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Transient Texts: Erasable Writing on Wood, Sand, and Metal in Northern Nigerian Islam

Abstract: Based mainly on ethnographic research carried out in Qur'anic schools and in private Islamic teaching circles, this chapter provides a description of writing practices on three distinct erasable surfaces – wood, sand, and metal – in the context of northern Nigerian Islam. We can broadly divide these writing practices into two categories: pedagogical and occult. In both cases, the use of traditional writing supports should not be dismissed as the residual vestige of a long-gone past but rather should be understood either as functional to the technical goals of the pedagogical system in which the practice is embedded or as reflecting the symbolic logic of the religious practices that it facilitates.

1 Introduction

While the fortunes of clay and wax tablets are long over, erasable writing practices persist in the vibrant environment of West African Qur'anic schools, providing a unique opportunity to study these techniques in a living tradition. The history of erasable writing surfaces in the Muslim world traces back to the inception of Islam, where it was rooted, in turn, in the cultural and religious practices of the ancient Middle East. The erasable wooden tablet has been by far the most ubiquitous tool of basic literacy skills transmission throughout the Muslim world. In the broader context of classical Muslim manuscript cultures, its use overlapped with that of non-erasable surfaces (or, at least, of surfaces for which erasure and rewriting was not the norm), such as parchment and, later, paper; in most cases, it was also propaedeutic to the latter. Islamic theology developed from Qur'anic references to the idea of a two-stage 'descent' (AR *tanazzul*) of the divine revelation: first from a heavenly 'tablet' (*lawḥ*; Q85: 21–22: 'indeed, it is a majestic recitation | preserved in a Tablet'), down to the angelic realm in the form of 'folios' (*ṣuḥuf*; Q80: 13–15: 'in honoured folios | elevated, purified | (written) by the hands of angelic scribes'); and then, from the latter, through the mediation of Gabriel, to a human prophet. These theological speculations nurtured an imagination that imbued both the tablet and the folios with a sacred character and prompted their

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use in a pedagogy of Qur'anic literacy with deep and wide-reaching cultural meanings.[1]

Regional studies on the history of the book in the Middle East,[2] Egypt,[3] Ottoman Turkey,[4] the Indian subcontinent,[5] the Maghreb,[6] and Central Asia[7] tend to date the beginning of the decline of classical Muslim manuscript cultures to the early, the mid, or the late nineteenth century, depending on the individual region. As the increased acceptance of print technologies, favoured by the availability of cheap paper, started to impact Muslim societies to a large scale, the nineteenth century also witnessed the transformation of the classical Islamic pedagogical methods. This implied, among other things, the virtual disappearance of the wooden tablet from Muslim institutions of primary learning. In the Maghreb, the process was somewhat slower as compared to the Middle East, the Indian subcontinent, and Ottoman Turkey: in the Qur'anic schools of Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia, the wooden tablet was still predominant in the mid twentieth century.[8]

However, in Sub-Saharan West Africa and parts of East Africa – where the history of the Islamic book has followed a different timeline and the print revolution's impact on local Muslim manuscript cultures has been less pervasive[9] – we can observe a notable exception. Classical manuscript cultures, of which the tablet

1 For a phenomenological approach to the use of the tablet in traditional Qur'anic education, see Brigaglia 2017.

2 Atiyeh (ed.) 1995; Sadgrove (ed.) 2004; Roper (ed.) 2013.

3 Nuṣayr 1994; Hanna 2004.

4 Strauss 1992; İhsanoğlu and Aynur 2007.

5 Green 2006.

6 Abdulrazak 1990.

7 Khalid 1994.

8 For recent documentaries on the use of the wooden tablet in Qur'anic education in Algeria, see Canal Algérie, 'Ain Salah: Tradition et lecture du Coran au 27 ème jour du ramdhan', video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jcEoQq11VE4> (Aïn Salah, 2018). In Libya, see Al Arabiya, عمرها 7 قرون.. "العربية" في أقدم كتاتيب تحفيظ القرآن على ألواح الزيتون في ليبيا, video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0sPWxg3Z9uo> (Tripoli, 2023); Associated Press, 'Libyan Children Memorize Quran Using Old Method', video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M7RUunxBpo4> (Misrata, 2023); and Libya Al Ahrar, رحلتي مع الألواح إقصة كتّاب, video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=czWIIXvJF34> (Zliten, 2025). In Morocco (region of Chefchaouen), see Khalid Mouna, 'Le maître du Coran', video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BYxTsicmO3A> (2019). All pages were accessed on 2 January 2025. All these examples, however, appear to be marginal today in the general context of the North African countries.

9 In part, this observation is valid also with reference to the wider world of Islam. In fact, recent studies (Reese (ed.) 2022) often show that manuscript cultures and print cultures have tended to overlap in the Muslim world for longer than previously thought, and that the shift from the first to the second has never been an abrupt one.

is a central component, remain alive, especially in West Africa, to this very day.[10] Muslim West Africa thus offers the ideal location for an ethnographic study conceived in the framework of a cross-cultural project of erasable media in manuscript cultures, but focused on a living, observable tradition.

All studies on the traditional pedagogy of Muslim West Africa and its transformation – its adaptation to modern contexts, or lack thereof[11] – have acknowledged in the region a striking persistence of classical manuscript practices and, in particular, of the wooden tablet as the preferred support of Qur'anic literacy skills transmission, calligraphy and memorisation practices. But while many, and especially the earlier ones among the above-mentioned studies, predicted an inexorable decline of the wooden tablet under the impact of modern pedagogical methods, the use of the wooden tablet, while certainly less ubiquitous today, continues to show a surprising resilience. This phenomenon is, in most cases, discussed in the light of categories such as the economic exploitation and social deprivation of Qur'anic pupils,[12] or, more sympathetically, of social theories of marginality.[13] Studies of the Qur'anic West African schools framed as anthropologies of religion or anthropologies of literacy, or both, are comparatively rarer.[14] Building on some of the insights of the latter studies, our first contention is that the persistence of Islamic manuscript practices in contemporary West Africa is not to be explained exclusively through an investigation of the failure of educational policies in postcolonial African states; rather, we must take into account the fundamental fact that the use of erasable surfaces, like wooden tablets, metallic tablets, and sand tablets, is functional to the goals of the pedagogical system in which it is embedded. Such goals being at the same time technical and cultural, our analysis moves back and forth between the description of the techniques and the cultural meanings that their users associate with them.

10 Gaudio (ed.) 2002; Krätli and Lydon (eds) 2011; Brigaglia and Nobili (eds) 2017; Brigaglia 2022.

11 Santerre 1973; Khayar 1976; Sanankoua 1985; Cissé 1992; Hassan 1992; Brenner 2001; Launay (ed.) 2016.

12 For some examples, see Cruise O'Brien 1970; Zoumanigui 2016; Hansen 2016; Pellizzari and Sylla (eds) 2014.

13 Loimeier 2002; Bah-Lalya 2015; Hoechner 2018.

14 See, for some examples, Mommersteeg 2011; Tamari 2016; Nur 2017 (especially Chaps 3 and 4); Nur 2018. For a long-term history approach, see Ware 2014.

2 A note on method

Our paper is based mainly on ethnographic observation carried out intermittently over the last two years (2023–2024) in northern Nigeria. Many studies have observed the dynamism of traditional manuscript cultures in contemporary northern Nigeria – exceptional even for West African standards.[15] By way of introduction, it might be worthwhile mentioning that, in the region, the arts of calligraphy and manuscript culture are not taught as a distinct curriculum but rather transmitted primarily as part and parcel of traditional training in Qur'anic studies.

Nigerian Qur'anic schools continue to be characterised by a high level of mobility, though certainly to a lesser degree if compared to the age that preceded the creation of the colonial boundaries. After completing their studies, scholars may decide to migrate to new lands to establish a school of their own, for a number of reasons that include financial feasibility but also, in more recent decades, safety concerns in a context of increasing insecurity (nomads vs settlers violence, Jihadism, and ethnic conflict). Students regularly travel outside their native towns and villages to attend a Qur'anic school, due to the benefits traditionally associated to 'travelling in search of knowledge' (AR *al-safar fī ṭalab al-ʿilm*); and, after attending a certain school for a number of years, they are likely to move to a new one elsewhere so as to diversify their sources. All of this means that these schools tend to be multilingual: languages like Arabic, Fulfulde, Hausa, and Kanuri (as well as, in certain regions, Ebira, Igala, Nupe, Yoruba, etc.) are contiguous and even overlapping. As the present paper is based almost entirely on observations made in the Hausa-speaking context of Kano and its surroundings, we refer to the Hausa lexicon to identify writing tools and practices. To refer to the Qur'anic school itself, however, instead of the generic Hausa term *makarantar allo* ('school of the [wooden] tablet'), which refers to any primary institution of traditional Qur'anic learning, but which is used mainly for part-time institutions attended primarily by children from the surrounding neighbourhood or village, we have

15 For an overview of Qur'anic arts in northern Nigeria, see Hassan 1992. For two attempts to document the work of contemporary calligraphers from Borno, see Dmitry Bondarev, 'Borno Calligraphy: Creating Hand-written Qur'an in Northeast Nigeria', video <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ELQRtiteNS8> (2015) (accessed on 6 June 2024); Mutai and Brigaglia 2017. For the short biography of a Kano calligrapher, Brigaglia 2010; for an account of the transformation of the calligraphic arts of northern Nigeria in contemporary times, Kurfi 2017; for an account of the ramifications of Qur'anic calligraphy on amulets and talisman, Adamu 2020; for a photographic volume derived from an exhibition of Qur'anic and talismanic artefacts from northern Nigeria, Brigaglia and Pezzoli (eds) 2021.

opted for the term *tsangaya,* a Hausa loanword from Kanuri. In Hausa-speaking contexts, a *tsangaya* indicates a bigger institution, often located in rural or suburban areas, where emphasis is laid on Qur'anic memorisation rather than simple Qur'anic literacy, and where students enrol on a full-time basis. A *tsangaya* offers (often modest) residential housing for the students and provides a unique socialising environment, where the Qur'an as a text, and the literacy skills associated with its study, constitute virtually the sole cultural horizon of the students. The *tsangayu* (pl. of *tsangaya*), thus, are also places where specific cultural practices and technical lexicons develop, creating a sort of confine between the 'in world' of the students and the wider society of the outsiders, even if the two share the same generic Hausa Muslim culture. In preparing this chapter, we have observed with some continuity, on several occasions in 2023 and 2024, a *tsangaya* located in the Chedi Ingawa neighbourhood of Bagadawa, a small settlement near Dawanau, about 27 km north-west of Kano. The *tsangaya* is run by *Buna*[16] Ɗalha, a Qur'anic specialist who originates from Zaria.[17] The information we gathered on the advanced teaching practices that take place in contexts more restricted than the *tsangaya* were collected through observation and interviews with *Malam* A. L. M. and *Malam* Misbahu Rabiu Inuwa, whose priceless assistance we gratefully acknowledge.

In the context of the northern Nigerian *tsangaya*, erasable writing practices can be broadly divided into either of two categories: pedagogical (H *karatu*), or esoteric or occult (H *asraru*). The two, however, often overlap in the concrete lifeworld of the Qur'anic students and specialists, so the division between them should be understood as a blurred one.[18] This does not mean that, in wider con-

16 The term *buna* (possibly derived from the Hausa term for 'a crazy horse', or from the Arabic verb *bāna,* 'to stand out') is a typical example of the specific cultural jargon of the *tsangaya*, where it is used as nickname or title to describe a person totally engrossed in his (more rarely, her) Qur'anic recitation. A *buna* has the habit of intermittently spending several days reciting the Qur'an without any break, any sleep, or any food.

17 We are thankful to *Buna* Ɗalha, as well as all his students, who welcomed us to their school, answered our questions, and allowed us to video-record their practices. A special thank goes to Goni Idris for his guidance. A video, made during our fieldwork, of *Buna* Ɗalha penning a handwritten copy of the Qur'an on paper is available here: <https://youtube.com/shorts/ZzoQrM_36Bc> (accessed on 12 January 2025). Our video of the premises of the *tsangaya* is here: <https://youtu.be/_bwXwsPnj_0> (accessed on 12 January 2025).

18 It would be a mistake to interpret this overlap as the result of an 'African' substratum swerving the 'religious' towards the 'magical'. On the contrary, such a continuity between the 'liturgical Qur'an' and the 'talismanic Qur'an' (we borrow the terms from Hamès 1997) is a reflection of the degree to which the world of the *tsangaya* is rooted within classical Islamic thought. A recent wave of studies has shown the extent to which the interest in the occult was, in the premodern

temporary Hausa society, there do not exist various forms of Islamic discourses that are sceptical or critical of occult Islamic practices, nor that *every* type of occult manipulation of the Qur'anic text is endorsed by *every* Qur'anic scholar issued from the *tsangaya* system. The discussion over what is licit and what is illicit is a fundamental register of all Islamic discourses, and the world of the *tsangaya* is no exception. We do not, however, consider this level of discursive analysis relevant to the purposes of the present contribution.

Moving to the supports of erasable writing practices, wooden tablets (H *allon karatu*; literally, 'tablet for studying') are used in the pedagogical realm for Qur'anic lessons, where students write with natural inks, memorise, and wash off the content of a daily lesson. While less ubiquitous, sand tablets (H *allon yashi*) are also used in sessions of higher learning that involve drawing signs meant to simplify the oral teaching of specific aspects of Islamic jurisprudence. In the domain of occult practices, the use of 'talismanic' wooden tablets (H *allon sha*; literally, 'tablets for drinking') involve writing esoteric formulas for the petitioner to wash off and drink; sand tablets involve the writing of elaborate alphanumerical calculations aimed at extracting certain formulas intended to produce 'seals' or talismans, as well as, in Islamic divination (AR *khaṭṭ al-raml*), the drawing of complex structures of lines and dots to derive insights into the petitioner's future. Finally, metallic tablets (H *allon karfe*) are used only as the support of very specific talismanic recipes.

The following section is subdivided according to the rewritable support used for either pedagogical or occult practices: starting from the wooden tablet, we move to the sand tablet, and, finally, to the metallic tablet.

3 Wooden tablets, reed pens, and inks

> The first student that accepted knowledge through learning, not by virtue of (his) essence, was the First Intellect. He [God] commanded it to write what He taught in the Preserved Tablet that He created from it. This is why He named it a 'Calam'.[19]

The main goal of this section is to complement existing research on the wooden tablet's use in the pedagogical practices of the West African Qur'anic school, by

Muslim world, part and parcel of the conceptual horizon of mainstream theologians and philosophers. See, for instance, Melvin-Koushki and Gardiner (eds) 2017; Saif et al. (eds) 2020.

19 Muḥyī al-Dīn Ibn 'Arabī (d. 1240 CE), quoted in Chittick 1998, 153.

providing a summary of our observations on the practices of writing, erasure, and rewriting on wood in the contemporary *tsangayu* of northern Nigeria.

The *tsangaya*'s main goal is teaching the student a perfect memorisation of the Qur'anic text.[20] Paper-printed Qur'ans are inexpensive and easily available nowadays in northern Nigeria, and in the Qur'anic schools, they are commonly used for recitation purposes. From the pedagogical point of view, however, it is easy to see why many in the region continue to consider the tablet a better support for memorisation. While the folios of a manuscript or pages of a bound book, in fact, tend to be erratic, 'luring' the student, as it were, to flip them and jump from one section to another, the body of a tablet, filled only with the manageable portion of a daily lesson, induces a resolute commitment to achieving a firm memorisation before deleting the text.

3.1 Wooden tablets

The wooden tablet comes in various shapes and materials. In Hausaland, the preferred shapes (illustrated in Fig. 1 in the two main variants: for beginners, H *allon ƙolo*, and for advanced students, H *allon gardi*) suggest an anthropomorphic symbolism which, in our opinion, might be intentional, implying an allusion to complex metaphysical notions.[21] As far as the material is concerned, the wood of the Egyptian balsam tree (SN *balanites aegyptica*; H *aduwa*) is reputedly the best option, as it has high solidity and durability, a smooth and bright surface, and low permeability to ink. Also attested, however, is the use of cheaper options, like wood from the jackal berry or 'African ebony' (SN *diospyros mespiliformis*; H *kanya*); shea tree (SN *vitellaria paradoxa*; H *kaɗanya*); neem tree (SN *azadirachta indica*; H *darbejiya*); black plum tree (SN *vitex doniana*; H *dīnya*); and *Commiphora kerstingii* (H *ararrabi*).[22] All the cheaper options, collectively, are known in Hausa as *farin allo* (literally, 'white tablet'), and they are immediately distinguishable from the *allon aduwa* ('Egyptian balsam tablet') by their lighter colour, as opposed to the yellowish colour of the *aduwa* wood, and by their much lighter weight compared to an *allon aduwa* of the same size.

After every use – that is, after the script on the tablet has been read up to a hundred or even two hundred times – the student of the *tsangaya* washes the Qur'anic writing off the *allo*. As the washed-off solution of water and ink contains

20 On the importance of memorisation in classical Islamic culture, see Eickelman 1978.

21 See Brigaglia 2017.

22 Authors' fieldwork, 2023 and 2024.

the word of God, it must be kept separate from ritually impure substances (urine, faeces, blood, etc.): every *tsangaya* has several ground slopes, often near a tree, reserved for discarding the washed-off ink.[23] The *allo*'s surface may be sanded before being used again. From time to time, when the surface starts to darken due to the gradual absorption of ink, it is covered with a coating of bright limestone (H *farar kasa*); this is needed, in particular, for the *allo* of lesser quality woods, which, being more permeable to ink than the *aduwa* wood, tends to darken after every use.

The tablet (H *allon sha*) that is reserved for writing talismanic recipes that will be 'drunk' (or, in certain cases, used for a bath) by the petitioner does not normally undergo any treatment like sanding or coating. That is because, in this case, the text is not meant to be read but simply washed off and ingested; brightness and clarity are not an issue. As a consequence, with time, the *allon sha* will gradually imbibe the ink that, in each successive usage, is written on and then washed off its surface, literally dozens of times a day. The *allon sha*, thus, has a characteristic dark shade that makes it immediately distinguishable from the *allon karatu* (see, respectively, Figs 3 and 2). Moreover, due to its more intensive usage, the surface of a 'talismanic tablet' often looks irregular and 'humpy'. In Yorubaland, south-west of Hausaland, to distinguish it further from the *allon karatu*, the *allon sha* is coated in black paint before being sold, as attested by the images reproduced in Moshood M. Jimbah's volume on Arabic manuscripts in the Ilorin Emirate.[24]

Tablets of various qualities are manufactured and sold by several dealers in Kano. One of the biggest dealers, located in the Kofar Wambai market (Fig. 4), sells an average of 3,000 tablets monthly.[25] Until a fairly recent past, when virtually all Muslim children attended Qur'anic school, the top-selling items were the small *farin allo* for beginners and the medium-sized *allon aduwa* for advanced students. Today, on the contrary, the top-selling item is by far the decorated wooden tablet (*allon zayyana*; Fig. 5) that is awarded as a diploma to the students who complete the first cycle of Qur'anic studies. Today, only a subsection of Kano children regularly attend a *tsangaya* and use a normal *allo* daily; the use of the decorated tablet

23 For a video recording of the students of the *tsangaya* of Bagadawa washing off their wooden tablets, see <https://youtu.be/q4TtrUg3QqY> (accessed on 12 January 2025).

24 Jimbah (ed.) 2019, 40–41. We owe to personal communication with Moshood M. Jimbah (December 2024) the information that such tablets are not made of a dark black wood but coated in black paint.

25 *Malam* Nasiru Mai Allo, dealer in wooden tablets and other Qur'anic writing materials, Kofar Wambai market, Kano (interview with Dahir Lawan Mu'az, Kano, 12 December 2024).

as a certificate, however, has been retained by most of the city's private Islamic schools, as well as by the state schools, where the Qur'an is taught on printed books as part of the mandatory class 'Islamic Religious Knowledge'. This means that, whenever any secondary school class in Kano completes the first cycle of Qur'anic studies, the dealer will receive an order for several dozen *allon zayyana*.

Fig. 1: The preferred shape of the wooden tablet in Hausaland, in different sizes for students of different levels and ages.

Fig. 2: A senior student of the *tsangaya* of Bagadawa holding his *allon karatu* (note the writing style: an original form of *kanawī* with elongation of certain letters).

Fig. 3: A senior student of the *tsangaya* of Bagadawa writing on an *allon sha* (talismanic wooden tablet).

Fig. 4: The market stall of *Malam* Nasir Mai Allo in Kano. In the foreground, a cheap variety of *farin allo* is being crafted.

Fig. 5: An *allon zayyana* from the Qur'anic school of *Malam* Ali Katsina (Dorayi, Kano); photograph courtesy of Black Tarantella (Caserta).

3.2 Reed pens

The reed pen (H *alkalami*) is usually very simple, and every student of a Nigerian *tsangaya* is able to cut their own using a simple razor blade. The pen is made from the middle section of the dried stalks of gamba grass (SN *andropogon gayanus*; H *gamba*) or from those of the various corns harvested in the region: millet (H *gero*), Guinea corn, and sorghum (H *dawa*). Gamba grass is considered the best in terms of balanced ink absorption and release, but the one harvested in the dry savanna of Kano State tends to be thin and fragile. Therefore, alternative options – such as the gamba grass harvested in the wetter areas of the Nigerian Middle Belt – are often preferred for younger pupils, who tend to break the point while writing unless they use a more solid pen. Advanced students often guard their reed pens in narrow pen cases (H *korami*; Fig. 6) made of palm tree leaves (H *kaba*), which are usually hung on the *tsangaya* walls to keep the pens away from small children. Depending on the stylistic effect desired of the writing, the pen's point may be cut straight across, at right angles to the reed (H *ƙafe*; literally, 'straightened'), or in a slanted way (H *jirge*; literally, 'inclined'). While no strict rules exist, preferences are partly rooted in regional differences. The *tsangayu* of Borno usually adopt, for the consonantal body of the writing, a thick *ƙafe*, resulting in homogenously thick vertical, horizontal, and diagonal strokes, while those of Kano often adopt *jirge*, producing a characteristic alternation of thin vertical strokes and thick horizontal strokes.[26] Vowels, on the contrary, are realised by the scribes of both Borno and Kano with a very thin *ƙafe* pen; usually, the voweling is done, with the suitable pen, only after completion of a relatively long portion of consonantal text (for example one page or one folio). To draw the concentric circles that mark the beginning of a *ḥizb* (one sixtieth) of a Qur'anic manuscript, as well as the seven bigger partitions of the Qur'an (*subʿ*) and the eleven verses of prostration (*sajda*), a compass (H *alkalamin zana hizifi*) is realised by cutting multiple points in a single reed and inserting a needle in them (Figs 6 and 7). The compass may also be used in decorations that surround the text of an *allon zayyana*.

26 On the *barnāwī* script, see Brigaglia and Nobili 2013. On the *kanawī* script, see Brigaglia 2011.

Fig. 6: In the foreground: *zuge* preparation for black, potable, erasable ink; in the middle ground: a compass for drawing concentric circles, a thin-pointed *kafe* pen, a thick-pointed *kafe* pen, and a *jirge* pen; in the background: a *korami* (pencase).

Fig. 7: Concentric circles in decorative *sajda* marker in a handwritten Qur'an from northern Nigeria; private collection, Milan.

3.3 Inks

The generic Hausa word for 'ink' is *tawada*, derived from the Arabic *al-dawāt*. The various natural ingredients used in northern Nigeria for producing permanent inks (H *yambari*) are discussed in Michaelle Biddle's extensive study of manuscript samples from the region.[27] Permanent inks are normally used for writing on paper; occasionally, however, they may be used on wood for the production of *allon zayyana.* The Nigerian tradition of Qur'anic calligraphy prescribes the use of four colours for the various graphemes of the text: black for the consonantal body of the text; red for the vowels and the titles of *sūra*s; yellow for the *hamzat al-qaṭ'* (the Arabic letter *hamza* when in a position that demands its pronunciation); and green for the *hamzat al-waṣl* (the Arabic letter *hamza* when in a position that demands skipping its pronunciation), as well as for the decorative markers on the text margins. Thus, recipes to produce *yambari* in black, red, yellow, and green exist in the region, with a range of possible shades: red, for instance, might tend to earth brown, and green to light azure.

For obvious practical purposes, instead of *yambari*, erasable inks are exclusively used on wood. As erasable writing is not meant to be decorative, black inks tend to be the norm. In most cases, the ingredients need to be natural, as the mixture of water and ink obtained from washing off the tablet is commonly ingested, either by students to ease the memorisation of that day's portion of the Qur'an and the symbolic embodiment of its *albarka* (H for 'blessing'; from AR *al-baraka*), or, in the specific case of the talismanic tablet, for healing purposes. Charcoal (H *gawayi*) is the most common basic ingredient used for erasable, black, potable inks. It is usually ground on a clay potsherd (H *tsingaro*) and then mixed with water, with gum arabic (H *karo*) added as a binder and to achieve glossiness. The mixture is boiled for fifty to thirty minutes or dried for several days under sunlight, until the required texture and density is achieved. Charcoal-based erasable ink is also formed into dried balls (H *zuge*; Fig. 6). Advanced Qur'anic students usually produce their own *zuge* from the charcoal of Egyptian balsam wood: after burning the wood, they mix the charcoal with a small quantity of water and gum arabic; the paste is then moulded into small balls and dried in sunlight. When the need arises, the students dilute their *zuge* mix with water and turn it into ink. *Zuge* can also be purchased from specialised sellers.

Another technique for producing erasable ink is *wanke* (H; literally, 'washing off'). To prepare *wanke*, the student scrapes off the thick layer of soot that forms on the bottom of pots used daily in households to cook on open flame. The pieces of crust thus obtained are first ground into a powder; then, a procedure similar to

27 Biddle 2011.

the one for charcoal-based ink is followed by boiling the powder with water and gum arabic. *Wanke* is the preferred method of ink preparation especially for junior migrant students (H *almajirai*), whose economy relies on the ties they establish with the women who live in the neighbourhood surrounding the school (or mosque) where they reside, and on performing household chores (including shopping, ironing, sweeping, and general housekeeping) in exchange for meals, clothing, or pocket money.

Erasable, potable inks can also be produced from grains. These are first grilled until they start releasing their oil, and then ground. The powder obtained is sieved before being mixed with water and gum arabic. Millet ink displays a bright grey colour, while corn and maize inks have a reddish tonality. These are among the preferred options for use on the *allon sha*. In specific talismanic recipes, sugar, saffron, or honey are added to grain-based inks; saffron may even be used alone. Grain-based inks and saffron-based inks are immediately recognizable, as they are the only inks used on the wooden tablet that are not black.

3.4 Innovation in talismanic writing

The complex and laborious writing practices of Islamic talismans inspire innovations to overcome certain challenges, which are constantly adopted in the field. The most basic notions involved in talisman-making are (1) not only words (of the Qur'an, of the divine names, etc.) but also individual letters of the Arabic alphabet have powers (AR *ʿilm al-ḥurūf*; 'science of the letters'); (2) the letters that compose words or phrases can be converted into numbers (*ʿilm al-ḥisāb*; 'numerology'), maintaining their properties intact; and (3) such properties can be enhanced and multiplied by combining letters and numbers in specific arrangements (*ʿilm al-awfāq*; 'talismanic science'). As a result, to fully exploit the power of certain formulas, these have to be written a specific amount of times, which after a series of complex additions and multiplications – similar to the chemical process of elements decomposition – might reach extremely high figures. To give just one example among literally hundreds of possible ones, the divine name *al-Laṭīf* ('the Subtle') is believed to be a powerful means for protection and, generally, to ease one's affairs. A practitioner may thus instruct a petitioner to recite this divine name 129 times, which corresponds to the sum of the numerical value of its letters, or, better, to ingest the ink washed off a tablet upon which the name *al-Laṭīf* has been written 129 times. To enhance the formula's power, the number of recitations or writings may be prescribed as 16,641 (that is, 129 × 129). And to target a specific aim, this number may be multiplied by the figure corresponding to the numerical value of the name of the person 'targeted' by the talisman (in this case, the petitioner), easily reaching figures over a million. Similarly and conversely,

these figures, just as in the chemical process of synthesis, may be then distilled down into a 'seal' (AR *khātim*; H *hatimi*), which usually takes the form of a diagram (AR *jadwal*; not necessarily a magic square *stricto sensu*)[28] that combines figures in such a way that, when rows and columns are added, the figures corresponding to certain intended numerical values are obtained. Fig. 8, for instance, shows an *allon sha* inscribed with a relatively simple *hatimi* created by 'reducing' the numerical values of the names *Allāh* (66) and *Muḥammad* (92), after the latter have been 'decomposed' through a series of multiplications.

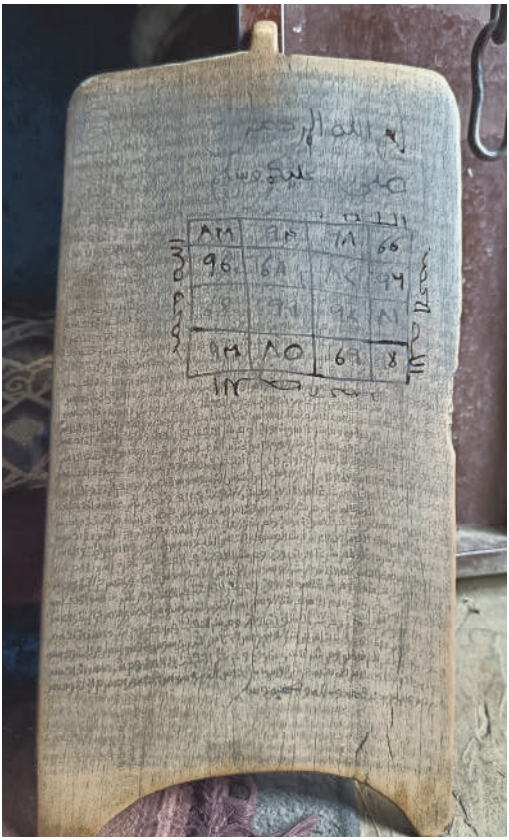

Fig. 8: A talismanic wooden tablet (*allon sha*) with an alphanumerical seal (*hatimi*).

28 In the 'magic square', the figures composing rows, columns, and diagonals, when added, have to give the same total. In a normal *jadwal*, the sums of rows and columns are often different, each symbolizing the numerical value of one of the words or phrases used in composing the talisman.

In the past, whenever Qur'anic scholars specialising in talismanic recipes had to produce a drinking potion that required writing a specific formula a huge number of times, they would divide the job among a group of their students. If, for instance, the specialist prescribed a petitioner to drink the distilled solution of one million *basmala* (the introductory formula of all Qur'anic chapters; *bismi l-lāhi l-raḥmāni l-raḥīm*), the scholar would assign to, say, one hundred of his students the task of writing the *basmala* ten thousand times each on their tablets. The one hundred bottles containing the solution of ten thousand *basmala* each would then be given to the petitioner, either separately or in one big water bin. To speed up these processes, some technical innovations were, at times, devised. For instance, some students might use a multi-pointed pen created by tying together a number of reeds (Fig. 9), allowing multiple identical sentences to be written in the same time required for a single sentence written with a standard, single-pointed reed.

Fig. 9: A multi-pointed reed; screenshot from a video originally posted on the Facebook group Mu Koma Tsangaya, the biggest social media gathering place for Nigerian *tsangaya* students; now available at the link <https://www.facebook.com/ElHadjiMoussaHanne/videos/276837306837149/>, video, accessed on 2 January 2025.

A further and more recent innovation in the field of occult erasable writing practices is using stamps to block print talismans. This technique involves carving relatively long Qur'anic verses, entire *sūra*s, special prayers, or numerical seals (H *hatimai*) onto wooden blocks. After pressing the block on a sponge dipped in the usual erasable and potable ink, it is used to print the required formula multiple times in a quick fashion (Figs 10 and 11). The specialists able to produce such stamps are rare in Kano, for having the two skills of woodcarving and Arabic calligraphy required for this task

is rather unusual. Although block-printed amulets have a long history in Muslim societies,[29] their use is not attested in the literature on West Africa, and our fieldwork seems to confirm that, in Nigeria, block printing is considered a recent innovation, prompted by the drop in the available manpower (i.e. full-time Qur'anic students) for producing written talismans.[30] It should be noted, however, that such blocks for printing talismans will never be used on the traditional wooden *allo*, but only on paper. However, as the ultimate purpose is always washing off the writing and drinking the solution, the block print overlaps with another relatively recent innovation: water-resistant folios that, once dipped in water, release the ink without disintegrating. If they are of good quality, water-resistant folios may also be sun-dried and used again. A similar time-saving technique that has emerged in recent times among the Islamic scholars who specialise in occult practices is using printer ink cartridges: once emptied of their industrial ink and washed out, the cartridges are filled with homemade, potable, erasable inks, then used to quickly print multiple copies of computer-typed formulas, which are dipped into water before the latter is drunk.[31]

Fig. 10: On the left, a stamp for block printing the ninety-nine names of God; on the right: a stamp for block printing the verses containing the phrases *kun fa-yakūn* (Q36:82: 'Let it be! And it [instantaneously] is'), with a complex seal (*hatimi*) extracted from these verses.

29 See Schaefer 2006.

30 Authors' interviews with Qur'anic scholars and students, Kano, 2023–2024.

31 Karimu Adejare Amao, known as Baba Kishi, a Muslim scholar and occult practitioner from Ibadan (telephone interview with Andrea Brigaglia, August 2020).

Fig. 11: From the top, clockwise: stamps for block prints of *hatimai* (seals) of the invocation known as *Ḥizb al-sayf*, the invocation known as *Ṣalāt al-fātiḥ*, the *sūra al-Fātiḥa* (Q1), and the 'Verse of the Throne' (Q2:255).

4 Sand tablets

Writing on sand, too, can serve both pedagogical and occult purposes. The sand tablet (H *allon yashi*) is a framed, rectangular wooden tray that contains a thin layer of sand. In the pedagogical realm, the *allon yashi* is the support of a teaching practice scholars may choose to engage in during advanced sessions of *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence). This practice is known in Hausa as *larabi* (from AR *ḍarb*; 'hitting' or 'multiplication'). Rather than in big and relatively visible institutions like the *tsangaya*, the teaching sessions that employ *larabi* normally take place in the private setting of a scholar's house and are attended by a select group of students of advanced jurisprudence. The sand tablet, thus, is not as ubiquitous and familiar to 'outsiders' as the wooden tablet.

As for the sand tablet's use in occult practice, in this context it is usually called *bugu*, which is the literal Hausa translation of *ḍarb*; thus, it technically can be considered a synonym of the Arabic loanword *larabi*.[32] In this case, however, the term refers to the complex calculations through which talismanic formulas are extracted from Qur'anic verses or divine names before being used in various ways (including on the *allon sha*). A third use of the sand tablet, also pertaining to the domain of the occult, is the practice of geomancy (AR *khaṭṭ al-raml*; H *bugun ƙasa*), which is the most common form of divination in Hausaland and in Muslim societies in general.[33]

32 The classical Hausa dictionary of George P. Bargery gives both meanings (jurisprudential and occult) for *larabi*, according to the following definitions: '1. Explaining the meaning of religious injunctions and prohibitions, their exceptions and reservations. […] 2. The markings made on the ground by a fortuneteller' (Bargery 1934). It is perfectly possible that at the time in which Bargery collected the materials for his dictionary, *larabi* was used for both jurisprudential and occult practices on the sand tablet, and that the shift of meaning we have observed (with the Arabic loanword *larabi* being restricted to the jurisprudential domain, and the Hausa synonym *bugu* to occult practices) has occurred during the generations that followed, based on an intuitive association of the Arabic term with legal orthodoxy, and of its Hausa synonym with 'local' occult practices. Bargery, however, also includes a reference to occult practices (and not to jurisprudential teaching) under the heading *bugu* ('beating'), where he gives, as the third possible meaning of the term '3. Calculation; mathematical work', and then, in sub-example 3.b, the phrase '*ana bugun hatimi*, "the seal is being affixed"' (Bargery 1934), which we would actually translate as 'the talismanic calculation is being made'.

33 For a classical historical study on *khaṭṭ al-raml*, see Fahd 1966. For an introductory reflection on geomancy in West African Muslim contexts, see Brenner 1985, 34–51. The influence of Islamic geomancy in Africa extends well beyond Muslim-majority groups like the Hausa. Its influence on the divinatory practices of non-Muslim peoples of southern Benin, for instance, was noticed as early as the 1940s by Bernard Maupoil (1943). Islamic origins also have been suggested for the

4.1 *Larabi*

As opposed to the *tsangaya*, where the main purpose of study is memorisation, the main goal of higher Islamic studies sessions, where *larabi* may be used, is understanding (of theology, jurisprudence, literature, exegesis, etc.). While the main teaching support of these sessions is always an Arabic textbook (AR *matn*), it is not normally recited and memorised as the Qur'an is in the *tsangaya*; rather, the textbook is read, translated into a local language (in our case, Hausa), and explained orally. The teacher may also add as much commentary as he (and, more rarely, she) deems appropriate, often referring to alternative opinions or quoting Qur'anic verses and hadiths that support the ruling under discussion.[34] In a way, the sand tablet's function in these sessions may be considered similar to that of the blackboard, the whiteboard, or the PowerPoint in a classroom setting: to focus the students' attention on certain bullet points. *Larabi* practices, however, never involve writing full phrases but rather consist of either (1) drawing bigger and smaller dots whose meaning is explained orally, or (2) performing complex mathematical calculations (usually, proportional reductions) needed in the Islamic ruling on the division of inheritance. Always sitting on the floor together with a small circle of students, the teacher may, when he discusses issues of jurisprudence that involve either lists and sublists or mathematical calculations, take the *allon yashi* that he keeps on his right-hand side, draw the required dots or figures, and then easily wipe away the writing with his right hand for a subsequent lesson.

Our video recording shows one example of *larabi* of type (1). The lesson is on the chapter of the *Risāla* of Ibn Abī Zayd al-Qayrawānī (d. 996 CE) on the rulings of ritual ablution according to the Māliki school of law.[35] The statement under discussion is '*wa-man ḍaḥika fī al-ṣalāt aʿādahā wa-lam yaʿud al-wuḍū*' ('whoever laughs during the ritual prayer must repeat it, but he does not need to repeat the

divinatory practices of the Mande-speaking people of West Africa (Kassibo 1992), as well as the Tswana of southern Africa (van Binsbergen 1996). For an interesting reflection on Islamic *khaṭṭ al-raml* and the history of religions in Africa, see Brenner 2000. See also Wim M. J. van Binsbergen, 'Islam as a Constitutive Factor in African 'Traditional' Religion: The Evidence from Geomantic Divination', unpublished paper, <https://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/document?repid=rep1&type=pdf&doi=f03c0e7e19e7608bbff7bfb47af8bff694d83f3b> (accessed on 11 April 2023).

34 See, for an excellent overview of higher private Islamic studies in West Africa and the insights they may provide to both anthropological and linguistic studies of the Muslim societies of the region, Tamari 2002 and 2008.

35 We have observed this use of *larabi* in teaching this section of al-Qayrawānī's *Risāla* in many scholars' private teaching circles, which were not, however, video-recorded. To illustrate it, we have realised a brief video in which one of us performs the practice as observed during fieldwork: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W6hFju5K3xo&t=21s> (accessed on 12 January 2025).

ritual ablution'). The teacher orally comments on the statement detailing and categorising the situation into three different scenarios, visually represented by three big dots on the sand tablet, as follows:

- The person who is praying alone (*al-faḏḏ*). If the individual:
  - laughs deliberately;
  - laughs unintentionally;
  - or is overcome by laughter, his prayer becomes invalid.

The above threefold scenario is represented by three smaller dots on top of the first big dot.

- The person who is leading a collective prayer (*imām*). If the imam laughs deliberately:
  - both his prayer and the prayers of those following him (*al-maʾmūm*) become invalid.

This second scenario is represented by one small dot on top of the second big dot.

- If the imam laughs unintentionally or is overcome by laughter:
  - his prayer;
  - and the prayers of the congregation become invalid. In the latter case, another individual from the congregation must take his place and assume the role of imam.

This scenario is represented by the remaining two small dots on top of the second big dot.

- The person who is following an imam (*al-maʾmūm*). If the individual who is following an imam:
  - laughs deliberately;
  - laughs unintentionally;
  - or is overcome by laughter, his prayer becomes invalid.

These three final scenarios are represented by the three small dots on the top of the last big dot.

Most northern Nigerian scholars continue to use the sand tablet for *larabi*. However, as no material or symbolic reason binds *larabi* exclusively to the sand tablet, innovations can be observed and are likely to occur more often in the future. Shaykh Amīn Bamba al-Faraḍī, for example, is a Ghanaian scholar who was trained in Māliki jurisprudence in the traditional circles of Kano and who – as his nickname al-Faraḍī suggests – is renowned for his knowledge of *ʿilm al-farāʾiḍ* ('division of inheritance').[36] When explaining the complex casuistry relative to the

36 Amīn Bamba al-Faraḍī (interview with Andrea Brigaglia, Ejora, Ghana, October 2007).

categories of people inheriting from a deceased, and the proportional reductions that regulate the division of the share, Bamba reproduces with a marker on a whiteboard the *larabi* lessons that, in all likelihood, he originally learned on a sand tablet from his teachers in Kano.[37]

4.2 *Bugu*

As their methods rest largely on a logic of symbolic associations, *bugu* practitioners might opt for a wider range of sands to use in their tablets than *larabi* users, for whom the type of sand is largely irrelevant. A practitioner of *bugu* might, for instance, prefer white desert sand (*farin yashi*) when engaged in extracting God's 'supreme name' (*al-ism al-aʿẓam*), which is used in invocations, since whiteness symbolises purity. Similarly, he may opt for, say, the red sand from a termite mound or the burrow of a fennec fox when producing specific talismans whose goals are associated with the characteristics of these animals[38] – the complex social life and industriousness of the termite, for instance, or the nocturnal hyperactivity of the fennec.

One of the 'supreme names' of God that has a long history in Sufism is the formula أهم سقك حلع يص (*aham*^{un} *saqak*^{un} *ḥala*^{ʿun} *yaṣ*^{un}). *Bugu* practitioners derive this through various alphanumerical calculations from a number of Qur'anic verses or Qur'anic divine names. To perform such calculations, practitioners always use the sand tablet as opposed to paper: with the index finger of the right hand, they write letters and corresponding figures; they then multiply them by a specific number, and after deleting the previous row with the palm of their right hand, they write the result of the multiplication, repeating the operation until arriving at a number that corresponds to the numerical value of the 'supreme name'.

37 See one example of his *larabi* lesson on inheritance at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FaR2FxqDEvQ> (accessed on 12 December 2025).

38 *Malam* Misbahu Rabiu Inuwa, Muslim scholar and occult practitioner (interview with Dahir Lawan Mu'az, Kano, December 2024). Social anthropologist Roy Dilley, speaking of the Fulbe context of Futa Toro (Senegal), sees the termite mound as a symbol of traditional Fulbe 'caste knowledge', opposed or complementary to the mosque, symbol of Islamic knowledge (Dilley 2004). This distinction does not seem relevant, however, in the context under discussion here. The termite mound – it should be noted – is a more generic symbol of social cohesion: Fulbe pastoralists, on special occasions, ritually feed their cows salt mixed with soil from termite mounds, which is believed to create in-group solidarity in the herd (Fulbe pastoralists, interviews with Andrea Brigaglia, Shanono, Nigeria, 2023).

To illustrate the *bugu* process, we interviewed a Sufi scholar of Kano, *Malam* Misbahu Rabiu Inuwa, who illustrated for us an example of extraction known as *aham*^{un} *zayy*^{u} (Fig. 12). *Malam* Misbahu explained that *aham*^{un} refers to a powerful, secret (but, in fact, quite well-known as it widely circulates in Sufi literature) name of God used in Sufi litanies, while *zayy*^{u} is an alphanumerical code that represents the number 17, which serves as the starting point for deriving this specific formula. The number 17 is derived by combining the numerical value of the letters composing the word *Allāh*, through a different procedure,[39] with the number of the five greatest prophets (*ūlū al-ʿazm*): Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad. Following this introductory explanation, *Malam* Misbahu proceeded to perform a series of multiplications and additions using the sand tablet. The medium of the sand facilitates rapid deletion and addition, as evident in the video recording of the procedure.[40] The instantaneous erasability of writing on sand also guarantees that the procedure remains essentially esoteric. The first step followed by *Malam* Musbahu involved a multiplication by 63, which is the figure that represents the age of Prophet Muhammad upon his death. By combining 6 and 3, he also obtained 9, which he referred to as the *kulki* (literally, in Hausa, 'blackjack stick', but in this context: 'multiplier') of the whole formula. He then continued with a series of multiplications, until arriving at the number 61,738,213,451, which corresponds to the 'supreme divine name', *aham*^{un} *saqak*^{un} *ḥala*^{ʿun} *yaṣ*^{un}.

39 Normally, the number corresponding to the four Arabic letters of the name *Allāh* (ا ل ل ه) should be 66 (1 + 30 + 30 + 5). However, according to an alternative numerological method, the two zeroes of the two thirties are removed and the calculation becomes 1 + 3 + 3 + 5 = 12.

40 To respect the esoteric nature of the procedure, we have omitted some sections from the recording. The partial video recording – which nevertheless offers a sense of the complex mathematical calculations involved – is available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oPkLouAsI74> (accessed on 12 January 2025).

Fig. 12: The sand tablet being used in *bugu* occult practices.

4.3 *Khaṭṭ al-raml*

As the Kano specialists of geomancy we contacted, *Malam* I. H. and *Malam* A. U., did not agree to a video recording, we have chosen to illustrate this practice through a page of the Hausa book *al-Raml wa-l-ashkāl idhā nazala al-rifʿa al-ʿāliya* (Fig 13), in which part of the procedures are explained by Ibrahim Mukarram Baba, son of Salih Abubakar Husaybakar (d. 2008). The latter was considered one of the foremost specialists of the Islamic *ʿulūm al-asrār* (occult sciences) in Kano at the turn of the century.[41] In brief, *khaṭṭ al-raml* works by forming with the right finger on the sand tablet sixteen random rows of one to twelve dots. Each row is then reduced to a one-dot or two-dot row, depending on whether the number of dots in each row is, respectively, odd or even. This leaves the practitioner with sixteen one-dot or two-dot rows, which, through a process of reversion, are combined into four figures, called 'mothers', and associated to certain divinatory meanings that involve numerous

41 While being well integrated in the established scholarly circles of Kano, Husaybakar became famous as a prolific writer of 'popular' literature on occult Islamic practices. Hunwick and O'Fahey (eds) 1995, 313–314, offers a partial list of his writings. An author of the present contribution is in process of documenting more of his writings.

astrological insights. The four 'mothers' are then reduced and recomposed again to form four 'daughters' and, successively, four 'nieces'. The practitioner then interprets the resulting set of twelve figures, always combined with astrological and alphanumerical insights, as signs related to specific aspects of the petitioner's future.

Fig. 13: Geomancy illustrated in the text *al-Raml wa-l-ashkāl* by Ibrahim Mukarram b. Salih Baba Husaybakar.

5 Metallic tablets

The *allon ƙarfe* (literally, in Hausa, 'iron tablet', but also indicating tablets in brass, aluminium, silver, and even gold)[42] is used, similarly to the talismanic wooden tablet (*allon sha*), by writing on its body a talismanic recipe, often containing a *hatimi*. However, to achieve the desired effect, instead of being washed off and drunk, in this case the writing is warmed under sunlight or upon fire embers (Fig. 14). The *allon ƙarfe* is widely used in occult practices, especially when a strong and immediate effect is desired on the intended person, whether to benefit or harm them. Although the metallic tablet is not *necessarily* used for harmful talismanic recipes, this tends to be the case quite often.[43]

To understand the logic behind using the iron slate, we again consulted the Kano-based specialist *Malam* Misbahu Rabiu Inuwa. He explained that achieving the powerful impact of a talismanic practice depends not only on the formula used (Qur'anic verses, alphanumeric 'seals', God's secret names, etc.) but also on aligning the writing practice with one of the four primordial elements – air, fire, earth, water – that the practitioner sees as dominant in the 'natural temperament' (H *ɗabi'a*) of the person that the ritual is designed to affect. This dominant element, in turn, is calculated at the beginning of the petition through specific calculations that combine the numerical value of the person's name with that of their mother's name. If this calculation shows that the dominant element in the person's temperament is air (AR *hawā'ī*), paper may be used to enhance the spiritual impact of the formula, and the paper might be hung and exposed to air currents before use. If the dominant element is earth (AR *turābī*), a wooden slate is preferred. For a water-natured individual (AR *mā'ī*), the written amulet may, for instance, be tied to a stone and placed in a river for some time, before being untied and used. Finally, for a person whose nature is dominated by the element of fire (AR *nārī*), the metallic slate is the most effective one. Different metals, however, also have different properties, so practitioners, by getting numerological or astrological insights on the person, may also decide on a particular metal among the range of options available: iron, aluminium, brass, silver, gold.

42 For a selection of samples of brass *allon ƙarfe* from northern Nigeria, see Brigaglia and Pezzoli (eds) 2021, 202–209.

43 The association of the metallic slate with a harmful intent cannot but remind one of the 'curse tablets' of Euro-Mediterranean antiquity (see Kotansky 1994), usually in lead. It is worth mentioning, however, that some specialists have recently started to question whether some of the ancient Greek 'curse tablets' might not, in fact, have had a protective intent (Faraone 2021).

The metallic slate, thus, may 'tune' a talismanic recipe to a recipient who has a fire-dominated natural temperament. Practitioners – continued *Malam* Misbahu – may also choose to concentrate their 'tuning' efforts on the *content* of the recipe, rather than on its recipient. In this case, the metallic slate will be chosen when the formula being used (a Qur'anic verse or chapter, or simply a divine name) is considered to have a 'fiery' nature. This is true especially of the formulas that mention God's anger and punishment: their effect, especially in talismans meant to harm individuals (for instance, aiming to protect a house by hurting would-be robbers, or aiming to kill an enemy in battle), is believed to be intensified if written on a heated *allon ƙarfe*. For instance, Q5:64 ('every time they kindled the fire of war, God extinguished it') is commonly used as protection and to counter adversaries. For rituals aimed at repelling enemies and for defence against malicious magic (AR *siḥr*), the text of *sūrat al-Masad* is used: Q111, 'May the hands of Abū Lahab[44] perish, and may he perish too! | No profit to him from all his wealth and his gains! | Burnt will he be in a fire of blazing flame! | And his wife, the firewood-carrier | On her neck will be a twisted palm-fiber rope!'

The texts to be featured on an *allon ƙarfe* may be written in their entirety or, more often, 'synthesised' in an alphanumeric seal (*hatimi*). Fig. 15 shows a talisman drawn on a silver *allon ƙarfe*. The talisman is based on a formula for *mallakar mutum* ('reducing a person under one's own control'). In the Hausa context, these formulas are often made for a jealous wife who wants to take her husband under her control and remove him from the control of a younger co-wife; but they may be equally used for a man who wants to control a woman, an employee who want to take control of their employer, and so on. The seal is derived from the numerical value of the letters that compose the Qur'anic verse Q85:12 (*inna baṭša rabbika la-šadīd*, 'And the violence of your Lord is, indeed, stern!'), combined with the numerical values corresponding to the name of the petitioner and the name of the person targeted by the recipe.

44 Abū Lahab is a paternal uncle of Prophet Muhammad and an archenemy of the latter's community. His name means 'Father of Flame', so this Qur'anic *sūra* curses him using a pun on his name.

Fig. 14: A silver *allon karfe* being heated on charcoal embers in the house of *Malam* Misbahu Rabiu Inuwa.

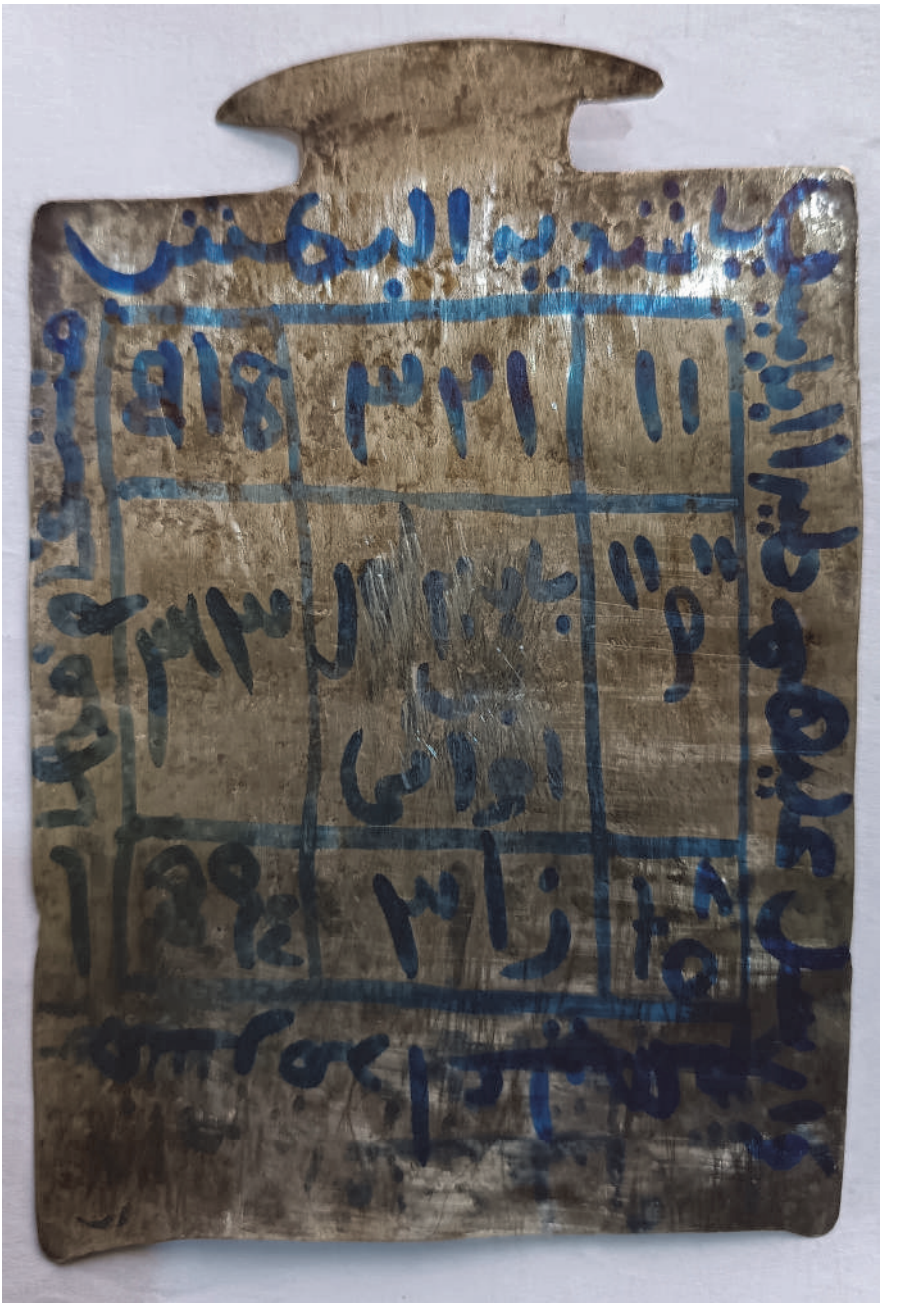

Fig. 15: A silver *allon karfe* with a talismanic seal (*hatimi*).

6 Conclusions

This article has provided an overview and discussion of erasable writing practices for inscribing and deleting transient texts on three different supports – wood, sand, and metal – within the context of northern Nigerian Islam. The described practices have a long history and are obviously rooted in premodern writing techniques. It would be wrong, however, to believe that their persistence is the fruit of a mere 'traditionalist' attitude. Some of these techniques continue to be preferred for technical-practical reasons. In these cases, a functional analysis that takes into account the internal goals of the techniques in question reasonably explains their persistence in an epoch when paper (not to mention electronic supports) is easily available. For instance, wooden tablet use in the *tsangaya* as a support for Qur'anic teaching is rooted primarily in the fact that the wooden tablet maximises concentration, minimises distraction, and teaches calligraphy, which are essential aspects of a pedagogy primarily aimed at achieving memorisation and developing writing skills. Similarly, the use of the sand tablet in *larabi* is associated with a practical, pedagogical goal: this tablet, as we have observed, allows the students to shift their focus from the oral teaching of a *matn* (textbook), which is aimed at simply being understood, to a list of bullet points (or to the figure resulting from a mathematical calculation) that, on the contrary, is to be memorised. In this case, the sand tablet may be easily, and quite naturally, substituted with modern erasable tools like whiteboards, as noted in at least one example above.[45]

In some of the occult practices that we have observed, too, the use of a traditional support is functional to ensure easy erasability. The talismanic wooden tablet (*allon sha*), for instance, allows the writing to be washed off and drunk as healing or protection. However, as water-resistant paper is now relatively easily available on the market, it can stand-in for the *allon sha*. As we have documented above, moreover, the shift to water-resistant paper can trigger a series of new adaptations – such as the use of stamps for block-printed amulets, and the use of ink cartridges for printing computer-typed talismans – that may not only safeguard, but even increase, functionality.

Other instances of occult practices of writing and erasing transient texts reviewed in this paper, however, are based on a symbolic logic that associates a specific material support (wood, sand, metal) to the goals of the writing itself. In these cases, a functionalist analysis needs to be complemented by insights from

45 See Section 4.1.

the anthropology of religion that take into account the symbolic logic of the practices observed. The use of sand in *bugu* practices, for instance, cannot be explained simply by the fact that the easy erasability of writing on sand is functional to maintaining secrecy: sand can, indeed, be wiped off quickly, leaving no trace of the procedure followed; the same erasability, however, can be achieved in principle by a whiteboard (just like in *larabi*), maintaining secrecy. In this case, the use of sand *as such* makes sense only when seen as intricately embedded in a web of symbols that link the goals of the practice of writing-erasure, its material support, and the various forces that animate the natural world. When adaptations do occur (as we have documented in the case of sand from an anthill or the burrow of a fennec fox), they are prompted by the symbolic logic of the occult, and not by functional considerations. Similarly, the use of metallic supports (the *allon ƙarfe*) is ultimately embedded in the belief that metals embody a specific type of force – this belief, in turn, depends on an overarching, ubiquitous theory of the 'four elements' (fire, water, air, sand) and the 'four qualities' (hot, wet, cold, dry). Changing the writing support from metal to a different one would, thus, undermine the very logic on which the practice is based.

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Abbreviations

AR = Arabic
H = Hausa
Q = Qur'an
SN = Scientific name

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