Between the State and the *Malam*: Understanding Forces that Shape the Future of Nigeria’s Koranic Schools¹

Nasir Mohammed Baba  
Department of Curriculum & Instruction,  
School of Education,  
Federal College of Education (Tech),  
P. M. B. 1088, Gusau, Zamfara State, Nigeria  
babanasirm@gmail.com

A Paper Prepared for Presentation at an International Conference on “Religious Education in a Democratic State” Organised by Faculty of Law, Bar-Ilan University, Ramat Gan, Israel, holding from 6th – 8th June, 2010.

**Key Words:** Malam, Koranic Schools, Northern Nigeria, Islamiyya, Madrassas, State

¹ This paper is part of an ongoing research work for a PhD in Curriculum Theory at the University of Jos, Nigeria being undertaken by the author with a Fellowship grant from the American Council of Learned Societies, ACLS, New York.
Abstract
This paper attempts to answer the question: what accounts for the persistence of Koranic schools as separate schools operating at cross-purposes with the Nigerian state in the provision of education to millions of Muslim children officially reported ‘out of school’? To answer this question, the paper traces the long years of mutual isolation between the state and Islamic institutions, particularly in northern Nigeria, that was at first a product of colonisation, but subsequently a reflection of state failure to meet its obligations towards a people struggling to come to terms with the loss of their cultural/religious values as western influences became pervasive. The paper submits that by remaining faithful to those values, ideas and practices that hold together the cultural/religious essence of life, Koranic schools and their owners fill a void neither the new religious elite nor the post-colonial Nigerian state has been able to recognise. The paper however worries that although culturally-relevant, this bond between Koranic schools and their communities further isolates young generations of Nigerian Muslims from constructively engaging with state. An inclusive state policy on education based on constructive engagements with the hidden clients of Nigeria’s submerged Koranic schools is what the country needs if these schools are to play any future positive role in education.
Introduction
Koranic schools are what remain of an old system of Islamic learning that has witnessed transformations since Nigeria’s encounter with colonialism. Defying efforts aimed at their reform, they exist very much in their prototype forms characterised by their exclusively religious curricula and absence of linkages with the state. These schools have attracted concerns among scholars, civil society, and the state as hindrances to the attainment of Education for All (EFA) goals in states of Nigeria with large Muslim populations. While scholars have associated the dominance of Koranic schools among rural dwellers and the urban poor with poor delivery of public education in Nigeria (Khalid, 1997; Umar, 2001; USAID, 2003a), the power influence of the Koranic school teacher/proprietor (malam in Hausa)\(^2\) in mediating the relationship between the state and those marginalised by it has not received much attention. In making its argument, the paper pursues a definition of malam that differentiates him\(^3\) from the power bloc of elite Islamic scholars (or ulama in Arabic) that has a more visible public presence but is often removed from the intellectual, spatial and socio-economic remoteness of Koranic schools and their clients.

The State and Islamic Education in Nigeria
Nigeria is a Federation of 36 states\(^4\) and a Federal Capital Territory, FCT. States in the Federation are divided into 774 Local Government Areas (LGA’s). The country therefore has three administrative units; a Federal Government at the centre, State and Local Governments at the periphery. Education is on the concurrent legislative list of the Nigerian constitution making it a joint responsibility of the Federal and State governments (Federal Republic of Nigeria, FRN, 1999). Therefore both Federal and State legislatures make laws with regards to all levels and types of education, but LGA’s bear substantial responsibility for managing primary education. Since the constitution declares a secular status for Nigeria, religious education does not fall within the above parameters; it is only recognised as an academic subject of study at various school levels. Because Nigeria’s secularism is contested and confused in its application (Alao, n.d.), states often adopt different postures towards religion including religious education. On a general note, religious groups in Nigeria can be said to have considerable degree of autonomy in establishing and managing their schools. Except for those groups that want their schools to have linkages with the state, this autonomy could mean absence of state regulation and control as is the case with Koranic schools. However, the interaction of the state and religious education, like the implementation of constitutional provisions with regards Nigeria’s secularity, has had a long history of fluctuations and adaptations. This section of the paper describes how Islamic education has evolved in response to these developments.

\(^2\) Plural form is malammai. All subsequent translations provided are in Hausa Language unless otherwise stated. Hausa is the predominant language of communication in northern Nigeria.

\(^3\) I have provided justification for maintaining the masculine voice in reference to this concept in the section on “Koranic School Malam”.

\(^4\) States in Nigeria are grouped into 6 Geo-political zones: North Central, North East, & North West (comprising Northern Nigeria), while South East, South South, & South West make up Southern Nigeria. North East, North West, & South West are the zones with the highest concentration of Muslims. North East & North West are commonly referred to as the ‘Muslim North’ because their populations are predominantly Muslims.
Nigeria’s first contact with Islam date back to the 11th century through the activities of Islamic scholars and merchants along the famous trans-Saharan trade routes that linked cities and states in what is today called northern Nigeria with notable centres of Islamic learning and commercial activities in North Africa and neighbouring West African states (Clarke, 1982). However, in most of these states it was the linkages prominent ulama forged with existing political and commercial elite that prompted the widespread growth of Islam and Islamic scholarship in these areas (Easton & Peach, 1997). While these linkages afforded the ulama political patronage and the enabling environment for their preaching and scholarly pursuits, the ruling elite relied on the ulama to provide the intellectual support that conferred legitimacy to their rule (Blakemore & Cooksey, 1981; Lubeck, 2003; & Bano, 2009). The system of Islamic learning that became established in pre-colonial northern Nigeria from the 16th century had a two-tier structure with Koranic schools operating at the elementary level and the ilm schools dispensing advanced knowledge in different branches of Islamic sciences (Fafunwa, 1991). The two Islamic schools laid the foundation of an Islamic system of education that provided the basis for scholarly activities and the pre-eminence of some northern Nigerian cities as notable centres of Islamic learning.

However, the traditional ruling elite in these areas did not evolve a programme or policy for a sustained support for Islamic education despite their close linkages with the ulama (Khalid, 1999). But even if they wanted to, it was not all of the ulama that wanted any association with the political class; the ulama’ul sunna (righteous scholars), as they were called in Arabic, preferred maintaining a distance from state interference and control (Umar, 2001). At the beginning of the 19th century an ulama-inspired Jihad (Holy war) against the traditional ruling elite in Hausa states of northern Nigeria led to the establishment of Sokoto Caliphate that effectively transferred political power to the ulama class. Having provided the intellectual and organisational bases for the conduct of the Jihad, ulama’ul sunna, the erstwhile opponents of ulama-state engagement, took over leadership of traditional power structures they had initially avoided (Umar, 2001). To their credit, the emergent ulama-ruling elite vigorously pursued an education agenda that saw to the widespread establishment and support for Islamic schools, their pupils and teachers (Fafunwa, 1991; Khalid, 1999). Therefore, for the first time since their beginning in Hausa states, formal schools of Islamic learning enjoyed sustained state support beyond mere patronage.

Therefore by the late 19th century when Christian missionaries began making inroads into the Muslim majority hinterlands of Nigeria, Islamic schools had become integrated into the local polity as valued institutions for religious socialisation and social reproduction. Although Christian missionaries met some local resistances to their evangelical work in Muslim communities of northern Nigeria, it was the British colonial state that effectively restricted missionary activities in these areas. Therefore while missionary activities expanded with military conquest and growth of colonial rule over territories in southern Nigeria, the same could not be said of the North where the colonialists were bent on maintaining existing political arrangements for their policy of indirect rule (Clarke, 1982). However, while the colonial state restricted the growth of western education in Muslim areas, it did not offer sustainable support or encouragement to pre-existing Islamic schools, and was slow in establishing state-sponsored alternatives (Bano, 2009). Although the British contemplated several proposals for its handling of Islamic education in its Muslim territories in the North, constraints imposed by limited finances, a weak educational administrative structure, and a general fear of what too much Islamic education could do to people’s attitudes to British
imperial rule meant that little was achieved in this respect (Hubbard, 1975; Blakemore & Cooksey, 1981).

In particular, the colonialists feared the fragile, harmless looking yet highly mobile *malammai* more than the more established *ulama* for their ability to stir up anti-colonial feelings among the people (Clarke, 1982). The British fear of *malammai* was justified because they were well connected with their local communities. In remaining faithful to their traditional function of transmitting Qur'anic literacy and nothing else of the alien culture of the invaders, Koranic schools and their *malammai* reflected popular sentiments against colonial occupation. Therefore, in the early period of colonial rule, it was a common practice for Muslim parents in northern Nigeria to entrust their children to *malammai* to take them on study tours to villages far away from the reach of the colonialists (USAID, 2003b). USAID submits that this practice was to set the stage for a pattern of school avoidance associated with these schools which persists to date. Throughout colonial rule, British colonialists adopted a policy of neither engaging nor openly opposing Koranic schools (Bano, 2009). While the neglect may have stunted their growth and influence, Koranic schools emerged from colonialism firmly in the controlling power of their *malammai* as symbols of resistance to colonisation and westernisation.

The regional system of governance comprising Eastern, Western, and Northern regions that was adopted for Nigeria in 1939 was maintained by the country up to independence. The Northern Region exercised administrative control over all of northern Nigeria where Koranic schools were widespread leading to some efforts made from 1962 to 1967, to restructure, fund, and bring Koranic schools under state control (Khalid, 1999). However, the replacement of regional governance with smaller semi-autonomous administrative units or states in 1967, led to the discontinuance of this programme and loss of a centralised authority for northern states to evolve a common response to a peculiar problem. Instead, each of the northern states reacted to developments in Koranic schools on ad hoc basis without evolving a common framework for co-ordinating or regulating their activities. A few of the states, Kano and Sokoto for instance, came up with legislations intended to curb some of the excesses of Koranic schools and their *malammai* particularly in relation to licensing and child welfare (Khalid, 1999). In the end, these measures produced very little results because, as Andre & Demonsant (2009) observed in relation to Senegalese Koranic schools, their informal nature makes controlling them through legislation ineffective.

The 1970’s have witnessed the most ambitious attempts to date by the Nigerian state in expanding its presence in the education arena by its launching of a Universal Primary Education (UPE) programme and a new National Policy on Education (NPE) in 1976 and 1977 respectively. But it was the implementation of the state’s takeover of missionary and other private schools that served as the litmus test for the relationship between the state and religious groups in the provision of education. Understandably, Christian groups that controlled the largest number of such schools were the loudest in voicing oppositions to the move throughout the period of its implementation from 1970 – 1983. However, the implementation of the takeover left neither Christians nor Muslims satisfied with its outcome since the two religious groups constantly argued with one another or with the state over issues such as the scope of religious content in the curricula, choice of school uniforms, and conduct of devotional services at morning assemblies (Williams, 1991). Each was loudest in its criticism of prevailing practices in states where it was a minority. Takeover also revealed the weaknesses of the Federal-State governments’ relationships as even when the FGN
abandoned the pursuit of the policy in 1983, some states of the South West continued with it (Alao, n.d.). To date the controversy continues because while some states of the Federation have returned some schools to their owners (mainly Christian missionaries), other states facing oppositions from Muslim groups and organised teacher unions have not returned theirs (Williams, 1991). While this controversy raged on, Koranic schools remained at the margins since their exclusively religious curricula had little attraction for the state.

In concluding this section it is important to emphasise that the attitude of the state towards Qur'anic schools in terms of policy formulation, support, or regulation has not changed significantly since then. What could be considered a landmark event was the approval by the FGN in 2001 of a curriculum that Koranic schools willing to integrate into formal schools could implement to facilitate the process (Junaid, Dukku, & Umar, 2005). It was a landmark because for the first time a nationally approved curriculum is in place for those schools willing to engage with the state. However, this curriculum lacks the full weight of legislation to ensure compliance by the states and to provide sustainable funding for its implementation. For each Koranic school the decision to integrate lies with its malaam, and for a curriculum characterised by many implementation hiccups across states in Nigeria (Junaid et al., 2005; Usman, 2008), its appeal value is obviously limited. Therefore colonial and post-colonial Nigerian state has left the authority of malmmaai over Koranic schools largely unchallenged.

**Koranic School Malam: A Heritage of Scholarship and Tradition**

The contemporary usage of the word *malam* in Hausa language refers to any learned person, a teacher, or simply any male adult. But the word itself has an Arabic origin (*Mu'allim*), and before the advent of western education among the Hausa, it was only used in reference to the attainment by someone of certain level of Islamic scholarship (Bunza, 1998). It has now assumed a place in Hausa register as a title of respect of common application; its feminine alternative is *malama*. The plural form, *malammai*, is generic, used in reference to both sexes. But even in its technical (religious) sense, *malam*, identifies a person of learning but does not qualify the degree of such learning. In view of the versatility of the term, this paper proposes a definition of *malam* that emphasises his controlling power over socially distributed religious knowledge. I retain the masculine voice in reference to this word throughout the paper because the existence of females in the public domain of this knowledge production process is rare among the Hausa. Females are well represented in Koranic schools but they are generally underserved (Easton & Peach, 1997). Girls are pulled out of schools as soon as they learn those portions of the Quran needed for devotional duties, or when they reach the age of marriage, which in Islam is the onset of puberty. Therefore, while females could continue learning and perform teaching functions, in traditional Hausa societies they operate in the private domains of their homes (McIntyre, 1996). This position is however changing among the new *ulama* of the modern *Islamiyya* schools and Madrassas (Umar, 2004).

There is no formal way of categorising *malammai* of Koranic schools, and terms employed in identifying them vary across different contexts. Using the criteria of degree of learning and intellectual standing, Okoye & Ya’u, (1997) and the National Council for the Welfare of Destitute (NCWD, 2001) identified a *malam* as the lowest category of Koranic teachers occupied by someone who is at advanced stages of Islamic learning but who also has responsibility for instructing other learners at the Koranic school level or assisting the senior teacher in overseeing affairs of the school. However, Skinner (1977) offers a different perspective that associates the definition above with a Gardi (plural, Gardawa) rather than a *malam*. A Gardi is not fully a *malam* but a mature student who had reached an advanced
stage in learning, and could therefore perform leadership roles in a school, including teaching others.

But this paper pursues a definition that sees a malam not in terms of his amount of learning or functions performed but in terms of his ownership of a school. It is in the context of this of this ownership of a school that a malam appropriates the power to determine the meanings, norms and values that Adams & Chen (1981) identified as constituting the ‘boundaries’ that education systems preserve and disseminate. Establishing and managing a Koranic school in Nigeria does not require any formal qualification from an intending malam apart from the experience of having attended one himself (Abd-el-Khalick, Boyle, & Pier, 2006). Therefore even those described above as Gardawa could independently establish their own schools so long as they were assured of the goodwill of communities in sending children to the school and supporting it with charity or sadaka (Skinner, 1977). The act of establishing a school confers on a malam a considerable degree of autonomy in its management and operations because once established, each school exists in its own right (McIntyre, 1996). While a malam would defer to and maintain allegiance and linkages with the scholarly lineage that produced him (Bugaje, 1997), he may not have supervisory restraints in the practice of his functions.

The full implication of this power manifests both at the social and intellectual levels. Being a malam often confers on a person leadership responsibilities in the religious and social life of host community that include leading in prayers (as Imam), ceremonies, and funerals (McIntyre, 1996) as well as providing interpretations on matters of Islamic doctrine that regulate religious, personal, and social conduct. His presumption of Islamic knowledge also places the malam as a model of exemplary behaviour for younger generations of Muslims to emulate. At the intellectual level, the power of the malam manifests in the selection of content and prescribed texts (if any) for school curricula. While these are well defined for ilm schools, Koranic school curricula are not so well delineated (Easton & Peach, 1997). This creates room for some degree of variations in the scope of coverage of curricula and instructional practices in these schools that reflect, among other things, the background characteristics of their malammai.

In the view of the leader of the reformist Jihad, Sheikh Usman Danfodiyo, and another prominent scholar before him, Al-Maghili, in order to perform functions such as those described above, a malam needs to undertake the study and understand the writings of respected orthodox Muslim scholars (Clarke, 1982). In expressing these views, the focus of the reformist leader was on a rival intellectual tradition that concentrated on the study of the Quran to the exclusion of other sources of Islamic jurisprudence. Scholars have associated this tradition with the Gardawa (Yandaki, 1997; Ammani, n.d.) because another perspective of the concept sees it in relation to those scholars who devote their time to the study, reading and memorisation of the Quran, and nothing else of the other branches of Islamic knowledge. Therefore in their roles as Koranic school malammai and as preachers, the Gardawa had been under intense criticism from reformist ulama of the Jihad era for performing functions for which they were ill-prepared (Clarke, 1982). In fact, Gardawa, and members of the ulama who have been discredited as ulama 'ul su (Arabic for ‘venal scholars’) for compromising the true teachings of Islam for political or material gains, experience exclusion from the mainstream Islamic discourse and action increasingly dominated by those Umar (2001) identified as modernist ulama having been exposed to western ideas and institutions.
In order to remove themselves from this negative spotlight, Gardawa have a tendency of operating in rural areas or on the fringes of urban locations where in addition to establishing Koranic schools and performing vital religious social services, they also deploy their knowledge of the Koran for medico-spiritual purposes ranging from practice of herbal medicine to the invocation of spirits (McIntyre, 1996). Rural areas provided fertile grounds for proliferation of Koranic schools and adoption by some of them of a mixture of traditional belief systems and Islamic teachings because even after the Fulani reformist Jihad, some of these areas either remained non-Muslim or continued their syncretism which the Jihadist sought to correct (Clarke, 1982). In adapting to their local contexts, Gardawa fitted into an image of a malam that has gained acceptance in Hausa communities trying to reconcile their cultures with Islamic thoughts and practices to which they were newly introduced. Bunza (1998) considers that while the most distinctive qualities that define a malam in traditional Hausa societies are the possession of literacy skills and knowledge of the Quran, he is also expected to perform the more traditional functions of healing and spiritual protection through divination and sorcery. Therefore while practices such as syncretism, exclusive focus on the Quran and non-recognition of other sources of Islamic knowledge exclude Gardawa from the Ulama and other mainstream Islamic groups, they reinforce their cultural relevance in the traditional communities of their operation.

**Koranic Schools and the Education of Muslim Children in Northern Nigeria**

The practice of Islam in northern Nigeria has been influenced by an orthodoxy that is reformist and separatist towards anything that is non-Islamic; this contrasts with the predominantly accommodative attitudes of Yoruba Muslims towards similar experiences (Kenny cited in Alao n. d.). Alao considers that this is sometimes a source of friction because some Northern Muslims consider the Yoruba practice of Islam as adulterated. This difference probably explains the large scale adoption by Islamic schools in South West Nigeria of secular contents and organisational patterns of western schools early in the colonial period. Umar (2001) however cautions that the traditionalism of the Nigerian ulama is neither static nor definite, but a changing orientation fully engaged with topical issues around it. A key difference between traditionalist ulama (to which many of the Koranic school malammai belong) and modernist ulama of the contemporary era lies in their educational backgrounds (Umar, 2001; Calabrese, 2005). Having attended hybrid Islamiyya schools and Madrassas, the modernist ulama have adapted well to modern institutions of state by obtaining formal qualifications that allow them access to positions of power and influence. This section of the paper would show how an interactive combination of poor delivery of public education, poverty, and rural location provided the impetus for the growth of Koranic schools as distinct school types tailored to special needs of those with limited engagement with the state. These were needs which neither public schools nor the modern Islamiyya schools could adequately accommodate.

It was a concern over the diminishing influence of religious education in the lives of young Nigerian Muslims as western education expanded that drove some religious groups and organisations to embark on a reform of Koranic schools. This reform gave birth to Islamiyya schools that combined the teaching of religion with secular subjects from curricular of public schools, and modernised their organisational and instructional methods (Umar, 2003). Doing this, it was thought, would make western education attractive to Muslims and avert the risk that non participation in it portends to the umma (Arabic word for ‘global community of Muslims’) within the socio-political configurations of modern Nigeria (Fafunwa, 1991). In south-west Nigeria where Islamiyya schools are most active, they have successfully
diminished the public presence of Koranic schools in the educative process. In recent years, parental concern over the poor delivery of public education in Nigeria has triggered a demand that led to the proliferation of these schools in all parts of the country where Muslims predominate, including northern Nigeria where the *Islamiyya* model was not as widespread (Khalid, 1997; Umar, 2003; USAID, 2003a). Even public schools have risen to this challenge by incorporating content from Koranic schools into the Islamic religious studies curriculum and employing the services of *malammai* to teach them (Easton & Peach, 1997). By remaining faithful to the demand for religious education and establishing linkages with the educational bureaucracy of the Nigerian state, the *Islamiyya* model has created a balance that Muslims seek which neither the old Koranic schools nor public schools have been able to provide. However, in northern Nigeria the reach of *Islamiyya* schools have been limited to the urban and semi-urban elite that have the resources to pay for its costs.

Consequent to the above, some Muslims with limited means but who are nonetheless predisposed to the acquisition of both religious and western education, have their children alternating between public schools and Koranic schools, attending the latter after formal school hours or on non-school days. This practice is valued for its convenience because Koranic schools are accessible, cheap and flexible to the routines of their clients (Boyle, 2002). For these families, Koranic schooling is not a constraint to child participation in formal education. But in certain cases Koranic schooling could compete with attendance at formal school because of considerations of costs, quality or relevance of school outcomes. In this case, considerations of the relative benefits and costs of the two schooling experience will determine where the preference lies. Although the effectiveness of the delivery mechanism of public education could be an important determinant of whether a child attends a formal school or not (USAID, 2003a; Andre & Demonsant, 2009), for some families the costs (direct and incidental) can make the choice a difficult one.

Scholars are unanimous in identifying poverty and rural residence as the most important demographic characteristics of populations served by Koranic schools (Khalid, 1997; Umar, 2003; USAID, 2003a). These factors, together with gender, constitute what Oxenham (2006) refer to as correlates of educational disadvantage because they confer on learners from these backgrounds unique capacities, needs and interests which formal schools fail to recognise and adapt to. Instead, by their emphases on urban, western or elite values, language and behaviours, formal schools become foreign islands to rural, poor, migrant or nomadic children thereby increasing their sense of alienation and rejection (Bernard, 2000). Formal schools also exclude by the fees they charge and other incidental costs that parents incur in sending their children to schools. These situations place heavy tolls on poor families in terms of resources and time to the extent that in deciding to send children to school, parents have to make what Bernard calls ‘cruel choices’ between schooling and survival needs. Even when parents are willing to make sacrifices, poor learning outcomes and uncertainty of the future benefits of schooling mean that they are less likely to come to the side of education.

Koranic schools provide soft landing for children rejected by or unable to benefit from formal schools. Their roles as alternative education networks became strengthened following the faulty and erratic implementation of expansionist education programmes embarked by the state from the 1970’s. Problems such as poor planning of the programmes, dwindling revenues due to fall in petroleum prices in the global market, and the consequent imposition of debt-relief and Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) led to reduced state presence in provision of vital social services including education (Taiwo, 1980; Khalid, 1997; Umar,
Therefore, even as concerns over deterioration of school infrastructure, inadequate teacher quality and supply, and poor learning outcomes became widespread; parents had to bear substantial burdens for the education of their children contrary to previously established social compact with the state. Nigerian public schools gradually became the resort of those without alternatives. While Muslim elite searched for alternatives in fee paying private secular and religious schools, the marginalised urban poor and rural residents turned to the more familiar terrain of Koranic schools.

By 1999 when the National Primary Education Commission (NPEC)\(^5\) carried out a population survey of schools in Nigeria, it was found that pupil enrolments in Koranic and *Islamiyya* schools tripled that of formal primary schools in key Muslim states of Sokoto and Zamfara (USAID, 2003c). A similar trend was also depicted in a baseline survey of Qur’anic schools in four states in the North West (i.e. Katsina, Kebbi, Sokoto and Zamfara) conducted by UNICEF (1999) which showed that there were 16,648 Koranic schools in these four states with a total enrolment of 1,145,111 pupils: 63.2% of this number were boys, while the remaining 36.8% were girls. The survey further showed that out of the total number of students enrolled only 177,592 or 15.5% were attending primary schools; the remaining 967,519 or 84.5% were not. A recent survey of only 10% of the total number of Koranic schools in 6 northern states (Bauchi, Borno, Kano, Katsina, Sokoto, & Zamfara) conducted by FME & UNICEF (2008) revealed a total pupil enrolment of 514,264; out of which 194,368 or 38% were females. When these figures are compared with a total number of 54,434 public primary schools across 36 states in Nigeria and the Federal Capital Territory, FCT, it becomes clear that Koranic schools have a commanding presence in Nigeria’s education sector. Although public primary schools in Nigeria enrol 24,422,918 children, about 10.5 million or 30% of the total number of children of primary school age (6 – 12 years) are out of school (FME, 2009). With over 55% of their children out of school, some parts of northern Nigeria (specifically the North East and North West) account for a significant portion of the national average of out-of-school children (National Population Commission, NPC, & IFC Macro, 2009). NPC & IFC Macro also showed wide margins between national percentage of out of school children in rural areas (43%) and urban areas (26%); while the percentage of out of school children increases with poverty levels.

It is therefore fair to say that the Muslim North of Nigeria has a large percentage of children enrolled in Koranic schools who are excluded from the minimum state-sanctioned education provided in public schools and many of its accruing privileges. In a global context where local institutions gain relevance only by the risk they pose to global security, Koranic schools are likely to continue to exist on the fringes of state policy since they are believed to be contributing less to global terrorist networks (Alao, n.d.). But since they dispense exclusively religious curricula that have no linkages with the state, Koranic schools offer their products little prospects for educational, social, or economic mobility within modern economy and polity. Although some would argue against judging Koranic schools purely in terms of their utilitarian value since they are religious schools (Easton & Peach, 1997), it is their potential to exclude future generations of Muslims from the mainstream national life that should raise some concerns at least at the domestic level.

---

\(^5\) NPEC has since 2004 been replaced with Universal Basic Education Commission (UBEC) as the body responsible for managing Nigeria’s UBE programme.
Since the 1980’s Koranic schools, their *malammai* and products have been associated with religious uprisings in Nigeria. Although the country is not new to inter and intra-religious crises, a new dimension in which the state and its institutions are the targets is becoming prevalent among Islamic groups (Alao, n.d.). The uprisings by *Maitatsine*, *Boko Haram* and *Kala Kato* religious groups share a common minimalist ideology facilitated by exclusive reliance on the Quran and other practices similar to those of the *Gardawa* earlier described (Alao, n.d.; Ammani, n.d.; Umar, 2001; Calabrese, 2005). In all the three groups, Koranic schools established and managed by the leaders provided the platform for the spread of their version of Islam that rejects western education and ideas, modernity, supremacy of the state or any of its institutions, and recruiting a loyal following to their cause. Scholars like Umar, (2001) and Calabrese (2005) have explained the uprisings as manifestations of discontent by the *malammai*, their disciples and followers with their socio-economic and political marginalisation by the state and its elite. Sadly, Koranic schools in their present state and carrying capacities only add to the growing number of the marginalised in Nigeria.

**Conclusion**

The Nigerian state has consistently undermined Islamic education and institutions designed for dispensing it by failing to recognise and utilise their potentials in expanding access to education. While some Islamic elite and the *ulama*, who are predisposed towards engagement with the state and western education, have created the necessary linkages to overcome their isolation; long years of unstable state policy towards Islamic education have further excluded those who have been marginalised by the alien nature of western education in colonial times and its questionable quality and relevance in the post-colonial era. In their isolation, some *malammai* have consequently hijacked once vibrant institutions of learning, and turned them into havens of school avoidance and child neglect. Although mainstream Islam, the modernist *ulama*, and the state would wish that the *malam*, the *gardi*, and their old Koranic schools were pushed out of relevance in the context of modern Nigeria, their roots had penetrated too deep into the underserved local communities of rural Nigeria to be ignored.

In pondering the question, ‘what is the future of Koranic schools in Nigeria’, the answer may well depend on the answer to another question: ‘what is the future of public education in

---

6 *Maitatsine*, or ‘he who curses others’ was the name given to the leader of an Islamic group that preached an alternative Islamic ideology and was fond of ending his preaching sessions by cursing those who did not agree with him. His real name was Muhammadu Marwa, and his followers were known as *Yan’tatsine*. Marwa and his followers unleashed violence against the state and other Islamic sects in Kano (1980). Although Marwa was killed in 1980; his disciples extended the fight at different times to 3 other Nigerian cities: Yola (1984), Gombe (1985; 1987), and Lagos (1998). (See Calabrese, p.21).

7 ‘Boko-Haram’, a Hausa expression meaning ‘western education is sinful’, was the name given to a religious group led by an Islamic cleric, Mohammed Yusuf, that sought a forceful imposition of Shariah Islamic Law and dismantling of state structures across some northern Nigerian states unleashing violence in the cities of Bauchi, Borno, and Kano in July 2009. Yusuf was himself a Gardi, and has not attended formal school. (See Ammani in the references).

8 ‘Kala Kato’, a Hausa expression denoting incorrect or illegitimate Islamic doctrines. Several Islamic groups that are characterized by exclusive reliance on the Quran on matters of conduct and rituals, and other practices considered un-Islamic have been labeled ‘Kala Kato’. One of such groups was involved in intra-group violence in Bauchi in December, 2009.
Nigeria”? The answer to the last question could then be communicated to the ‘real’ malam of the ‘real’ Koranic schools, not to their urban proxies, for further dialogue.

Recommendations
This paper makes three recommendations in the light of the issues raised:

1. Nigeria’s education policy (NPE) should contain concrete proposals on the status of religious schools, a minimum framework for their reform, and possible anchorage points for their linkages with the formal education system;

2. Purposeful and co-ordinated network of culturally-sensitive researches and school census by research institutions and development partners should be carried out to locate Koranic schools, their pupils and teachers and engage them in a dialogue on their visions for education, and how it can best be reflected in the NPE as raised above;

3. Government should improve the delivery of public education in terms of its access, quality and relevance by increasing budgetary allocations to education, partnering with the civil society in establishment and management of schools, training of teachers, and supply of school facilities, materials and equipment.
References


