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‘Printed Manuscripts’: Tradition and Innovation in Twentieth-Century Nigerian Qur’anic Printing

Abstract: This chapter provides a chronology of the printed editions of the Qur’an published in Nigeria, in the form of offset lithography, from the 1950s onwards. Reconstructing the history of these publications alongside an anthropological description of Qur’anic reading practices in Nigeria, the chapter raises questions related both to the aesthetics and to the economy of Qur’anic calligraphy. In answering these questions, the chapter stresses how a set of cultural and historical factors shaped the Nigerian Islamic book market to enable an old calligraphic art to thrive in the age of print. The flamboyant aesthetics of the Qur’anic ‘printed manuscripts’ of twentieth-century Nigeria is, rather than a simple residual legacy of an ‘ancient art’, the fruit of the encounter of the latter with a modern economy.

1 Introduction

The present chapter provides a history of Qur’anic calligraphy in northern Nigeria from the early twentieth century to date. The focus is on the Qur’ans – for the large part penned by calligraphers based in Kano – reproduced in offset lithographic editions from the 1950s onwards. The formula ‘printed manuscripts’, borrowed from Adeeb Khalid’s work on Tsarist Russia, alludes to the offset lithographic editions that allowed ‘the age of manuscript to continue under the guise of print’.[1] Proposing a tentative chronology of these Nigerian editions, the chapter will try to answer a set of questions related both to the aesthetics and to the social history of Arabic calligraphy in northern Nigeria: what cultural, social and economic forces shaped the arts of twentieth-century Nigerian calligraphers? How did the introduction of the printing press impact the world of local calligraphers? What changes did it prompt in their economy, and what in the aesthetic of their arts? Which aspects, of the calligraphic styles displayed by

1 Khalid 1994, 192.

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twentieth-century's Nigerian Qur'ans, can be considered as 'traditional', and which as 'modern'?

Addressing these interrelated questions, the chapter will demonstrate how a set of circumstances that are peculiar to mid to late-twentieth century Nigeria, and in particular to Kano, created a context whereby the introduction of printing press technologies, far from rendering the job of the calligraphers irrelevant, contributed to a calligraphic boom that had few historical precedents in the region. Testaments to this boom are the many flamboyant offset lithographic editions of the Qur'an published during the last seventy years, which can be considered, without exaggeration, as among the finest items of Islamic arts in contemporary Africa.

2 The Nigerian Qur'anic manuscript tradition

A brief review of extant studies on the Qur'anic manuscript tradition of northern Nigeria will introduce the reader to the terminology that will be used in the rest of the chapter and provide some background on the historical origins of the manuscript tradition that will be discussed below. Due to the uniqueness of the variety of Arabic script (often labelled as the *sūdānī* or 'West African' script) displayed by Nigerian Qur'anic, as well as by most non-Qur'anic, manuscripts, the description of the script has understandably attracted a great deal of the attention of the scholars who have approached the manuscripts from the region. Two basic theories about the origin of this script have been advanced in the literature. Adrian H. Bivar, in his sketchy but pioneering articles on the topic,[2] argued that one of the most significant aspects of this variety of Arabic script was its antiquity: the script displayed by the Qur'ans of Borno of the late-nineteenth to mid-twentieth century, he submitted, was a direct descendant of a now extinct North African script in use before the thirteenth century and therefore, it must have been transmitted to the Muslims of the Lake Chad region already in the eleventh or twelfth century.[3] Bivar's theory was followed by Salah M. Hassan in a subsequent study.[4] Later on, however, the antiquity of the origins of the West African script was questioned by Tim Stanley[5] and Sheila Blair,[6]

2 Bivar 1960; Bivar 1968.

3 Bivar 1968, 15.

4 Hassan 1992. See especially the chapter 'Arabic Malamic Calligraphy: Genealogy and the Making of a Style', 116–147.

5 Stanley 1998.

who argued that, on the contrary, the *sūdānī* had to be considered as a relatively recent (post-sixteenth century) offshoot of the *maghribī*, a script that had become characteristic of North Africa only after the thirteenth-century 'cursive revolution' of Arabic scripts.

A second problem was the taxonomy of the script(s): does the label *sūdānī* / West African allow to effectively identify the geographic scope of the script(s) observed in the Bornuan and, more broadly, northern Nigerian Qur'ans? If yes, can we also identify sub-types of *sūdānī* that represent local variations? If not, what alternative labels can be suggested? And what about the relationship between the Bornuan/Nigerian typology of script and other West African ones? Should they all be subsumed under the overarching term *sūdānī*, or should different terms be used for different local variants?

The most ambitious attempt to identify the typologies of scripts observable in the Qur'anic manuscripts from the West African region, Nigeria included, has been made by Constant Hamès. In a path-breaking study based on the analysis of calligraphic Qur'ans originating from different Sahelian countries (from Mauritania in the West to Chad in the East), Hamès has suggested that it is possible to identify relatively clear regional sub-types of Arabic script.[7] A later taxonomy of the scripts displayed by the manuscripts (in this case, mainly non-Qur'anic) included in a French collection originating from Mali, has been proposed by Mauro Nobili,[8] who has followed Hamès' methodology while, at the same time, refining the typologies that had been proposed by the latter, at least as far as the scripts of the western Sahel are concerned.

For the Nigerian case, in a set of partly co-authored contributions,[9] Mauro Nobili and I have advanced the argument that the Arabic scripts of the Lake Chad region constitute a peculiar tradition that is relatively independent of the rest of the Sahel and that, in turn, displays two main stylistic variants: the first, more conservative, peculiar to Borno; the second, more innovative in the aesthetics but firmly rooted in the former in palaeographic terms, peculiar to Kano. The script family of the Lake Chad region displayed by the Nigerian Qur'ans should thus, in our opinion, be labelled as 'Central Sudanic', and its two main stylistic variants respectively as the *barnāwī* and *kanawī* styles. In the 2013 instalment of the above mentioned paper, we also proposed a positive re-evaluation, along with a partial re-assessment, of Bivar's theory about the

6 Blair 2008.

7 Hamès 2009.

8 Nobili 2011.

9 Brigaglia 2011; Brigaglia and Nobili 2013.

historical origins of the Nigerian script, suggesting that the latter's core intuition about the antiquity of the origins of the *barnāwī* is in fact supported by strong palaeographic evidence.

Besides the script, other aspects of the Nigerian Qur'anic manuscript tradition have been the object of in-depth studies. Dmitry Bondarev's works on the non-Qur'anic textual elements found in the Bornuan Qur'ans[10] have provided original answers to a set of questions related to the origins of the local exegetical tradition and to its sources. Bondarev's conclusions – arrived at by tracing back aspects of the Bornuan Qur'anic culture to a time that well pre-dates the sixteenth century – indirectly reinforce the hypothesis that the Bornuan script, too, might be older than Stanley and Blair would concede.

The textual and non-textual decorative elements of the Qur'anic tradition of Yorubaland in southwestern Nigeria, which largely overlaps with its northern (Borno and Kano) counterpart, have also been the object of an original study by Ismaheel A. Jimoh.[11]

Parallel to the above developments, which are all related to the graphic aspects (script; non-Qur'anic textual elements; decorations) of the manuscripts, their material study has also received a decisive impetus during the last ten years, thanks to the publication of a number of detailed studies by Michaelle Biddle on inks,[12] paper,[13] and watermarks.[14] Brief holistic descriptions of both textual and non-textual elements of the Qur'anic calligraphic tradition of northern Nigeria have also been occasionally attempted.[15]

Most of the above studies address the northern Nigerian Qur'ans as anonymous representatives of a collective calligraphic tradition, rather than as fragments of a complex history defined by both stability and change. The initiative of individual calligraphers in response to the circumstances of a specific age (society, technology, market demand) are not, thus, given due recognition. This was largely inevitable: as the vast majority of Qur'anic manuscripts from the region are not dated nor signed by a scribe, the identification of individual hands and with them, of specific historical trajectories within the tradition in any given period, is difficult if not impossible. Thus, the effort to identify

10 Bondarev 2006; Bondarev 2014.

11 Jimoh 2010.

12 Biddle 2011.

13 Biddle 2017.

14 Biddle 2018.

15 Brockett 1987; Mutai and Brigaglia 2017. See also Dmitry Bondarev's documentary 'Borno Calligraphy: Creating Hand-Written Qur'an in Northeastern Nigeria' (<https://www.oa.uni-hamburg.de/bildung/multimedia/kalligraphie-borno.html>; accessed on 20 August 2020).

elements of innovation and transformation and to raise questions related to the circumstances that prompted such changes has inevitably remained a secondary concern for researchers.

A significant exception is a recent article by Mustapha H. Kurfi,[16] which vividly describes the career of *Sharu* Mustapha Gabari, a son of the celebrated Kano calligrapher Sharif Bala Gabari (d. 2014)[17] and the founder of the Institute of Calligraphic and Geometric Designs, the first in Nigeria devoted to the formal teaching of Arabic calligraphy. In the light of Kurfi's analysis, Mustapha Gabari appears as an individual artist with a pronounced personal agency, and his career as being as much rooted in a living calligraphic tradition as responsive to technological innovation and motivated by a conscious effort towards aesthetic refinement.

Extending the scope of the enquiry to several calligraphers and to a longer historical timeline compared to the one covered by Kurfi, the core sections of this chapter will establish a partial chronology of twentieth-century Nigerian printed Qur'ans. My chronology is based on observations made on over thirty different lithographic editions penned by more than a dozen different calligraphers, that I have seen in the libraries of private owners or purchased over the years from the bookshops of the Kurmi market of Kano. The description below, however, will be restricted to a selection of editions written by ten different calligraphers.

In outlining such chronology, my underlying goal is to assess the impact of the development of the printing industry on a living calligraphic tradition. This tradition is intimately engrained in the religious networks constituted by the *gardawa* (senior Qur'anic students) and *alaramma*-s (those who have fully memorized the Qur'an). My study, therefore, requires a different methodology than the one used by Kurfi in his study of Mustapha Gabari. The latter, in fact, is an artist who has tried to detach the aesthetic of the Nigerian Arabic calligraphy from the Qur'an and to transform it into 'pure arts', a process Kurfi calls the 'desacralization' of calligraphy.[18] The printed editions of the Qur'an that will be the object of my historical overview, on the contrary, are representative of an aesthetic that is inextricably linked to the didactic and ritual functions that the product of the calligrapher's art is ultimately intended for. The calligraphic arts that this paper will describe, thus, are primarily shaped by the aesthetic conventions and the technical requirements of the *gardawa* and *alaramma*-s who

16 Kurfi 2017.

17 Sharif Bala Gabari is discussed below, p. 310–312.

18 Kurfi 2017, 40.

engage in a life-long journey dedicated to the perfect memorization and the constant recitation of the Qur'an. Such conventions and requirements delineate the artistic horizon of the calligrapher by encouraging certain types of innovations and restraining others: the latter, thus, can only be understood in the light of the former. All the calligraphers, in fact, have emerged from the traditional networks of Qur'anic schools and have developed their skills as an extension of their training in Qur'anic memorization. Even more importantly, *gardawa* and *alaramma*-s are also the primary market the Qur'ans penned by the Nigerian calligraphers are aimed at. The success, or lack thereof, of any new edition of the Qur'an, is due not only to the abstract beauty of the hand of the scribe who copied it (which remains, of course, a factor), but also to the degree to which the new item appears to its potential buyers as more or less suitable for the functional needs of the day-to-day teaching, memorization and devotional reading of the Qur'an, practiced according to the conventions of *gardawa* and *alaramma*-s.

Keeping this in mind, the first two sections of the chapter will integrate an ethnographic description of the lives and the learning practices of the (mainly Borno-trained) *gardawa* and *alaramma*-s, with a historical-biographical account of the calligraphers of early twentieth-century Kano.[19]

3 The context: Qur'anic studies in Borno

According to most oral accounts, in the first two decades of the twentieth century there were only a few specialists of the Qur'an in Hausaland who had achieved regional reputation. In Sokoto, the local scholarly community held onto the symbolic prestige inherited from the charismatic legacy of the Ɗan Fodio jihad with its all-round engagement with the *uṣūl* (theoretical foundations

19 In order to work on this chapter, I originally intended to supplement the data sparsely collected over the years with some structured interviews to calligraphers and printers. Having been prevented from travel to Nigeria by the Corona virus pandemic, I have had to rely on the assistance of Sani Yakubu Adam and Dahiru Lawan Muaz (both at Bayero University Kano), who generously agreed to conduct interviews on my behalf. Their assistance, without which I would have not been able to complete this chapter, is hereby thankfully acknowledged. I also wish to thank Abdulaleem Somers and Prof. Abdulkader Tayob (University of Cape Town) for generously scanning and sending the images of several of the lithographed editions of the Qur'an of my collection, preserved in my archive at the University of Cape Town, to which I was unable to have physical access.

of the classical Islamic disciplines) and with its practical concern for Islamic administrative law. In Kano, the religious scholars had been renowned for quite some time for their stern dedication to the transmission of a tight corpus of derivative Māliki jurisprudence, largely thanks to the prestige of a family-run school based in the Madabo quarters, whose students were known as the *Madabawa*.[20] The scholars of Zaria, for their part, had a reputation for the study of Arabic grammar and literature, as well as (mainly Tijāni) Sufism: the most important Nigerian authors of Arabic Sufi poetry of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century were, unsurprisingly, based there.[21]

But in order to seriously specialize in the Qur'an, any ambitious student was required to leave Hausaland and travel to Borno, whose *tsangayu* (sing. *tsangaya*), often rural-based Qur'anic schools, had a centuries-old reputation in the field.[22] Training in a Bornuan *tsangaya,* for a *gardi* (senior Qur'anic student) aiming at achieving perfect memorization, was a daunting enterprise that required an exclusive commitment, forcing him to leave aside, or at least to reserve a marginal space for, the study of the non-Qur'anic curriculum of Islamic studies for some time.

In a *tsangaya,* an average student would usually wake up at 3 a.m. to sit with his peers around the light of a wood fire (*gargari*).[23] After writing down a portion – normally one *thumn* (the eighth part of one sixtieth, *ḥizb,* of the Qur'an) – on his wooden tablet, and having the writing checked by his teacher, he would start reading the text over and over until 7.30 a.m., with a short interruption for the canonical dawn prayer. After two hours of rest and a breakfast provided by the teacher or by the community in the school's neighbourhood, he would leave the *tsangaya* at 10 a.m.; carrying his tablet under his arm, he would walk a long way to an improvised hut in the bush and spend the rest of the day in *iskali,* a time of complete isolation. In *iskali,* he would continue to work on his memorization until right before sunset, when he would return to the *tsangaya*. After the sunset prayer, he would sit with his peers for about an hour of *zaman*

20 Chamberlin 1975, 84–127, 193–200; Hassan 1988.

21 Bala 2011.

22 Lavers 1971.

23 The following reconstruction merges information collected on separate interviews by author with Goni Yaƙubu Abdullahi Mai Kumsa (2012), a Bornuan Qur'anic teacher based in Ɗorayi, Kano; with Abdullahi Yusuf Chinade (August 2020), a *gardi* from Bauchi State who has studied in various *tsangaya* schools in Yobe State; and with Sadisu Salisu Idris, who has been a Qur'anic student in Kano. As the interviews were conducted in Hausa, I have retained the Hausa names for all the activities related to the daily life of a *gardi*. Kanuri, Fulfulde and Arabic names are also used, of course, in the various *tsangaya* schools across the country.

tilawa, a collective assembly dedicated to the recitation of the Qur'an from memory in a quick fashion, without looking at the tablet. After the night prayer and a simple supper, he would sit again around the fire to read his lesson over and over again on his tablet, until at least 11 p.m.

Following this system, every day a student would be able to recite a daily lesson of one or two *thumn*-s (corresponding to 1/480 or 1/240 of the full Qur'an) about three hundred times, writing it first without vowels and verse-markers, then a second time with the addition of these signs. In addition to that, he would also devote part of his daily routine to *takara,* the individual reading of the Qur'an from a complete manuscript, finishing in this fashion about one full Qur'anic recitation every day. Occasionally, he would also participate in night *musaffa* gatherings, wherein a group of senior students would be invited, in exchange for a customary gift in money or kind, to sit at somebody's house or at a local mosque for a collective reading of the Qur'an. During the *musaffa,* a manuscript (always kept unbound as per the local custom) would be divided into the pages composing separate *ḥizb*-s, and distributed among the participants, who would all read in turn from their sections, thus completing multiple full recitations of the Qur'an overnight.

Along with his studies, a *gardi* would also cumulate some knowledge of the *faḍā'il* (virtues) or *khawāṣṣ* (special therapeutic or apotropaic uses) of the various verses and Suras of the Qur'an, transmitted in virtually infinite varieties of recipes by the local scholars by drawing on the existing literature on the topic[24] supplemented by personal insights. They would annotate these recipes in a personal *kundi* (manuscript notebook of unbound leaves), and once fully established as scholars in their own right, they would use them to dispense healing, protection, or the fulfilment of the ordinary needs and desires of a client (someone's love; an easy pregnancy; the smooth delivery of a baby; sexual power; protection from robbers; increased memorization skills; success in business, etc.) as formulas written on a wooden tablet, washed off and drunk (*rubutun sha*), or as talismans (*hatimi*) written on paper and carried on the body as amulets (*laya*).

First only occasionally, and then more intensely as their studies would progress further, senior *gardawa* would also devote some of their time to special study sessions with a scholar who had specialised in the virtually infinite details of *harji,* a term that designates the statistics related to how many times each Arabic word appears in the Qur'an in each of the three possible desinences

24 Hamès 2001.

of Arabic grammar, or in combination with other words, syntactic constructions or non-textual markers (verse markers, pause markers, five-verse markers etc.).

Through years of such daunting routine, cadenced by the alternation of times of *gargari, iskali, tilawa, musaffa* gatherings, special lessons on *faḍā'il* and *harji,* the Bornuan *tsangaya* system had turned generations of *alaramma*-s (simple memorizers of the Qur'an) into *gwani*-s (or *goni*-s*;* full-fledged experts in Qur'anic memorization) who, in turn, had established their own schools and trained more people.

In order to cater for the requirements of the public of *gardawa,* all the Qur'anic manuscripts from northern Nigeria, virtually without exception, display a set of decorative elements functionally designed to facilitate the *gardawa*'s practices of memorization and ritual reading, always according to the following scheme:

- *Aya* (verse marker). Three-circular intra-textual marker in red contour and yellow filling. It separates each verse of the Qur'an from the following one. Verses are not numbered.
- *Kumsa* (five-verse marker). An intra-textual marker in the form of an irregular circle, flattened at the bottom, in black contour and red filling, with a yellow dot standing on a vertical hook. It separates each group of five verses from any following one.
- *Kuri* (ten-verse marker). An intra-textual marker in the form of two concentric circles, in black contours filled with red and/or yellow dots. It separates each group of ten verses from any following one.
- *Hizbi* (*ḥizb* marker). A big extra-textual marker made of concentric circles, in black contours and filled with geometric designs in red, yellow and green inks. It appears on the margins of the text to signal the beginning of every sixtieth part of the Qur'an. In each Qur'an, 60 *hizbi* markers are present, and each is different from the others.
- *Sumuni* (eighth-of-*ḥizb* marker). A relatively simple extra-textual marker in the form of a pattern of thin lines in red ink that surround the letter of the Arabic alphabet *thā'*. It appears on the margins of the text to signal the beginning of an eighth part of a *ḥizb*.
- *Rubu'i(n hizbi)* (fourth-of-*ḥizb* marker). A relatively simple extra-textual marker in the form of a pattern of thin lines in red ink that surround the letter of the Arabic alphabet *bā'*. It appears on the margins of the text to signal the beginning of a fourth part of a *ḥizb*.
- *Nusufi* (half-of-*ḥizb* marker). A relatively simple extra-textual marker in the form of a pattern of thin lines in red ink that surround the letter of the

Arabic alphabet *nūn*. It appears on the margins of the text to signal the beginning of a half of a *ḥizb*.

– *Subu'i(n kur'ani)* (seventh-of-the-Qur'an marker). A big extra-textual marker in the form of a circle or, alternatively, two partly overlapping circles, filled with geometric designs in various colours. It is similar to the *hizbi* marker, but usually bigger in size and recognisable by the presence of the Arabic word *sub'*. It appears on the margins of the text to signal the beginning of a seventh part of the whole Qur'an. Six of such signs are found in each Nigerian Qur'an, each different from the others.
– *Rubu'i(n kur'ani)* (fourth-of-the-Qur'an marker). The biggest decorative extra-textual marker, covering half-page to one page of any Nigerian Qur'an. It appears at the beginning of every fourth part of the Qur'an, in the form of a colourful rectangular design (*zayyana*) created by interweaving patterns. Four of such decorations are found in each Nigerian Qur'an, each different from the others.
– *Sajda* (prostration marker). Similar in size and shape to the *subu'i,* this extra-textual marker signals the requirement of a ritual prostration when the reader reaches specific verses during the recitation of the Qur'an. According to the Māliki school followed in Nigeria, the required prostrations are eleven, so there will be eleven *sajda* markers in every Nigerian Qur'an.

Any given *gwani* would be qualified to write a calligraphic copy of the Qur'an with all the above markers at the right place; but not all of them would be gifted with a hand of equal regularity and beauty. Moreover, *gwani*-s would have their internal hierarchies of knowledge: some, after acquiring the title, would proceed to search for further specialization in the various canonical readings (*qirā'āt*) and interpretation (*tafsīr*) of the Qur'an, eventually acquiring the additional honorific title of *gangaran;* some of the *gangaran,* in turn, would combine the deep Qur'anic knowledge provided by years of intensive study in the *tsangaya* system with a full mastery of the Islamic disciplines (jurisprudence, theology, etc.) taught in separate, and usually urban-based, circles of learning. Only a few of the latter would exist at any given age, and they would be known by the further honorific title of *tilo*.

4 The forerunners: Kano calligraphers in the early twentieth century

In the 1920s, only about six *gwani*-s of repute were known to be teaching in Kano,[25] and all of them were either Bornuans or Borno-trained. This is the case, for instance, of Goni Hamidu (d. 1950), a Bornuan Shuwa Arab who had settled in Kano between the late nineteenth and the early twentieth century, who was considered as a *gangaran*. He is remembered, in particular, as the first to introduce the teaching of all Qur'anic canonical readings – in addition to the reading of Nāfiʿ in the transmission of Warsh that was traditionally considered as the norm in the region – in the Islamic curriculum of Kano city. Among his many students was a man called Rabiu (Muḥammad al-Rābiʿ b. Yūnus b. al-Ḥasan al-Sayāwī) Ɗantinƙi, who gradually emerged as the foremost calligrapher of Kano of the first half of the twentieth century.[26]

Born in 1894 in Tinƙi (a village near Saye, north of Kano), Rabiu had memorized the Qur'an in his early teens and started to teach in his father's school when he heard the news of the visit in Hausaland of a Malian scholar known as Malam Kunta.[27] He then asked his father's permission to attach himself to the latter. After following Malam Kunta for some time in his peregrinations, Rabiu eventually settled in Kano, where he continued to study under other scholars, including the aforementioned Goni Hamidu, the visiting Mauritanian scholar Muḥammad b. Yaḥyā al-Walātī, and Abubakar Mijinyawa (d. 1946),[28] who was one of the major Kano-based Sufi scholars of his time.

Mijinyawa had emerged as the main reference in Sufi studies for the *Salgawa,* a dynamic network formed in Kano by the students of Muhammad Salga (d. 1938).[29] Strong of a multi-disciplinary training in jurisprudence, Arabic literature and Sufism, the Salgawa were harshly critical of their Madabo counterparts (*Madabawa*, mentioned earlier) for what they believed to be a narrow-minded, quasi-devotional focus on the memorization of the *Mukhtaṣar* of Khalīl b. Isḥāq and of a few selected commentaries of it, and for their simultaneous neglect of other fields of Islamic knowledge. The shared affiliation to the Tijāniyya Sufi order of both the Madabawa and the Salgawa did not prevent the

25 Aminu Ayyuba, interviewed by Sani Yakubu Adam and Dahiru Lawan, Kano, 12 Aug. 2020.
26 Rābiʿ 2010, 44–45.
27 Rābiʿ 2010, 41.
28 See Hunwick 1996, 269–271.
29 On the Salgawa, see Adam 2014.

Islamic scholarly community of Kano from being polarized by the polemics between the two rival networks.

Gradually the Salgawa were able to establish a stronger foothold in Kano and beyond. In particular, their all-round project of revival of Islamic knowledge found resonance in, and merged with, the revival of gnostic Sufism promoted by the Senegalese Tijāni leader Ibrāhīm Niasse (d. 1975), whose 'Tijānī flood' (*fayḍa*)[30] had reached Kano in the late 1930s through the mediation of Emir Abdullahi Bayero (rul. 1926–1953), and who successively visited Nigeria personally in the mid-1940s. The Kano Salgawa affiliated to Niasse's global *Fayḍa* movement, prompting other Tijāni circles based in other areas of Nigeria, within and outside Hausaland, to follow suit. The *Fayḍa* revival profoundly impacted the Islamic field of Nigeria, its primary manifestations being a boom of Islamic literature,[31] in particular poetry, and of oral session of Qur'anic exegesis[32] that had little precedence in the region. By attaching himself to the Salgawa and, via them, to the *Fayḍa,* a Qur'anic scholar of repute like Rabiu Ɗantinƙi[33] was providing the network with an additional surplus of symbolic capital. It also provided him, conversely, with local and international patronage that would be of great importance in his career, as well as in that of his offspring. Ɗantinƙi died in 1952, in Mali, while on his way back from a visit to Kaolack, Senegal, where he had paid a visit to Ibrāhīm Niasse.[34]

Besides authoring twenty-six books and poems on various subjects[35] (his *magnum opus* being a versification of over 1,000 verses on the differences between the various canonical readings of the Qur'an), throughout his career Rabiu Ɗantinƙi wrote by his hand a number of copies of the Qur'an that range, according to different estimates, between 50 and 100, for a variety of individual clients.[36] None of Ɗantinƙi's handwritten Qur'ans was published during his life, but several posthumous editions were later produced on the initiative of his sons. One of the latter, Isiyaƙa Rabiu (1925–2018), was himself a Borno-trained Qur'anic scholar; the initiator of one of the biggest holding companies in northern Nigeria; and, from the early 1990s until his death, the representative (*khalīfa*) of the Niasse family in Nigeria. Before his death, Isiyaƙa Rabiu

30 Seesemann 2011.

31 Brigaglia 2014.

32 Brigaglia 2009.

33 Rabiu's *silsila* in the Qur'an went back to Imam Warsh via only thirteen names, the latest degrees in the *silsila* being all Bornuan scholars (Rābiʿ 2010, 59).

34 Rābiʿ 2010, 62.

35 Listed in Rābiʿ 2010, 48–54.

36 Balarabe Isiyaƙa Rabiu, interviewed by Dahir Lawan Muaz, Kano, 8 September 2020.

managed to gather about 30 copies of the Qur'an in the handwriting of his father, buying them back from various owners in Nigeria, Chad and Cameroon. These manuscripts are preserved today in the family's library.

Rabiu Ɗantinƙi must have begun receiving requests to write calligraphic copies of the Qur'an at a very young age. One published copy, in fact, bears 1339 AH (1920 CE) as the date of the original manuscript, while a recent re-print (third edition) of one of his earliest copies was published in 2014 on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of its writing. The latter copy (Fig. 1), published when the calligrapher was only twenty, already displays some of the reasons that would make the handwriting of Ɗantinƙi so popular. The writing style is elegant and consistent, devoid of the irregularities that characterise most of the Qur'anic manuscripts from Kano of the same period (see, for an average example, Fig. 2), but the script maintains the characteristic thickness of the *kanawī*. The text has a luminosity that is rare to see in the copies from the same period, whose characteristic, earthy dimness (due to the natural ingredients of the inks as well as to the quality of the paper), is undoubtedly charming but makes them, on the whole, less readable than Ɗantinƙi's (see, again, Fig. 2).

Colours are used consistently with the established tradition: black for the consonantal text and the contours of the circular *ḥizb* markers observable on the right side of Fig. 1; red for the vowels, for the tri-circular contour of the verse marker, and for all non-Qur'anic textual elements (like titles of Suras and marginal notes); yellow for the letter *hamza* and for the filling of the verse markers; green for the *hamzat al-waṣl*. Red and yellow – in this case, for some reason, no green – are used for the internal decoration of the circular *ḥizb* markers. Besides being particularly bright in their tonality,[37] the inks of different colour rarely overlap with each other as can be often observed in other manuscripts, and this enhances the overall luminosity and clarity of the text. The *sajda* and *subu'i* markers are particularly beautiful (Fig. 3).

The layout (in this and in other Qur'anic manuscripts penned by Ɗantinƙi that I have observed through the years) has a margin that is much wider than usual, but that is only occasionally interspersed with annotations of the *harji* genre,[38] leaving a huge space for the user to add all the *harji* notes of his liking. The result is a heavy (in this case, almost 800 folios) and probably very

37 Was the calligrapher using chemical additives to his inks to increase the brightness of the natural ingredients traditionally used by the local scribes? Or was the colours' brightness artificially enhanced at the time of printing (2014)? So far, I have not been able to answer these questions.

38 See above in this article, p. 297–298.

expensive manuscript; but one that, with time, could become an even more treasurable item to its owner, for he could use the broad margins to add all the *harji* notes that he would progressively gather during years of training and research.

5 The 'printed manuscripts' of Kano

The affirmation of the *Fayḍa Tijāniyya* network in Kano and the consequent boom in the production of Islamic literature, were closely intertwined with the economic growth of Kano during the late colonial and early postcolonial times.[39] The prosperity of colonial Kano was due to its position in the heart of the commercial routes that linked the north and the south of the country in the service of export farming, which was the core of the colonial economy of Nigeria. Commercial crops (cotton, groundnuts) produced by northern farmers were stocked by Kano-based traders before being transported to the harbour of Lagos and from here, exported abroad: the famous colonial pictures of Kano's 'groundnut pyramids' are iconic images of this era. During the late colonial and early postcolonial ages, however (more precisely, between the 1950s and the early 1980s), the Kano economy also experienced the development of a relatively important manufacturing and industrial sector:[40] weaving, spinning, food processing and confectionery, steel, plastic, concrete, chemicals and, for what concerns us directly, the printing industry.

The history of the Islamic printing industry in Kano has been reconstructed in detail by Sani Yakubu Adam.[41] In its first phase, the success of this industry was based on the use of lithographic techniques (plate lithography and offset lithography). The typesetting of Arabic books, in fact, was only possible in Oriental (*naskhī*) and Maghribī Arabic fonts. For the Central Sudanic script, which was the only one the local public was familiar with, printing was only possible through the lithographic reproduction of exemplars penned by local scribes.

The first attempts to print the Qur'an from handwritten samples copied in the local script were made in the early to mid-1950s. At that time, the Kano Government Press (previously Kano Native Authority Press) already possessed tools

39 See Tahir 1977.

40 Bashir 1989.

41 See Sani Y. Adam's chapter included in this volume. For more details, see Adam's PhD dissertation (Adam 2022).

for offset printing;[42] however, for some reason the earliest prints were apparently made in Zaria, on behalf of Kano publishers and from manuscript samples written by Kano scribes, by NORLA (Northern Regional Literature Agency), which was active in the period 1953–1959. According to oral accounts, publishers Malam Kabo Sanka and Muhammad Ɗanjinjiri (both from Kano, and both closely associated to the Salgawa/*Fayḍa* network) published two such editions of the Qur'an in the local script.[43]

It is easy to imagine the success that such editions had in the local market. Modern education (*boko*) had still a very limited reach in northern Nigeria: virtually all Muslim children attended a Qur'anic school, and most Qur'anic schools probably purchased several copies of these, for the time pioneering, items. As mentioned by oral accounts, however, such early prints were only partial (usually only the final *ḥizb*-s containing the shortest Suras) and in grey scale. While they could satisfy the demand of the schools, their appeal to the more specialized consumer group of senior *gardawa, alaramma*-s and accomplished scholars was limited. Handwritten calligraphic volumes that featured the four traditional colours, therefore, continued to be, for several more years, the most common form in which the Qur'an would enter northern Nigerian homes.

It was only the appearance of the first integral, colour-print, offset editions, that radically transformed the market ushering in a new phase in the history of the Qur'anic calligraphy of Nigeria. The first such colour editions appeared in the mid-1950s. Copied by a scribe known as Malam Kyauta and printed by NORLA, it was published by Abdullahi Yassar (another one of the many book-traders associated with the Salgawa/*Fayḍa* network) with the financial sponsorship of Isiyaƙa, son of Rabiu Ɗantiƙi.

For reasons that I have not been able to ascertain, the market was not impacted by the Yassar edition as massively as it would be, shortly later, by a similar edition published by the entrepreneur Sanusi Ɗantata (d. 1997). Perhaps, the Yassar edition was printed in a limited number of copies and could not satisfy the demand of the market; or perhaps, due to the low quality of the paper used, the final outcome was less memorable than the Ɗantata edition.[44]

42 Furniss 1984, 442.

43 Audu Tsakuwa, an elderly man who repairs and sells second-hand books in the Islamic books section ('*Yan littafi*) of the Kurmi market of Kano, interviewed by Sani Yakubu Adam and Dahiru Lawan Muaz, Kano, 15 August 2020.

44 When exactly did the first edition of the Ɗantata Qur'an see the light? As several editions published over the years (but in most cases, undated) still circulate in Kano, and as oral sources provided contradictory answers to this question, I have not been able to identify an

The Ɗantata family was based in the Koƙi ward of Kano city, which also hosted one of the biggest Tijāni communities of the city. Sanusi was a son of the famous tycoon of the kolanut trade Alhassan Ɗantata (d. 1955) and a grandfather of Aliko Ɗangote, who was destined to become the most successful businessman of late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century Africa.

The Qur'an published by Sanusi Ɗantata came to be known as *Mai Belt,* because the leather strip that was traditionally used to tie the cover that enclosed the unbound pages of any Nigerian Qur'anic manuscript had been substituted by a more modern-looking plastic band (a 'belt') with a metal clip. While displaying a script in the traditional style and penned by a scribe who had emerged out of the local circles of *gardawa* and *alaramma*-s, the *Mai Belt,* with its innovative clipped band, perfectly encapsulated early Islamic modernity in Nigeria, of which it can be considered an iconic image.

As all local Qur'anic manuscripts (including those written by Rabiu Ɗantinƙi in the previous decades), the *Mai Belt* does not feature the name of the calligrapher. The original manuscript, we learn from oral sources, was penned by Mahmud Ɗan Baballe.[45] Born from a Tijāni family of Kano, Ɗan Baballe had studied the Qur'an, needless to say, in Borno.[46] Back from his studies, he had settled in his native Koƙi ward, close to the Ɗantata house, and attached himself to a local Qur'anic scholar known as Gwani na-Dudu, while also engaging in long-distance kolanut trade with Ghana. As soon as his writing skills had started being appreciated in local Qur'anic circles, he was commissioned by Alhassan Ɗantata to write three Qur'anic manuscripts for his sons, one of whom was Sanusi. Several years later, witnessing the growing demand for colour-printed Qur'ans in the local hand after the publication of the Yassar colour edition, Sanusi took his manuscript to London and had thousands of lithographed copies made, to which he added a cover page that featured his name as the publisher, an index of Suras (written in a different hand than the text of the

exact date for the first edition. Most sources suggest that it was in the late 1950s, shortly before Independence, probably 1959. A son of the calligrapher who penned the manuscript, however (interviewed by Sani Yakubu Adam and Dahiru Lawan Muaz, Kano, 30 August 2020), remembers the printing to have occurred much earlier, in the early 1950s, during the last years of Emir Abdullahi Bayero's rule.

45 In a previous publication (Brigaglia 2011, 62), I had wrongly indicated the name of the calligrapher who had penned the *Mai Belt* as Hassan Inuwa. As I have later verified, however, the latter name appears on the cover page of a later edition of the *Mai Belt* as the new publisher (with permission from Sanusi Ɗantata), and not as the scribe.

46 Sule na-Lala, son of Ɗan Baballe, interviewed by Sani Yakubu Adam and Dahiru Lawan Muaz, 30 August 2020.

Qur'an, so probably added by another scribe in the absence of Ɗan Baballe), a simple carton cover, and the clipped plastic band. The *Mai Belt* displays a measured writing, slightly thinner than Ɗantiŋki's, while the colours are similarly bright (see Fig. 4). The margins are minimal, so the volume comes in less than 300 folios, containing the printing cost of a book that, because of the high-quality paper used, was quite expensive in the market, being sold at 2 pounds a copy. Marginal notes (of the *harji* or *faḍā'il* type) are absent. Besides the clipped belt and the Sura index, it also displays what was, for the time, another remarkable innovation, page numbering, printed in Arabic numerals on top of each page: these were certainly absent in the original manuscript and were added at the time of printing to increase the marketability of the final product.

The publication of the *Mai Belt* provoked a domino effect in the world of Kano calligraphers and in the local printing industry. First, the publishers, who were closely associated with the families of the religious scholars, felt threatened by the fact that a commercial enterprise belonging to an outsider like Ɗantata was stepping into 'their' business, and that it was doing so in such a successful way. At the time, the Kano publishers had already started to rely massively on offset lithographic printing to supply the market with copies of the writings of the local scholars, as well as of a wide range of classical works (*Akhḍarī, 'Ashmāwī, Risāla, Sanūsiyya,* etc.) studied in the local Islamic circles. Their concern, however, was that all the printing presses that were active in Kano (Oluseyi, Adebola, Jola-Ade) were owned by southern Yoruba entrepreneurs who were either non-Muslims themselves, or hired non-Muslim workers: ritually 'impure' hands would, thus, handle pages that contained sacred texts.[47] For this reason, most Muslim publishers had been reluctant to publish any edition of the Qur'an, which would have amplified the problem of the perceived impurity of the printing presses. With the success of the Yassar edition and even more so, of the Ɗantata edition, however, they were forced to step in, either by finding alternative printers in Egypt, or by acquiring the necessary tools and skills for offset lithographic printing. Second, when several publishers followed in the footsteps of Ɗantata and issued more lithographed editions of the Qur'an (each penned by a different hand, and each displaying some original feature that rendered it unique), the competition between calligraphers was enhanced. By making the old art of Nigerian calligraphy available to a wider public in the form of affordable commercial items, lithographic printing prompted the calligraphers to engage in an unprecedented search of technical and aesthetic refinement and innovation. The position of the calligraphers in the local book cycle, far from being rendered irrelevant, was thus

47 See the contribution by Sani Y. Adam in this volume.

enhanced by the growth of the printing industry. Third, calligraphers, printers and publishers immediately realised that, with their business taking on a new dimension, a set of more formal rules that determined the rights and duties of the three categories had to be established. Although Ɗan Baballe, in fact, was generously patronized by Ɗantata (the calligrapher's son, an elderly man, still lives with his family in the house the businessman built for his father in Koƙi), the absence of any mention of the calligrapher on the cover page of the *Mai Belt* was a reason for concern. If publishers wanted to hold full copyright over the final product, they had to formally acknowledge the calligrapher and pay him a higher salary. As a result, most of the subsequent editions of the Qur'an began featuring the calligrapher's name on the cover page.

One of the calligraphers who emerged in this period was Sharif Bala Zaitawa (*c.* 1924–2011), who became the favourite scribe of publisher Abdullahi Yassar. During his life, Zaitawa penned about 60 handwritten Qur'ans, at least four of which were published by Abdullahi Yassar and one, by publisher Sani Adamu.[48] According to oral sources,[49] the main specificity of Zaitawa's hand was that it was chameleonic enough to imitate the hand of any of his peers. A simple observation of two of the editions in his handwriting lends credibility to this anecdote: the first (1960; Fig. 5) has some resemblance to Rabiu Ɗantinƙi's, while the second (undated; Fig. 6) is very reminiscent of the handwriting of Ɗan Baballe. Besides being printed in beautiful colours (with a teal green tonality that adds a touch of originality), the 1960 edition also displays another interesting innovation, page numbering in Latin numerals; the undated edition, which is probably later, has page numbering in both Arabic and Latin numerals.

During the same years, various sons of Rabiu Ɗantinƙi sponsored new lithographed editions, which were probably aimed at supplying the massive network of Qur'anic schools they inherited from their father. Bala Rabiu Ɗantinƙi, for instance, is mentioned as the publisher on the cover page of one of the many re-editions of the *Mai Belt*, while a Qur'an penned by calligrapher Abubakar Ɗan Bukka (Fig. 7), was published in 1962 with the sponsorship of Zubayr Rabiu Ɗantinƙi. No information on the printer is provided on the cover page of this edition, but the printing was probably made in Egypt.[50] I have not been able to

48 Abba Bala Zaitawa, interviewed by Sani Yakubu Adam and Dahiru Lawan Muaz, Kano, 28 September 2020.

49 Abba Bala Zaitawa, interviewed by Sani Yakubu Adam and Dahiru Lawan Muaz, Kano, 28 September 2020.

50 Audu Tsakuwa, interviewed by Sani Yakubu Adam and Dahiru Lawan Muaz, Kano, 15 August 2020.

gather any information about Ɗan Bukka. Perhaps, he was a student of the publisher's father or perhaps, an associate or teacher of his, whose memory the Ɗantiŋki family wanted to celebrate.

The Ɗan Bukka Qur'an displays some outstanding decorative patterns like the *sub'* marker that can be observed on Fig. 7. The writing style is interestingly angular, displaying a clear example of the alternation of thick horizontal strokes and thin vertical strokes that was (or was becoming?) characteristic of many of the scribes of Kano if compared to their Bornuan counterparts. It also displays some *harji* marginal notes here and there. The colours (red and yellow only) appear only on the *hamza*, on the verse-marker, on the five-verse marker and on the decorative patterns, while they are absent from the vowels, the Sura titles and the marginal notes, all of which appear in black. Moreover, colours appear as rather irregular spots of ink: they were seemingly added mechanically, at the time of printing, either on an original that was devoid of colours, or upon a grey scale reproduction of the original manuscript. The print is made on the thick, dull paper that was normally used, until fairly recent times, by scribes for handwritten books: the result is a very heavy and probably expensive volume.

With the boom of lithographic printing in full bloom, and with an increasing concern about non-Muslim workers of the Kano presses handling Islamic texts, the Senegalese Ibrāhīm Niasse advised his Nigerian followers about the necessity of establishing a Muslim (and Tijāni) printing press. This eventually saw the light in 1964 as *Maɗaba'ar 'Yan Kasa* (Northern Maktabat Printing Press, NMPP),[51] owned in partnership by the scholars of the Salgawa network. Another privately owned Muslim press emerged one year later (1965); this too, however, was indirectly associated with the Salgawa network, showing the extent of the control the latter exercised over the Islamic book market. It was owned by Ayyuba Sani Magoga, a bookseller hailing from the Madabo quarters and related by family ties to the Madabawa, but whose religious affiliation had later shifted to the latter's 'rivals', the Salgawa.[52]

51 Furniss 1984, 444. See also Adam, infra, p. 345.

52 Barhama Ayyuba Magoga, interviewed by Sani Yakubu Adam and Dahiru Lawan Muaz, Kano, 13 August 2020. Magoga's change of affiliation was signaled by his marriage to a daughter of Shaykh Tijjani Usman (d. 1970), one of the most prominent exponents of the Salgawa. It has to be noted that by the early 1960s, all the main publishers of Kano (Abdullahi Yassar, Sani Adamu, Zakari Salga, Muhammad Ɗanjinjiri), just like Magoga, were associated with the Salgawa scholars. While Magoga established his own press, however, the others continued to prefer relying on the services of local or international (usually Egyptian) presses instead of establishing independent prints.

Ayyuba Magoga's favourite scribe was a man called Salisu (Muḥammad al-Thālith) Inuwa Kore. Magoga published at least three editions of the Qur'an in the handwriting of the latter.[53] The two copies in Kore's handwriting that I have been able to observe, however, were released by other publishers: by Sani Adamu & Hassan Inuwa the first (Figs 8 and 9); by Sharif Bala Gabari the second (Fig. 10). Especially in the latter edition, the writing style of Salisu Kore is characterized by thick strokes, elongated horizontal lines, and an increased angularity of the script if compared to any of the examples shown so far. Was Salisu Kore under the influence of his publisher, Sharif Bala Gabari, who was also a calligrapher, and whose writing became legendary for maximizing angularity to achieve a 'Kufic' vintage look? Or was it vice versa? Both answers might be true at the same time: as a calligrapher, Gabari might have drawn some inspiration from the style of Salisu Kore; and as a publisher, he probably encouraged his calligrapher to maximize the angularity of the script to make it more appealing.

In both cases, the paper is of an ordinary, thin quality, the volumes are light in weight and the final product was probably inexpensive, making it accessible to the students of the Qur'anic schools. The presence of many *harji* annotations on the margins certainly enhanced the popularity of this edition for the public of *gardawa*. From the notes appearing on the page displayed as Fig. 9, for instance, a Nigerian *gardi* using this edition to rehearse his memorisation, would have learnt that the combination of letters *Alif-lām-mīm* appears in the Quran six times; that the expression *ūlā'ika humu'l-mufliḥūn* is a singular occurrence (*ḥarfī*); that a word starting by the letter *khā'* follows the five-verse marker only on five occurrences in the Qur'an; that the word *yukhdaʿūn*, in the passive form, occurs three times; and that the word *ghishāwa* in the indefinite nominative appears only on one occasion (*ḥarfī*) while its corresponding accusative appears once in another place in the Qur'an.

A curious detail is that both these editions feature an overwhelming presence of the colour green (traditionally used in much lesser doses than red and yellow) in the decorations. Salisu owed his surname, Kore, to the fact that he was born in a village by this name. However, the word *kore* also means 'green' in Hausa. At a time when calligraphers and publishers were competing to market 'their' edition of the Qur'an, it is possible that the idea of playing with the coincidence between the calligrapher's surname and the Hausa word for the colour 'green', might have been devised by the calligrapher (or perhaps, by his publishers) as a means to make his 'green Qur'ans' more recognizable and memorable.

53 Barhama Ayyuba Magoga, interviewed by Sani Yakubu Adam and Dahiru Lawan Muaz, Kano, 13 August 2020.

6 Sharif Bala Gabari's classics

As I have mentioned above, by the early 1960s the custom of including a mention of the calligrapher's name on the cover page of any new edition of the Qur'an was well established. All the Kano calligraphers, however, were still waged workers, paid by the publisher a stipulated sum for the production of any new calligraphic copy. I was not able to establish the average wage of a Nigerian calligrapher in the 1960s; but considering the income that could be generated by any new published edition (editions that targeted the Qur'anic schools, like the ones penned by Zaitawa and Kore, could easily sell over 100,000 copies), many calligraphers felt that they were not being given their due. This persuaded one of them, Sharif Bala Gabari, that it was time for calligraphers to bypass the mediation of the established publishers and take full control of the cycle of Qur'an writing, printing, publishing and marketing.

Sharif Bala was born in 1930 from a family that claimed descent from the North African reformer Muḥammad b. ʿAbd al-Karīm al-Maghīlī (d. 1505), who visited Kano towards the end of the fifteenth century and founded a lineage of Muslim scholars and *shurafā'* (descendants of the Prophetic household). Sharif Bala's writing abilities were originally nurtured by assisting his father, a Qur'anic teacher, in the writing of Qur'anic verses on wooden slates to be given as *rubutun sha* (ink potions to be drunk as healing) to the family's religious clientele.[54] After memorising the Qur'an in his early teens, he wrote his first full copy of the Qur'an at age fifteen or, according to other narratives, twenty. Thereafter, as customary, he started to lend his services to various Sufi scholars and religious poets of Kano, penning copies of their writings to be reproduced as offset lithographic publications. In the early days of his career, he worked as a scribe for many Tijāni scholars. But unlike most of the calligraphers and publishers mentioned thus far in this chapter, Bala was not a Tijāni. Rather, he was a student of Qādiri scholars Nasiru Kabara (d. 1996) and Yusuf Makwarari (d. 2000). The former was the initiator of a Sufi revival that, while not comparable to the *Fayḍa Tijāniyya* in terms of its international reach, was its Qādiri equivalent as far as the northern Nigerian arena was concerned.[55] And parallel to what Ibrāhīm Niasse had done when he had pushed the Salgawa to take

54 Jibril 2018, 22.

55 The following reconstruction is based on information I collected during interviews with Bala Gabari made in August 2007, supplemented by further data provided by Jibril 2018, and by additional fieldwork conducted by Dahiru Lawan Muaz in August 2020.

control of the printing business, Nasiru Kabara encouraged his pupil, Gabari, to turn from a simple scribe into an independent publisher.[56]

Gabari's emancipation from the Kano publishers was a gradual process. Initially, thanks to the provision of capital provided by another student of Nasiru Kabara, he started to take his works for publication to Gaskiya Corporation (Zaria) and to Northern Maktabat Printing Press (Kano). He entrusted their distribution to a business associate, and controlled retail sales through two shops he established in the Islamic books section of the Kurmi market of Kano.[57] Later on, in 1971, he took a step further by traveling to Beirut, as other Kano-based publishers had started doing, and arranging for the printing of his first colour offset lithographic edition of the Qur'an (Fig. 11), in 50,000 copies, by the noted publisher Dar El Fikr. The final step in the process of Gabari's emancipation from the various actors of the book cycle in Kano, was the establishment by his son Munzali, in 1999, of the Mahir Sharif Bala Printing and Publishing Company.[58]

Before his death in 2016, Gabari had been able to pen about sixty different copies of the Qur'an, about a dozen of which have been published, in some cases in different editions. As I have argued elsewhere,[59] the popularity of the handwriting of Gabari superseded those of his peers due to the following set of aesthetic and functional features:

(a) An innovative style of writing, which maximised the angularity and regularity of the then fast-developing *kanawī* hand, bringing it closer to ancient monumental Kufic models. According to hagiographical accounts, this new writing style was divinely inspired to the calligrapher in a dream.[60]
(b) Maximizing the use of the marginal space by inserting numerous *harji* and *faḍā'il* notes that would appeal the public of *gardawa*. As an additional mark of innovation and modernity, the source of these notes is often referenced in his Qur'ans; for instance, most *faḍā'il* notes are acknowledged as being drawn from the book *Naʿt al-bidāyāt* by the Mauritanian Sufi Mā' al-ʿAynayn (d. 1910). As each edition displays different marginal notes, some of the buyers would have had an interest in purchasing a copy of every new edition.
(c) The presence of an additional formula (*mi'atān āya*), which I have not observed on other Nigerian editions of the Qur'an, marking every two hundred

56 Sources provide hagiographical accounts of how Bala Gabari's entry in the printing business was prompted by a prayer that Nasiru Kabara made for Gabari while holding a Qur'an penned by the latter (Abdullahi Uba Jibril, Kano, telephonic interview, 2 April 2021).
57 Jibril 2018, 26.
58 Jibril 2018, 55.
59 Brigaglia 2011, 61–83.
60 Jibril 2018, 23.

verses. This offered an additional advantage to students and memorisers interested in dividing the text according to a variety of possible portions.

(d) The presence of a final *duʿā' khatm al-Qur'ān* (prayer to be recited upon completion of a recitation), which would have come in as handy for both individual and collective recitation.

(e) Most importantly, all of Gabari's editions of the Qur'an are written in such a way that every *ḥizb* starts on the first line of the front page of a new folio. The sixty Qur'anic *ḥizb*-s are only approximately equal in length, so most *ḥizb* markers appeared, on the editions penned by earlier calligraphers, at various different points on a page (see for instance Figs 1 and 4). Calligraphers who wanted a new section to appear exactly on top of a new folio, were forced to leave a few blank lines in the verso of the final folio of the previous section. This was the case, for instance, in a popular lithographed Tunisian edition written by calligrapher al-Tijānī al-Muḥammadī, which is arranged in separate *juz'* (thirtieths). We know that Gabari was familiar with this edition, not only because it was common in Kano until the 1980s,[61] but also because at some point, he had sponsored a Kano scribe, Ɗan Maiwanki, to copy a Nigerian imitation of it. Published by Gabari, this circulated in Nigeria under the nickname *Shabīhu Tūnis* (the 'Tunisian look-alike').[62] The neater separation of each *juz'* from the following one, in al-Muḥammadī's original 'Tunisian Qur'an' and in its Nigerian 'look-alike', had obvious advantages for the frequent collective recitations where the various portions would be shared among the attendees (Fig. 12), if compared to previous editions where a *ḥizb* or *juz'* division would fall in the middle of a page. The editions published by Gabari from the 1970s onwards, however, have the further advantage of being written in such a way that the final word of every given *ḥizb* also coincides with the bottom corner of the

61 An invoice collected by Sani Yakubu Adam during his fieldwork shows that Kano bookseller Sani Adamu purchased 1,000 copies of this Qur'an from Tunisia in 1982 (Tunis Invoices, Sani Y. Adam personal archive, Kano).

62 I am profoundly thankful to Prof Abdullahi El Okene (Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria) for his generous gift of his personal copy of this edition. As an interesting additional anecdote that further illustrates the importance of ritual functions in the use of unbound Qur'anic editions, this copy was personally bound by El Okene in seven volumes, divided according to the conventional daily rhythm of Qur'anic recitation adopted by Ibrahim Niasse of Senegal. The latter, in fact, used to complete a full recitation in seven days, but followed a slightly different arrangement than the standard *subʿ* (seven parts) division, so as to achieve the effect of the initial Arabic letters of the seven daily portion of the Qur'an, if joined together, to give a particularly auspicious meaning.

verso of a folio (Fig. 13). The absence of any blank section on the page that precedes a new section increased the appeal of Gabari's Qur'ans, boosting the credentials of the calligrapher as the embodiment of perfect memorization, who was able to adjust the size of his writing in imperceptible ways and complete any given *ḥizb* on the desired spot.

(f) Strictly linked to innovation (e) above, are Gabari's experiments with a series of thickly written editions of the Qur'an wherein every individual *ḥizb* is realised either in one folio (recto and verso), in two folios, or in three folios. One example (from the one *ḥizb* per two folios edition) can be observed in Fig. 14.

The many editions of the Qur'an penned by Bala Gabari are an iconic embodiment of the Nigerian Qur'anic culture of late twentieth century. Perfectly rooted in an Arabic script tradition that prided itself of its archaic traits, his writing style enhanced the 'Kufic' look of the script, rendering Gabari's Qur'ans distinctive and recognizable as required by the modern market with its competitive dynamic. As we have seen, each edition also featured new technical or stylistic innovations, always devised in the light of the functional requirements of the public of *gardawa* and *alaramma*-s.

7 After the classics

Through the last five decades, the arts and the business of Qur'anic lithography in Nigeria have been marked primarily by the innovative writing style and the clever marketing strategies of Sharif Bala Gabari. Yet, other calligraphers have been able to find their niche in a market that today – notwithstanding visible signs of decay in the use of the Central Sudanic script as a consequence of the reforms of Qur'anic schooling – remains sizeable. At least a dozen publishers in Kano continue to market offset lithographic editions of the Qur'an,[63] compared to only five in the 1960s and none before the 1950s.

One example are two sons of Ayyuba Magoga (d. 1983), Barhama and Aminu. As we have seen above, in the 1960s Ayyuba had been a pioneer of the Islamic press in Kano. His son Barhama, born in 1963, studied the Qur'an in Maiduguri (1971–1981), with Goni Adamu Ɗan Kyallori. Upon his return to Kano, he was introduced to the printing business by his father. Today, Barhama

63 Aminu Ayyuba Magoga, interviewed by Sani Yakubu Adam and Dahiru Lawan Muaz, Kano, 12 August 2020.

publishes offset editions of books penned by various scribes, but whenever he wants to launch a new edition of the Qur'an, he prefers to use his own handwriting, relying on the help of assistants for voweling the consonantal text so as to minimise time. In this way, he is able to complete a copy in as little as three weeks, as opposed to the three–six months it normally takes a Nigerian calligrapher to complete a full manuscript. So far, he has copied and published four different editions in his own handwriting. One of his innovations consists in writing in such a way that the end of every page coincides with the end of a Qur'anic verse. This is obviously inspired by the success of the Gabari's editions where end-of-page and end-of-*ḥizb* coincide. Currently,[64] Barhama is busy with a fifth copy, which will be the first to feature the numbering of the verses in Latin numerals. The rationale for this additional innovation is that with the spread of cell phones and social media, the Nigerian public has become more accustomed to Latin numerals than to Arabic ones. Barhama hopes that this will guarantee the success of the new edition: while his first Qur'an, in 2009, was published in 3,000 copies, and his fourth one, in the late 2010s, in 6,000 copies, the fifth edition is planned to be released in as many as 60,000 copies.

As for Barhama's junior brother Aminu (b. 1982), he penned his first complete Qur'an in 2000 and published a first edition *c.* 2014 (Fig. 15). This was followed by numerous other editions (1–3 per year), each issued in 5,000–10,000 copies. Unlike his brother, Aminu did not study in Borno, but was entirely educated in Kano. As in the past, being integrated in the networks of Qur'anic schools continues to be the key to a calligrapher's success. As Barhama and Aminu supply the massive Qur'anic schools run by fellow Tijāni scholars they can count on yearly orders of several thousand copies for every new edition they supply.

The most innovative calligrapher of Kano, perhaps, is currently Abbas Musa Rijiyar Lemo. Born in 1970, Abbas left home before reaching the age of 7 to enrol in a Qur'anic school in Funtua (Katsina), where he lived for ten years. Thereafter, he followed various Tijāni teachers in Maiduguri, Kano, Bajoga (Bauchi), Zaria, Maradi (Niger Republic). From 2003 to date, seven of his Qur'anic manuscripts have been published. Less regular and angular than Gabari's or Barhama Ayyuba's hands, Abbas's writing style alternates ultra-thick horizontal strokes and ultra-thin vertical strokes to achieve the desired effect, an exemplary illustration of *kanawī* style. His 2008 edition is 786 pages long, corresponding to the numerical value of the *basmala* (the introductory formula of all but one Qur'anic Suras) according to the Arabic traditional numerology that is particularly

64 Barhama Ayyuba Magoga, interviewed by Sani Yakubu Adam and Dahiru Lawan Muaz, 13 August 2020.

in vogue among Sufis. This was certainly not a coincidence, but an attempt by the calligrapher to achieve the blessings of the *basmala* to guarantee divine acceptance and public recognition for his work.

Abbas's most curious innovation in the tradition, however, is his choice to use different colours in the consonantal body of the text: red for the names of God, brown for the names of angels, and green for the names of the prophets, in addition to the customary black ink used for ordinary text (Fig. 16). The use of these colours can be found in some Middle eastern editions of the Qur'an that the calligrapher has certainly seen. His inspiration to adopt this change in the local calligraphic tradition, however, reportedly was the result of a dream.[65] To add to the stylistic innovation in Abbas's writing, in the few instances where the Qur'an mentions the name of Prophet Muhammad, the latter is distinguished from those of other prophets by bigger-sized writing and colourful decorations (Fig. 17). As eye-catching as these experiments are, it is not clear to what extent they have been received with favour by the Nigerian public: as Abbas admits, in fact, 'the *gardawa* do not accept easily any change that is brought in by a new calligrapher.'[66]

8 Conclusions

While the Kano calligraphers were actively engaged in the many experiments described in this chapter, their Bornuan counterparts, who consider themselves the veritable custodians of the arts of Qur'anic calligraphy in the region, largely remained attached to the old ways and in most cases resisted any change to the practice of calligraphy, including refraining from signing any manuscript with the name of the calligrapher and from publishing it. Literally thousands of Qur'anic manuscripts have continued to be produced in Borno, either as diplomas submitted to certify the ability of a scholar in the process of gaining the title of *goni*, or as richly decorated, luxury items written by skilled calligraphers for individual clients.[67] But no initiative to publish a lithographic edition of a Bornuan Qur'an has been taken so far, and Bornuan Qur'ans have continued to circulate anonymously in unicum copies.

65 Abbas Musa Rijiyar Lemo, interviewed by Sani Yakubu Adam and Dahiru Lawan Muaz, 18 September 2020.

66 Abbas Musa Rijiyar Lemo, interviewed by Sani Yakubu Adam and Dahiru Lawan Muaz, 18 September 2020.

67 For an example, see Mutai and Brigaglia 2017.

The conservative cultural attitude of the Bornuan Qur'anic calligraphers, which stands in sharp contrast to the innovation that characterizes the Kano arena, has been partly reversed by a recent initiative of the Yobe State Government to publish a digital edition of the Qur'an in a *barnāwī* font that was created ad hoc from the handwriting of a calligrapher of Borno (Fig. 18). The handwriting selected by the committee after a selection process among dozens of active Bornuan calligraphers, was that of Musa Ali Umar (Kagoni), a forty-year-old calligrapher who, at the time of the publication (2018), had already penned over forty copies of the Qur'an, always as unicum copies for individual customers. This highly innovative experiment has led, in turn, to new ramifications in Kano, where a digital *kanawī* font modelled on the handwriting of Sharīf Bala Gabari has been created and used for a brand-new monthly magazine in Arabic-script Hausa (*ʿajamī*), *Tabarau mai hangen nesa*, 'The spectacles that see far'.

From the *Mai Belt* in the 1950s, to the Bornuan digital Qur'an in 2018, the history of the Qur'anic printing industry in Nigeria shows the different ways in which the actors of a pre-modern book culture (scribes and book traders) have gradually taken control of a process of technological change that could have potentially disrupted their business, creating in the process a hybrid aesthetics and opening new market opportunities.

The making of the exceptionally prolific world of calligraphers, printers and publishers that have animated this market, has to be understood against the backdrop of the following set of intertwining cultural, social and technological factors. Firstly, the presence of a calligraphic tradition of deep roots and high symbolic prestige such as the Bornuan one, has continued to function as a relatively independent regional pole of Qur'anic culture up to present times. Secondly, the widespread use in Nigeria of a distinctive variant of Arabic script (the Central Sudanic) has limited the marketability of typeset books imported from the Middle East and created a niche where the skills of local scribes could continue to persist and even to thrive. Thirdly, the pervasiveness and resilience of a culture of Qur'anic memorization that, based as it was on a set of didactic and ritual conventions that provided a functional horizon for the art of calligraphy, created both opportunities and boundaries to the creativity of individual calligraphers. Finally, the commercial boom and the concurrent Islamic literary revival experienced by Kano in the late colonial period, provided the economic and social context for an expansive network of calligraphers and publishers to market their products.

Collectively, the above factors have contributed to create a seeming paradox whereby 'new' book printing technologies have resulted in a boom of 'ancient' scribal and calligraphic arts. The success of individual calligraphers, in the

above context, is based on their ability to balance innovation (in a highly competitive market that encourages each calligrapher to stand out from others) and tradition, in a market constrained by the tastes of a public whose perception of what makes an edition of the Qur'an *beautiful* and *useful*, is largely shaped by inherited cultural habits.

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Fig. 1: A page of a Qur'an in the handwriting of Rabiu Ɗantiŋki, copied 1339H [1920-1921], publ. (third edition) Kano: al-Shaykh Isḥāq Rābiʿ, 1449H/2017. © Isiyaka Rabiu Dantinki.

Fig. 2: A page of a handwritten Qur'an (copyist anonymous) from early 20th century Kano. Verona: Alberto Nicheli collection. © Michele Stanzione.

Fig. 3: *Subu'i* marker on a page of a Qur'an in the handwriting of Rabiu Ɗantiŋki, copied 1339H [1920-1921], publ. (third edition) Kano: al-Shaykh Isḥāq Rābiʿ, 1449H/2017. © Isiyaka Rabiu Dantinki.

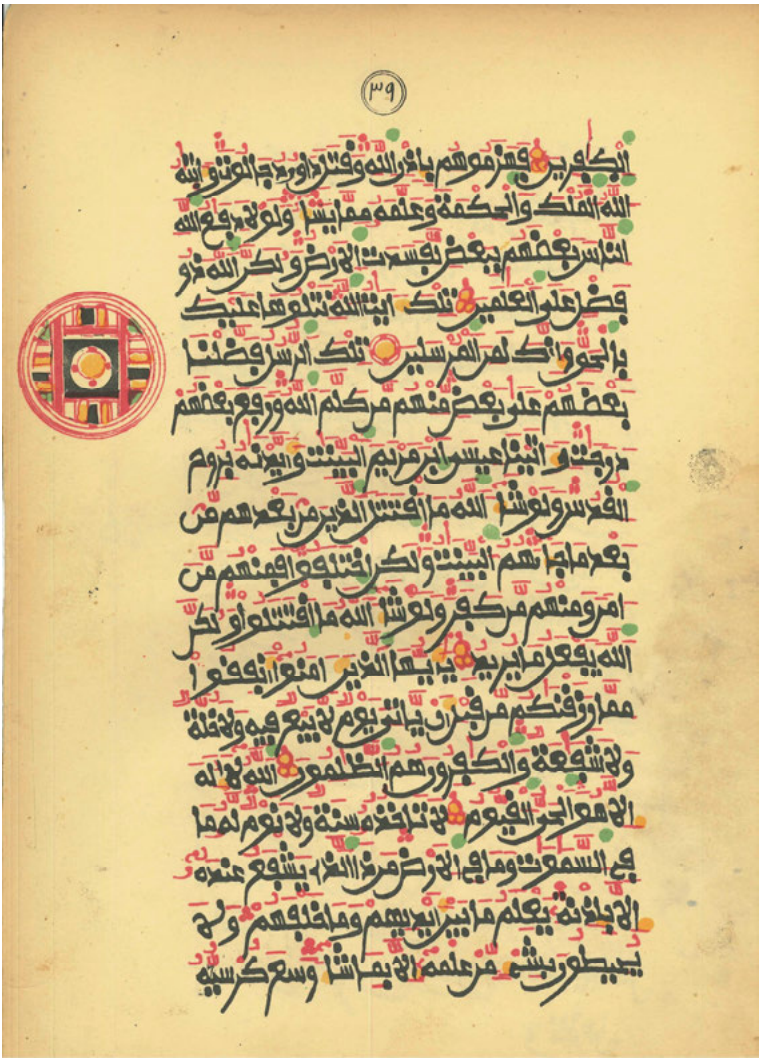


Fig. 4: The *Mai Belt* Qur’an, originally publ. Kano: Sanusi Ɗantata, 195[-], republ. Kano: Balā b. al-Shaykh Muḥammad al-Rābiʿ, *s.a.* © Bala Rabiu Dantinki.

Fig. 5: A page of a Qur'an in the handwriting of Sharif Bala Zaitawa, publ. Kano: Abdullahi Yassar, 1960. © Abdullahi Yassar.

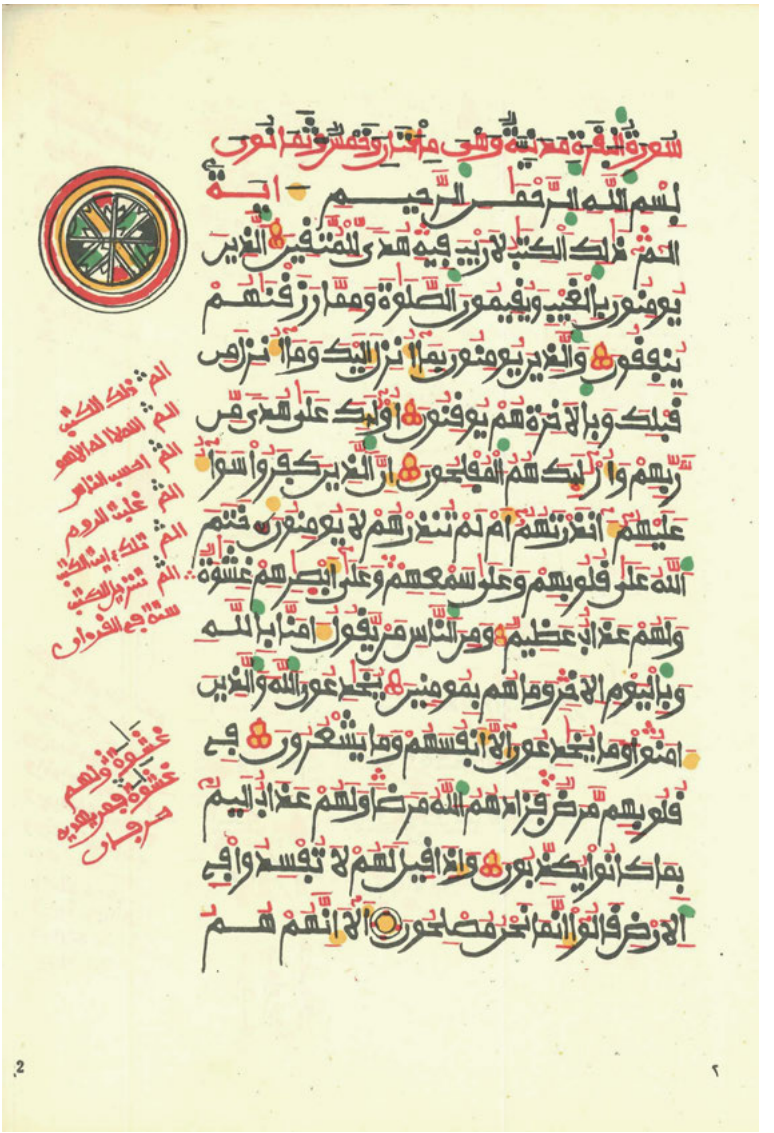


Fig. 6: A page of a Qur'an in the handwriting of Sharif Bala Zaitawa, publ. Kano: Abdullahi Yassar, *s.a.* [*c.* 1960s-1970s]. © Abdullahi Yassar.

Fig. 7: A page of a Qur'an in the handwriting of Abubakar Ɗan Bukka, publ. Kano: Zubayr Muḥammad al-Rābiʿ Ɗantinƙi, 1962. © Zubayr Rabiu Dantinki.

Fig. 8: A page of a Qur'an in the handwriting of Salisu Kore, publ. Kano: Sani Adamu & Hassan Inuwa, *s.a.* © Sani Adamu & Hassan Inuwa.

Fig. 9: A page of a Qur'an with *harji* notes on the margins, in the handwriting of Salisu Kore, publ. Kano: Sani Adamu & Hassan Inuwa, *s.a.* © Sani Adamu & Hassan Inuwa.

Fig. 10: A page of a Qur'an in the handwriting of Salisu Kore, publ. Kano: Sharif Bala Gabari, *s.a.* © Sharif Bala Gabari.

Fig. 11: A page of a Qur'an in the handwriting of Sharif Bala Gabari, publ. Beirut: Dar El Fikr, 1971. © Dar El Fikr.

Fig. 12: End of *ḥizb* 12 and beginning of *ḥizb* 13 in the *Shabīhu Tūnis*, copied by Ɗan Maiwanki *c.* 970s-1980s, publ. Kano: Sharif Bala Gabari, *s.a.* © Sharif Bala Gabari.

Fig. 13: End of *ḥizb* 12 and beginning of *ḥizb* 13 in a Qur'an in the handwriting of Sharif Bala Gabari, copied 2006-2007, publ. Kano: Sharif Bala Gabari, 2008. © Sharif Bala Gabari.

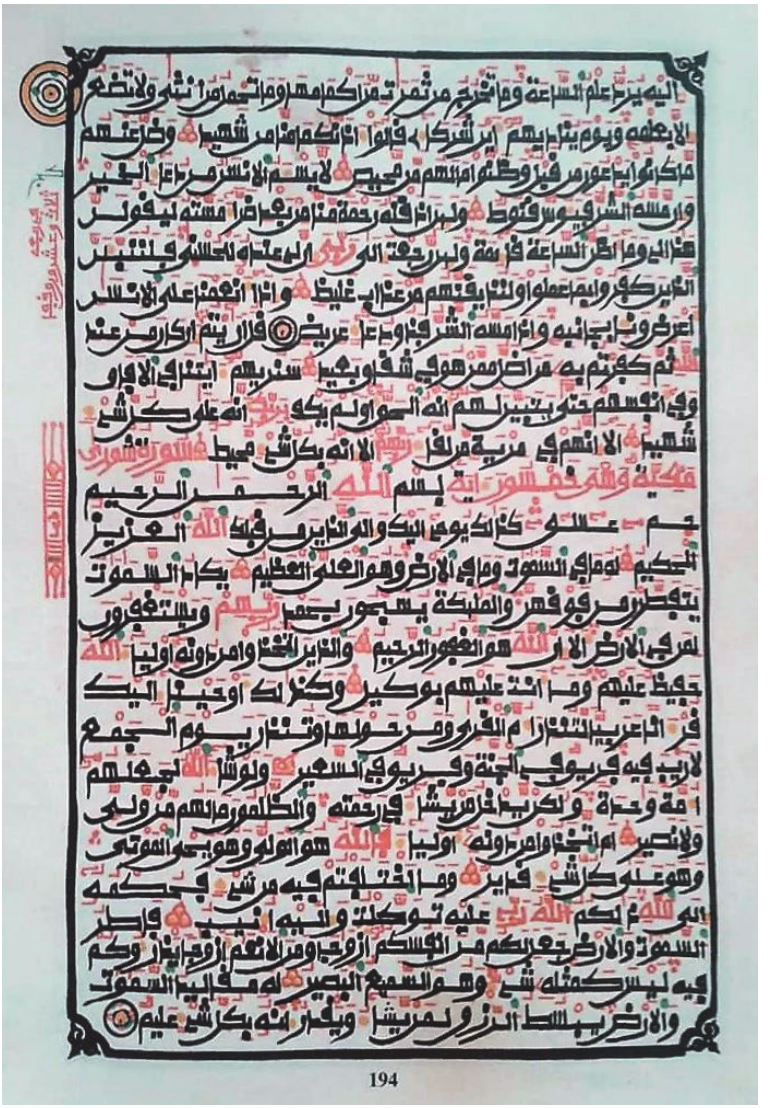
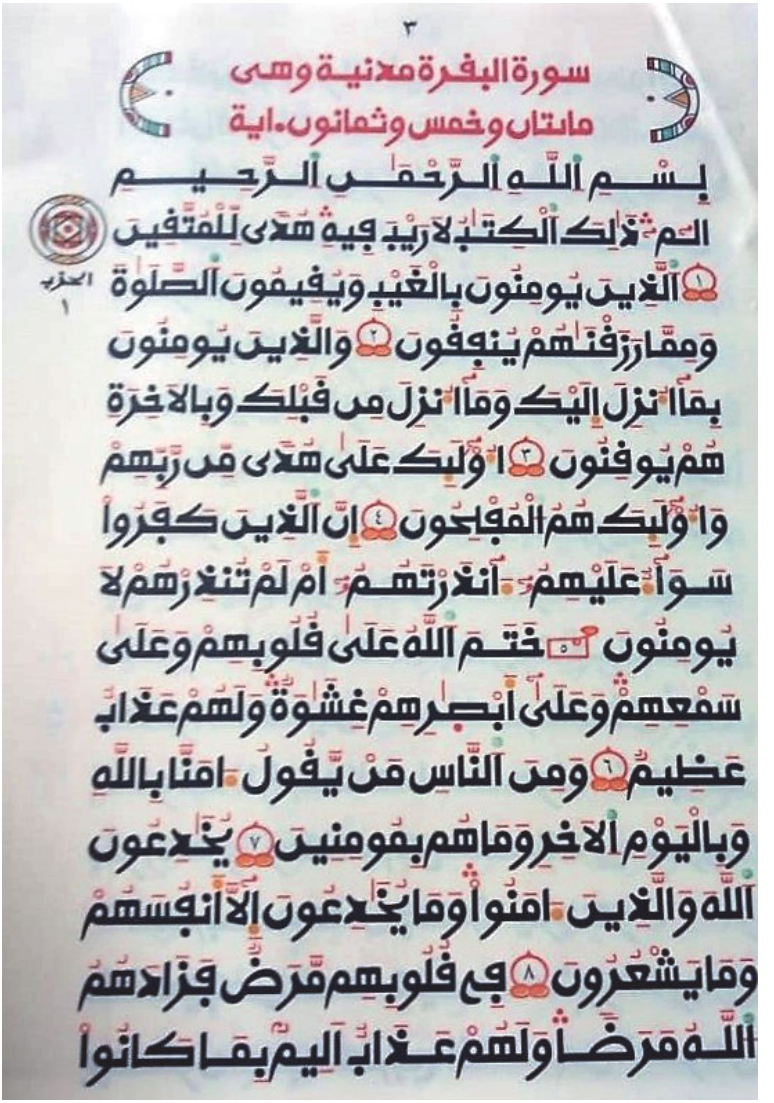


Fig. 14: A page of a Qur'an in the handwriting of Sharif Bala Gabari, one *ḥizb* each two folios edition, copied 2011, publ. Kano: Sharif Bala Gabari, 2011. © Sharif Bala Gabari.

Fig. 15: A page of a Qur'an in the handwriting of Aminu Ayyuba Magoga, publ. Kano: Muḥammad al-Amīn Ayyūb, *c.* 2014. © Aminu Ayyuba Magoga.

Fig. 16: A page of a Qur’an with names of God in red ink, names of angels in brown, and names of prophets in green, in the handwriting of Abbas Musa Rijiyar Lemo; publ. Kano: Muḥyī al-Dīn b. ‘Abdallāh Yassār, 2008. © Muhyiddin Abdallah Yassar.

Fig. 17: A page of a Qur'an with special design for the name of Prophet Muhammad, in the handwriting of Abbas Musa Rijiyar Lemo; publ. Kano: Muḥyī al-Dīn b. 'Abdallāh Yassār, 2008. © Muhyiddin Abdallah Yassar.



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