terms of economy. It also undermines the image of Islam in the eyes of non-Muslim.
2. The teachers and graduates of this system are not considered as educated in society.
3. There is no proper accommodation for students, because the available accommodation in each school is mostly not sufficient for the students.
4. The students lack good hygiene in terms of the food they eat, the place they sleep and the clothes they wear. They are malnourished, wounded; rushing for flies-infested leftover food, little morsels, just to stay alive. They consume all kinds of food, fresh or stale. They roam about dirty, tattered, bare-footed, and pale with flies pecking on their crackled lips and dry faces, which is filled with rashes or ring worm.
5. The teachers mostly don't know the number of their students, which in this era of insurgency and insecurity will cause a great problem. A student may sneak and join a bad peer group without the consent of the teacher.
6. The integration project carried out by both the federal and the state governments did not address most of the problems of Tsangaya schools. This was largely because the project did concern with few schools, some of the Tsangaya proprietors adopt conservative approach towards the project coupled with the fact that those who were assigned as the leaders of the projects don't know the system very well, especially at the federal level.

7. The system has deteriorated in terms of discipline and learning. Some students now engage in various acts of immorality and other child abuse, they may sometime end up illiterate.

Conclusion and Recommendations

From the foregoing, it can be concluded that *Tsangaya* system is an ancient system of Qur'anic learning been practiced in most countries of West Africa and northern Nigeria in particular. In Nigeria the system got its origin from Kanem-Borno Empire and later diffused to various states in Hausa land. This system had made a reasonable impact in socio-economic development of Gombe and Nigeria at large whereby its graduates became stars and excelled in various facets of life. However, the system have later come to be associated with so many problems due to British conquest of Nigeria and their introduction of so called western education which render *Tsangaya* schools irrelevant and negligence of the Muslim community. Based on the aforesaid challenges this study wishes to recommend the following:

- a. Parents who send their children to *Tsangaya* schools should take the responsibilities of their children, in terms of feeding, clothing as well as accommodation and medical expenses.
- b. Uniform should be introduced to the students for proper identification and to reduce the rate of untidiness of the students. And by extension the *Almajiris* would not detest the western system of learning since they shared many things in common.
- c. In the course of addressing these problems, the certificate should be introduced and be given to students at various levels.
- d. The curriculum of these schools should be broadened and integrated to include some basic knowledge of western education so that their certificates will be considered in any governmental affairs.
- e. Products of these schools be introduced to skills acquisition and vocational education programs. This will help them acquire many skills on which to subsist and become self-employed. This will serve two purposes. On one hand, they are protected against becoming hooligans by being self-employed and on the other hand they are made useful and productive members of the society.
- f. Governments should ban street begging, because of its evil consequences and the abuses it causes to society.
- g. Government should regulate the number of *Almajiris* that are supposed to be admitted in these schools and take in record the number of students in each school.
- h. Government should organize a committee for supervision these schools.

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