

Kanem–Bornu as a Centre of Qur'anic Intellectual Tradition in Eighteenth-Century Sub-Saharan Africa: Historical Continuity and the Resurgence of Qur'anic Studies in Contemporary Borno

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Article History	Abstract
Original Research Article	<i>This study examines the historical evolution of Kanem–Bornu as one of the foremost centres of Qur'anic intellectual tradition in Sub-Saharan Africa and investigates the continuity of this legacy in the contemporary resurgence of Qur'anic studies in Borno State, Nigeria. Although previous scholarship has extensively explored the political history of the Kanem–Bornu Empire and the spread of Islam across the Central Sudan, comparatively little attention has been paid to the continuity of its intellectual institutions and their enduring influence on present-day Islamic education. The article addresses this scholarly gap by demonstrating that the current revitalisation of Qur'anic studies represents the continuation of a deeply rooted intellectual tradition rather than a new educational phenomenon. The study adopts a qualitative historical research design based exclusively on documentary evidence drawn from classical Arabic manuscripts, historical chronicles, archival records, biographical dictionaries, Qur'anic commentaries, juristic literature, and contemporary peer-reviewed academic publications. Using qualitative historical content analysis, the research reconstructs the institutional foundations of Qur'anic scholarship in eighteenth-century Kanem–Bornu while examining the mechanisms through which its intellectual heritage has been preserved and transformed over time.</i> Keywords: Kanem–Bornu; Qur'anic intellectual tradition; Qur'anic studies; Islamic scholarship; Borno; Sub-Saharan Africa; Islamic education; intellectual history.
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Introduction

The spread of Islam in Sub-Saharan Africa gave rise to some of the continent's most influential centers of religious learning and intellectual production. Among these, Kanem–Bornu occupies a distinguished position in the history of Islamic civilization. Situated within the Central Sudan, the Kanem–Bornu Empire emerged not only as a formidable political power but also as a vibrant centre of Qur'anic scholarship, Islamic jurisprudence, Arabic literacy, and manuscript culture. From the medieval period through the eighteenth century, the region attracted scholars, jurists, Qur'anic exegetes, and students from across West and Central Africa, thereby facilitating the transmission of Islamic knowledge beyond its geographical boundaries. Its intellectual influence extended through scholarly networks that connected North Africa, the Lake Chad Basin, Hausaland, and other parts of the Bilād al-Sūdān.

The eighteenth century represents a particularly significant phase in the intellectual history of Kanem–Bornu. During this period, Qur'anic education became increasingly institutionalized through the establishment of traditional learning centres (*makarantun allo* and *zāwiyahs*), where memorization (*ḥifẓ*), recitation (*tajwīd*), Arabic grammar, Qur'anic exegesis (*tafsīr*), and other Islamic sciences were systematically taught. The patronage of Muslim rulers, coupled with the commitment of distinguished scholars and local communities, fostered an environment in which Islamic learning flourished. These educational institutions produced generations of scholars who contributed significantly to religious instruction, judicial administration, manuscript production, and the preservation of Islamic intellectual heritage throughout the Central Sudan.

The intellectual prominence of Kanem–Bornu was sustained by its strategic position along trans-Saharan commercial and scholarly routes, which enabled continuous exchanges of ideas, books, and scholars with major centers of Islamic learning in North Africa and the wider Muslim world. Such interactions enriched the region's educational system and facilitated the incorporation of diverse intellectual traditions into local scholarship. Consequently, Kanem–Bornu evolved into one of the most respected centers of Qur'anic learning in Sub-Saharan Africa, with an influence that endured well beyond the eighteenth century.

Despite this remarkable legacy, the intellectual history of Kanem–Bornu has received comparatively limited attention in contemporary academic discourse. Existing scholarship has largely concentrated on the political history of the empire, the process of Islamization, or the nineteenth-century reforms associated with the Sokoto Jihad. Relatively few studies have critically examined the historical continuity between the flourishing Qur'anic intellectual tradition of eighteenth-century Kanem–Bornu and the contemporary resurgence of Qur'anic studies in Borno. This gap has resulted in an incomplete understanding of how historical institutions, scholarly lineages, pedagogical traditions, and religious networks have shaped present-day Islamic education in the region.

In recent decades, Borno has witnessed a notable revival of Qur'anic scholarship despite persistent socio-political and security challenges. This resurgence is reflected in the expansion of traditional Qur'anic schools, the establishment of integrated Islamic educational institutions, renewed interest in Arabic and Islamic studies within higher education, increased manuscript preservation initiatives, and the wider dissemination of Qur'anic knowledge through digital technologies and community-based religious programmes. These developments suggest that contemporary Qur'anic scholarship is not an isolated phenomenon but rather the continuation and adaptation of a long-standing intellectual tradition rooted in the historical foundations of Kanem–Bornu.

This article examines the role of Kanem–Bornu as a center of Qur'anic intellectual tradition during the eighteenth century and analyses the factors underlying the resurgence of Qur'anic studies in twenty-first-century Borno. Specifically, it explores the historical foundations of Qur'anic scholarship, the institutional and scholarly mechanisms that sustained its transmission, and the ways in which this intellectual heritage continues to shape contemporary Islamic education. By integrating historical evidence with contemporary developments, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of the continuity, transformation, and enduring significance of Qur'anic intellectual traditions in Sub-Saharan Africa. It also

contributes to the growing literature on African Islamic intellectual history by demonstrating that the revival of Qur'anic studies in Borno represents not merely the preservation of a religious tradition but the renewal of a dynamic intellectual legacy with enduring relevance for contemporary scholarship and society.

2. Literature Review

2.1 *Kanem–Bornu in the Historiography of Islamic Intellectual Tradition*

The intellectual history of Kanem–Bornu occupies a significant place in the historiography of Islam in Sub-Saharan Africa. While early scholarship focused predominantly on the political evolution of the empire, more recent studies have increasingly acknowledged its contribution to the development of Islamic education, Arabic literacy, and Qur'anic scholarship. Classical historical accounts portray Kanem–Bornu as one of the earliest regions south of the Sahara where Islam became firmly institutionalized through royal patronage, trans-Saharan commercial networks, and scholarly exchanges with North Africa (Hunwick, 1994; Levtzion & Hopkins, 2000).

Historical evidence indicates that Islam had become deeply rooted within the Kanem–Bornu Empire by the eleventh century, following the conversion of the Sayfawa rulers. The adoption of Islam by the political elite stimulated the establishment of mosques, Qur'anic schools, judicial institutions, and centers of Arabic learning that gradually transformed the empire into an important intellectual hub within the Central Sudan (Lange, 2004). Unlike many neighboring polities where Islamic influence remained limited to urban elites, Kanem–Bornu developed an extensive educational tradition that integrated religious learning into community life through Qur'anic schools and informal scholarly circles.

Scholars have further demonstrated that the geographical position of Kanem–Bornu facilitated sustained intellectual interactions with Egypt, Fezzan, Tripoli, and other North African centres of learning. These exchanges enabled the circulation of scholars, manuscripts, legal opinions (*fatāwā*), and pedagogical traditions that enriched local Islamic scholarship (Hunwick, 1994). Consequently, Kanem–Bornu emerged as one of the principal gateways through which Islamic intellectual traditions entered the Central Sudan.

2.2 *Qur'anic Scholarship and Educational Institutions in Kanem–Bornu*

The literature consistently recognizes Qur'anic education as the foundation of Islamic intellectual life in Kanem–Bornu. Traditional Qur'anic schools served not merely as

institutions for memorizing the Qur'an but also as centers for studying Arabic grammar, Qur'anic exegesis (*tafsīr*), Prophetic traditions (*ḥadīth*), jurisprudence (*fiqh*), theology (*'aqīdah*), and Islamic ethics (Trimingham, 1962).

Brigaglia (2017) argues that Qur'anic schools across the Central Sudan functioned as comprehensive institutions responsible for preserving Islamic identity, producing religious scholars, and transmitting intellectual traditions across generations. Their pedagogical methods combined oral instruction, memorization, writing on wooden slates (*lawḥ*), and advanced textual study under the supervision of recognized scholars. These educational practices enabled the preservation of both textual authenticity and scholarly authority over several centuries.

The production and preservation of Arabic manuscripts further strengthened Kanem–Bornu's intellectual reputation. Manuscripts covering Qur'anic sciences, jurisprudence, theology, devotional literature, and Arabic linguistics circulated widely among scholars, reflecting an active scholarly culture rather than passive reception of foreign ideas (Hall & Stewart, 2011). This manuscript tradition demonstrates that Kanem–Bornu contributed to the generation, interpretation, and dissemination of Islamic knowledge within Africa.

2.3 The Eighteenth Century as an Era of Intellectual Consolidation

The eighteenth century represents a relatively understudied period within the intellectual history of Kanem–Bornu despite its importance in consolidating earlier educational traditions. Existing literature suggests that this period witnessed the expansion of Qur'anic institutions, increased scholarly mobility, and the strengthening of regional networks of Islamic learning (Last, 1967).

Unlike the nineteenth century, which has attracted considerable scholarly attention because of the Sokoto Jihad and its educational reforms, the eighteenth century remains comparatively neglected. Nevertheless, available historical sources indicate that scholarly families, Qur'anic teachers, judges, and Sufi scholars played crucial roles in preserving religious education during this period. Their activities ensured the continuity of Islamic scholarship despite changing political and economic conditions within the Lake Chad Basin.

Furthermore, intellectual continuity during the eighteenth century established the foundations upon which later Islamic reform movements expanded. Rather than representing a period of intellectual stagnation, the eighteenth century appears to have functioned as a bridge connecting medieval Islamic traditions with the scholarly developments of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

2.4 Contemporary Resurgence of Qur'anic Studies in Borno

Recent scholarship has identified a renewed interest in Qur'anic education throughout northern Nigeria, particularly in Borno State. This revival has been characterized by the expansion of traditional Qur'anic schools, integration of Islamic and Western education, establishment of specialized institutes for Arabic and Islamic studies, increased digitization of manuscripts, and wider dissemination of Qur'anic knowledge through electronic media (Loimeier, 2012).

Despite prolonged security challenges associated with violent extremism, Islamic educational institutions in Borno have demonstrated remarkable resilience. Community participation, philanthropic support, government interventions, and the commitment of local scholars have contributed significantly to rebuilding educational infrastructure and restoring confidence in Qur'anic learning. These developments indicate that contemporary Qur'anic scholarship continues to draw intellectual legitimacy from the historical traditions established during the Kanem–Bornu period.

Nevertheless, much of the existing literature examines these contemporary developments from sociological, political, or security perspectives while paying limited attention to their historical foundations. Consequently, insufficient attention has been devoted to understanding how eighteenth-century intellectual traditions continue to influence present-day educational institutions and scholarly networks.

2.5 Research Gap

Although considerable scholarship exists on the political history of Kanem–Bornu, Islamization in the Central Sudan, and Islamic education in northern Nigeria, there remains a significant gap regarding the historical continuity between eighteenth-century Qur'anic intellectual traditions and the contemporary resurgence of Qur'anic studies in Borno. Most previous studies examine these periods independently, thereby overlooking the enduring institutional, pedagogical, and scholarly linkages that connect them.

This article addresses this gap by adopting a historical-continuity perspective that traces the evolution of Qur'anic scholarship from eighteenth-century Kanem–Bornu to twenty-first-century Borno. In doing so, it demonstrates that the present revival of Qur'anic studies represents the continuation of a deeply rooted intellectual tradition rather than an isolated educational phenomenon. The study therefore contributes to broader debates on Islamic intellectual history, knowledge transmission, educational

resilience, and the preservation of Africa's indigenous scholarly heritage.

3. Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative historical research design to examine the evolution of Qur'anic intellectual tradition in eighteenth-century Kanem–Bornu and its resurgence in twenty-first-century Borno. Historical research is particularly appropriate because it facilitates a critical examination of past events, institutions, and intellectual traditions through the systematic collection, evaluation, and interpretation of historical evidence. Rather than merely reconstructing historical narratives, the study seeks to explain the continuity, transformation, and contemporary relevance of Qur'anic scholarship within the Kanem–Bornu intellectual tradition.

The research employs a historical-analytical approach that combines descriptive and interpretative methods. The descriptive component reconstructs the historical development of Qur'anic learning, while the analytical component evaluates the factors that sustained its continuity and contributed to its contemporary revival. This approach enables a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between historical educational institutions and present-day Qur'anic scholarship in Borno.

3.1 Theoretical Framework

The study is anchored in the theory of Intellectual Tradition and Knowledge Transmission, which emphasises the continuity of scholarly ideas, educational institutions, and intellectual authority across generations. Drawing on the works of Talal Asad (1986) on discursive traditions and John O. Hunwick (1994) on Islamic scholarship in Africa, the framework conceptualizes Qur'anic learning as a dynamic intellectual tradition sustained through formal instruction, manuscript transmission, scholarly lineages (*isnād*), and institutional continuity.

Within this framework, the resurgence of Qur'anic studies in contemporary Borno is understood not as a new educational phenomenon but as the renewal and adaptation of a historically established intellectual tradition. The framework also explains how changing political, social, and technological contexts influence the preservation, transformation, and dissemination of Islamic knowledge without undermining its historical foundations.

4. Findings and Discussion

The Finding shows the historical development of Kanem–Bornu as a key center of Qur'anic scholarship in Sub-Saharan Africa. It highlights the continuity of this legacy in modern Borno State, Nigeria, emphasizing that current Qur'anic revival stems from a long-standing intellectual tradition, not a recent phenomenon.

4.1 The Emergence of Kanem–Bornu as a Centre of Qur'anic Intellectual Tradition

Kanem–Bornu as a center of Qur'anic intellectual tradition was the result of a gradual historical process shaped by political stability, the institutionalization of Islam, trans-Saharan scholarly exchanges, and sustained royal patronage. Contrary to earlier narratives that primarily emphasize the military and political achievements of the Kanem–Bornu Empire, the evidence demonstrates that its enduring legacy lies equally in its contribution to the development and dissemination of Islamic knowledge throughout Sub-Saharan Africa.

Historical records indicate that Islam became firmly established within Kanem–Bornu between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries following the conversion of the Sayfawa dynasty. The adoption of Islam by the ruling elite transformed the religious and educational landscape of the empire, leading to the establishment of mosques, Qur'anic schools, judicial institutions, and centers of Arabic literacy (Levtzion & Hopkins, 2000). Royal patronage extended beyond religious observance to the promotion of scholarship through the sponsorship of teachers, jurists, and students, thereby embedding Qur'anic learning within the administrative and social fabric of the state.

The intellectual development of Kanem–Bornu cannot be understood independently of its strategic geographical location. Positioned at the crossroads of the trans-Saharan trade routes, the empire maintained sustained interactions with North African centers such as Cairo, Tripoli, Fezzan, and Tunis. These networks facilitated not only commercial exchange but also the movement of scholars, manuscripts, legal opinions, and pedagogical traditions. Consequently, Kanem–Bornu became an important conduit through which Islamic intellectual traditions entered the Central Sudan and were subsequently transmitted to neighboring regions, including Hausaland, Bagirmi, Wadai, and Adamawa (Hunwick, 1994). The Qur'anic education in Kanem–Bornu extended well beyond elementary instruction. While memorization (*hifẓ*) remained the foundation of learning, advanced students received systematic training in *tajwīd* (Qur'anic recitation), *tafsīr* (Qur'anic exegesis), *ḥadīth*, *fiqh*, Arabic grammar (*naḥw*), rhetoric (*balāghah*), logic (*manṭiq*), and theology (*ʿaqīdah*). This integrated curriculum produced scholars capable of serving as judges, teachers, legal advisers, and community leaders across the Central Sudan. Such educational breadth challenges earlier assumptions that traditional Qur'anic schools focused exclusively on rote memorization (Trimingham, 1962; Brigaglia, 2017).

The scholarly authority in Kanem–Bornu was institutional rather than individual. Knowledge was transmitted through recognized scholarly lineages (*isnād*), where students

studied under established scholars before receiving authorization (*ijāzah*) to teach. This structured system preserved the authenticity of religious knowledge while ensuring continuity across generations. Similar patterns have been observed in other major centers of Islamic learning, indicating that Kanem–Bornu formed part of the wider intellectual ecology of the Muslim world rather than existing as an isolated regional tradition (Hall & Stewart, 2011).

The role of mosques and traditional learning centres as complementary institutions within the educational system, rather than functioning solely as places of worship, mosques served as community universities where scholarly debates, public lectures, legal consultations, and Qur'anic instruction occurred on a regular basis. Traditional Qur'anic schools, meanwhile, provided structured education beginning with literacy and memorisation before progressing to higher Islamic sciences. Together, these institutions established a comprehensive educational framework that facilitated the widespread dissemination of Islamic knowledge throughout the empire. The eighteenth century witnessed the consolidation of these educational traditions. Although the period has received less scholarly attention than the nineteenth century, available evidence indicates continued expansion of scholarly networks, increasing mobility of students, and sustained patronage of religious education. Distinguished scholars travelled between Kanem–Bornu, Hausaland, the Lake Chad Basin, and North Africa, creating transregional intellectual networks that enhanced both the quality and the influence of Qur'anic scholarship. These interactions ensured that local educational traditions remained connected to broader developments within the Muslim world while retaining their distinctive regional characteristics.

From a theoretical perspective, these findings support the concept of intellectual continuity proposed by Asad (1986), which views Islamic traditions as dynamic discursive systems transmitted through successive generations. The evidence demonstrates that Qur'anic scholarship in Kanem–Bornu evolved through adaptation rather than discontinuity. Educational institutions, pedagogical methods, scholarly authority, and manuscript traditions were continuously renewed in response to changing historical circumstances without abandoning their foundational principles. The findings establish that Kanem–Bornu's historical significance extends beyond its political achievements to its role as one of the foremost centres of Qur'anic intellectual tradition in Sub-Saharan Africa. The region developed a sophisticated educational system, nurtured highly respected scholars, cultivated extensive manuscript traditions, and established transregional scholarly networks whose influence continued well beyond the eighteenth century.

These historical foundations provide the essential context for understanding the contemporary resurgence of Qur'anic studies in Borno, which represents not a new phenomenon but the continuation of a deeply rooted intellectual legacy.

4.2 Institutional Foundations of Qur'anic Scholarship in Eighteenth-Century Kanem–Bornu

The remarkable intellectual prominence of eighteenth-century Kanem–Bornu was underpinned by a well-developed network of educational institutions that ensured the systematic transmission, preservation, and advancement of Qur'anic scholarship. Unlike the informal structures often associated with traditional education, these institutions operated within an organised framework characterised by recognised teachers, structured curricula, scholarly certification, and sustained community support. Their institutional resilience enabled Qur'anic learning to flourish across successive generations despite political transitions and changing socio-economic conditions.

At the foundation of this educational system were the traditional Qur'anic schools (*makarantun allo*), which served as the primary centres for religious instruction. These schools introduced learners to Arabic orthography, Qur'anic memorisation (*ḥifẓ*), pronunciation (*tajwīd*), and the ethical values embedded in Islamic teachings. Instruction relied on close interaction between teacher and student, with the wooden slate (*lawḥ*) functioning as the principal instructional medium for writing, memorisation, and revision. Beyond facilitating literacy, this pedagogical method cultivated discipline, perseverance, and intellectual responsibility, values that remained central to the educational philosophy of Kanem–Bornu (Brigaglia, 2017).

The study further reveals that Qur'anic schools represented only the first stage of an extensive educational hierarchy. Students who completed elementary instruction progressed to advanced circles of learning (*halaqāt*) conducted in mosques, scholars' residences, and educational lodges (*zāwiyahs*). At this level, instruction expanded to include *tafsīr* (Qur'anic exegesis), *ḥadīth* (Prophetic traditions), *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence), *uṣūl al-fiqh* (principles of jurisprudence), *ʿaqīdah* (Islamic theology), Arabic grammar (*naḥw*), morphology (*ṣarf*), rhetoric (*balāghah*), logic (*manṭiq*), and elements of mathematics and astronomy relevant to Islamic legal and devotional practices. This comprehensive curriculum demonstrates that Kanem–Bornu cultivated a holistic tradition of Islamic scholarship comparable to that of other renowned centres of learning within the Muslim world (Hiskett, 1984; Robinson, 2004). The finding of this study is the central role of mosques as multifunctional institutions of higher learning. Beyond serving as places of worship, mosques functioned as intellectual centres where scholarly debates, legal

consultations, public lectures, manuscript copying, and advanced Qur'anic instruction regularly took place. The mosque therefore operated as both a religious institution and a public academy, integrating spiritual formation with rigorous intellectual inquiry. This dual role strengthened the relationship between scholarship and society by ensuring that religious knowledge remained directly relevant to governance, legal administration, and community development.

The scholarly authority in Kanem–Bornu was maintained through structured systems of mentorship and certification. Students studied under recognised scholars for extended periods before receiving an *ijāzah* (authorisation) certifying their competence to teach specific texts or disciplines. This process established an unbroken chain of knowledge transmission (*isnād*), thereby preserving both the authenticity of Islamic learning and the credibility of those entrusted with its dissemination. Such scholarly lineages connected Kanem–Bornu to broader intellectual networks extending across North Africa, the Hijaz, and other regions of the Islamic world, reinforcing its status as an active participant in global Islamic scholarship rather than a peripheral recipient of knowledge (Hunwick, 1994).

The institutional sustainability of Qur'anic scholarship depended significantly on political and community patronage. The Sayfawa rulers and subsequent political authorities provided financial support for scholars, judges, mosques, and educational establishments. Wealthy merchants, religious endowments (*awqāf*), and local communities also contributed to the maintenance of learning centres by providing accommodation, food, writing materials, and financial assistance to teachers and students. This collective system of support ensured that access to Islamic education remained relatively broad and that scholarship could continue independently of fluctuations in state resources. Such collaboration between political authority and civil society reflects an educational model rooted in communal responsibility for knowledge preservation. Equally significant was the integration of education with judicial and administrative institutions. Graduates of advanced Qur'anic education frequently served as judges (*quḍāt*), muftis, teachers, secretaries, and advisers within the state administration. Consequently, Islamic learning was directly linked to governance, dispute resolution, commercial regulation, and public morality. This close relationship between scholarship and governance elevated the social status of scholars while reinforcing the practical relevance of Qur'anic education within the broader political order.

From an analytical perspective, these findings challenge interpretations that portray precolonial African Islamic education as informal, fragmented, or intellectually limited.

Instead, the evidence demonstrates that eighteenth-century Kanem–Bornu possessed a coherent educational system characterised by institutional organisation. Modern educational reforms have introduced formal curricula, digital technologies, and state regulation, the underlying intellectual philosophy of transmitting authenticated religious knowledge through recognized scholarly institutions remains largely intact. This continuity provides compelling evidence that the resurgence of Qur'anic studies in twenty-first-century Borno is deeply rooted in historical institutional foundations rather than representing an entirely new educational development. The institutional architecture of eighteenth-century Kanem–Bornu constituted the principal mechanism through which Qur'anic scholarship achieved continuity, resilience, and regional influence. The combination of structured educational institutions, scholarly certification, manuscript culture, political patronage, and community participation created a durable intellectual ecosystem whose legacy continues to shape Islamic education across the Lake Chad Basin and Sub-Saharan Africa.

4.3 Scholarly Networks, and the Transmission of Qur'anic Knowledge

The intellectual vitality of eighteenth-century Kanem–Bornu was sustained not only by its educational institutions but also by an extensive network of scholars, manuscripts, and transregional exchanges that facilitated the continuous transmission of Qur'anic knowledge across the Central Sudan. These interconnected mechanisms transformed the empire into a dynamic centre of Islamic learning, where knowledge was preserved, enriched, and disseminated through well-established scholarly traditions. Rather than functioning as an isolated intellectual community, Kanem–Bornu participated actively in a wider Islamic scholarly network linking the Lake Chad Basin with North Africa, the Hijaz, and other centres of Muslim learning. Scholars and students travelled extensively in pursuit of knowledge; a practice deeply rooted in the Islamic concept of *riḥlah fi ṭalab al-ilm* (journeying in search of knowledge). These educational journeys enabled scholars from Kanem–Bornu to study under renowned teachers in Cairo, Fezzan, Tripoli, and Makkah, while distinguished scholars from these regions also visited the empire to teach, adjudicate, and exchange intellectual ideas. Such interactions broadened the intellectual horizons of local scholars and ensured that educational practices in Kanem–Bornu remained consistent with developments in the wider Muslim world (Hunwick, 1994; Robinson, 2004).

The movement of scholars also facilitated the establishment of enduring scholarly lineages. Knowledge was transmitted through recognised teachers who granted *ijāzah* (scholarly authorisation) to qualified students after rigorous study of

specific texts and disciplines. This certification system strengthened academic accountability by ensuring that only those who had demonstrated mastery of the subject were authorised to teach. Consequently, the transmission of Qur'anic sciences maintained both intellectual continuity and textual authenticity across successive generations. The findings therefore support the argument that Islamic scholarship in Kanem–Bornu was governed by recognised academic standards comparable to those operating in other centres of Islamic civilisation (Asad, 1986). The study further reveals that manuscript culture formed the intellectual backbone of Qur'anic scholarship in Kanem–Bornu. The production, copying, preservation, and circulation of manuscripts ensured that religious knowledge remained accessible to scholars and students despite the absence of printing technology. Manuscripts covered a broad spectrum of Islamic disciplines, including *tafsīr*, *ḥadīth*, *fiqh*, *uṣūl al-fiqh*, Arabic grammar, theology, logic, astronomy, mathematics, inheritance law (*farā'id*), and devotional literature. Their diversity reflects the comprehensive nature of Islamic education in the region and demonstrates that scholarly engagement extended well beyond elementary Qur'anic instruction (Hall & Stewart, 2011).

The evidence demonstrates that Kanem–Bornu possessed sophisticated mechanisms for producing, preserving, and disseminating scholarship that paralleled developments in other major centres of Islamic civilisation. The integration of manuscript culture, scholarly mobility, institutional learning, and transregional intellectual exchange created a sustainable knowledge ecosystem that ensured the continuity of Qur'anic scholarship over several centuries.

4.4 Factors Responsible for the Resurgence of Qur'anic Studies in Twenty-First-Century Borno

The resurgence of Qur'anic studies in twenty-first-century Borno is not an isolated educational phenomenon but the product of multiple historical, institutional, socio-religious, and technological factors. Although the region has experienced prolonged political instability and security challenges over the past two decades, Qur'anic education has demonstrated remarkable resilience. Rather than declining, the tradition has undergone institutional renewal, curricular reform, and pedagogical adaptation, reflecting the enduring influence of the intellectual foundations established during the Kanem–Bornu era. One of the principal factors driving this resurgence is the continuity of traditional Qur'anic educational institutions. The study finds that *makarantun allo* (traditional Qur'anic schools) remain the primary centres for introducing children to Qur'anic memorisation, Arabic literacy, and Islamic ethics throughout Borno. While these schools continue to preserve classical pedagogical methods such as memorisation,

repetition, recitation, and teacher-centred instruction, many have gradually incorporated literacy, numeracy, and elements of formal education into their curricula. This integration has strengthened their relevance within contemporary society without undermining their historical identity. The persistence of these institutions demonstrates the capacity of indigenous educational systems to adapt to changing social realities while preserving their intellectual foundations (Brigaglia, 2017).

The expansion of formal Islamic educational institutions represents another significant factor contributing to the revival of Qur'anic scholarship. During the past three decades, Borno has witnessed substantial growth in colleges of Arabic and Islamic studies, Islamic secondary schools, and university programmes specialising in Qur'anic sciences, Arabic language, Islamic jurisprudence, and related disciplines. Institutions such as the University of Maiduguri and other tertiary establishments in northeastern Nigeria have played an important role in integrating traditional Islamic scholarship with contemporary academic research. This institutional diversification has expanded opportunities for advanced Qur'anic studies while encouraging interdisciplinary engagement between classical Islamic sciences and modern social sciences.

The contemporary Islamic organisations have significantly strengthened Qur'anic education through structured educational programmes, teacher training, curriculum development, and public enlightenment campaigns. Religious organisations, charitable foundations, and community-based associations have established Qur'anic memorisation centres, organised public recitation competitions, sponsored Islamic conferences, and provided scholarships for outstanding students. These initiatives have increased public participation in Qur'anic education and reinforced the social prestige historically associated with Islamic scholarship in Borno. The growing commitment to the preservation and digitisation of Arabic manuscripts. For centuries, private scholars and families safeguarded valuable collections of manuscripts inherited from earlier generations. Recent efforts by universities, research institutes, libraries, and international collaborative projects have focused on cataloguing, conserving, and digitising these materials to ensure their long-term preservation and accessibility. Digitisation has not only protected fragile manuscripts from physical deterioration but has also expanded scholarly access to historical sources that document the intellectual heritage of Kanem–Bornu. These preservation initiatives have stimulated renewed academic interest in the region's contribution to Islamic intellectual history (Hall & Stewart, 2011).

Technological advancement has also emerged as a transformative force in the contemporary dissemination of Qur'anic knowledge. Unlike earlier periods, when instruction was confined largely to mosques and traditional learning circles, twenty-first-century scholars increasingly utilise digital platforms to reach wider audiences. Online lectures, virtual Qur'anic classes, electronic libraries, mobile applications, and social media have become important channels for teaching Qur'anic recitation, exegesis, Arabic grammar, and Islamic jurisprudence. These technologies have facilitated access to learning for students who might otherwise face geographical, financial, or security constraints. The findings suggest that technology has complemented rather than replaced traditional teacher–student relationships, thereby extending the reach of long-established pedagogical traditions.

The community participation remains fundamental to the sustainability of Qur'anic education. Families, local philanthropists, business communities, and religious leaders continue to finance mosque construction, sponsor Qur'anic schools, provide accommodation for students, and support teachers through charitable contributions. This community-centred model of educational financing reflects the historical tradition of collective responsibility that characterised eighteenth-century Kanem–Bornu. Such sustained local support has enabled many Qur'anic institutions to survive periods of economic hardship and insecurity while maintaining their educational mission. Government intervention has further contributed to the resurgence of Qur'anic studies through educational reforms aimed at integrating traditional Islamic education into the national educational framework. Programmes designed to improve teacher training, curriculum development, and educational infrastructure have enhanced the quality of instruction within many Qur'anic schools. The integration of Qur'anic schools into broader educational policies has also increased opportunities for graduates to pursue higher education and professional careers without abandoning their religious educational background. Although implementation has varied across institutions, these reforms reflect increasing recognition of traditional Islamic education as an important component of national educational development.

An additional finding concerns the resilience of Islamic scholarship in the face of security challenges associated with violent extremism in northeastern Nigeria. While insecurity disrupted educational activities in many communities, the evidence demonstrates that Qur'anic learning persisted through the determination of scholars, local communities, and educational institutions. In several instances, displaced scholars re-established learning circles in safer locations, while universities and Islamic

organisations developed alternative teaching strategies to ensure educational continuity. Rather than extinguishing the region's intellectual tradition, these challenges appear to have reinforced community commitment to preserving authentic Islamic scholarship as a means of countering extremist misinterpretations of religious teachings (Loimeier, 2012). The international academic collaboration has contributed significantly to renewed interest in the intellectual heritage of Kanem–Bornu. Collaborative research involving African, European, Middle Eastern, and North American institutions has expanded the documentation, translation, and analysis of Arabic manuscripts originating from the Lake Chad Basin. These partnerships have generated new historical evidence concerning the region's scholarly traditions and have repositioned Kanem–Bornu within global discussions on Islamic intellectual history. Consequently, contemporary scholarship increasingly recognises the region as an important contributor to the development of Islamic civilisation rather than a peripheral recipient of external influences.

From an analytical perspective, the resurgence of Qur'anic studies in Borno reflects a dynamic process of institutional continuity and adaptive transformation. While contemporary educational institutions differ in organisational structure from their eighteenth-century predecessors, they continue to embody the same intellectual values that historically characterised Kanem–Bornu: reverence for the Qur'an, respect for scholarly authority, rigorous textual engagement, ethical formation, and community service. The continuity of these foundational principles demonstrates that Islamic educational traditions are capable of responding creatively to modern challenges without abandoning their historical identity.

The revival of Qur'anic studies in twenty-first-century Borno is sustained by the interaction of historical legacy, institutional development, technological innovation, manuscript preservation, community participation, educational reform, and scholarly resilience. These interconnected factors demonstrate that the intellectual heritage of Kanem–Bornu continues to shape contemporary Islamic education and remains an important resource for the future development of Qur'anic scholarship in Sub-Saharan Africa.

4.5 Continuity and Transformation: Linking Eighteenth-Century Kanem–Bornu with Twenty-First-Century Borno

The resurgence of Qur'anic studies in twenty-first-century Borno represents a process of historical continuity rather than a new educational development. Although contemporary Islamic education operates within social, political, and technological contexts that differ considerably from those of the eighteenth century, the core

intellectual principles established during the Kanem–Bornu period remain largely intact. The continuity observed in educational philosophy, pedagogical methods, scholarly authority, and institutional organisation demonstrates the resilience of the Qur'anic intellectual tradition across more than three centuries.

One of the strongest indicators of this continuity is the persistence of the teacher–student relationship as the foundation of Islamic learning. During the eighteenth century, knowledge was transmitted through direct interaction between recognised scholars and their students, with mastery of the Qur'an and related sciences acquired through prolonged study, moral discipline, and scholarly supervision. Contemporary Qur'anic education in Borno continues to uphold this model despite the introduction of modern classrooms, printed textbooks, and digital learning resources. The authority of the teacher (*shaykh* or *mallam*) remains central to the educational process, reflecting the enduring significance of personal mentorship within Islamic pedagogy (Asad, 1986). The study also reveals remarkable continuity in the curriculum of Qur'anic education. While educational institutions have expanded their programmes to include modern subjects, the classical sciences that formed the intellectual foundation of eighteenth-century Kanem–Bornu remain integral to contemporary scholarship. Instruction in Qur'anic memorisation (*ḥifẓ*), recitation (*tajwīd*), exegesis (*tafsīr*), Prophetic traditions (*ḥadīth*), jurisprudence (*fiqh*), theology (*'aqīdah*), Arabic grammar (*naḥw*), and legal methodology (*uṣūl al-fiqh*) continues to define advanced Islamic education throughout Borno. This curricular continuity illustrates the durability of the region's scholarly heritage while demonstrating its capacity to incorporate contemporary educational approaches.

The social role of Qur'anic scholars, during the eighteenth century, scholars served not only as teachers but also as judges, advisers, mediators, and moral guides within their communities. The findings indicate that contemporary Islamic scholars in Borno continue to perform these multiple functions. Beyond classroom instruction, they provide religious guidance, mediate community disputes, participate in public policy discussions, promote peacebuilding initiatives, and contribute to social development through educational and charitable activities. This enduring integration of scholarship with community leadership illustrates the continuing relevance of the Kanem–Bornu intellectual tradition in addressing contemporary societal challenges. The transformations that distinguish twenty-first-century Qur'anic scholarship from its eighteenth-century antecedent. Another notable transformation is the institutional expansion of Islamic education. The Qur'anic learning during the eighteenth

century was concentrated primarily in mosques, *zāwiyahs*, and traditional schools, contemporary scholarship is also supported by universities, colleges of education, research institutes, and formal Arabic schools. These institutions have broadened the scope of Islamic education by incorporating academic research methodologies, interdisciplinary inquiry, and engagement with contemporary intellectual debates.

The integration of modern technology constitutes another significant transformation. Digital libraries, online learning platforms, mobile applications, and virtual classrooms have revolutionised access to Qur'anic education. Students can now consult classical texts, attend lectures, and engage with scholars across national boundaries without the geographical limitations that characterised earlier periods. Importantly, these technological innovations have supplemented rather than displaced traditional pedagogical practices. The continued emphasis on teacher supervision and scholarly mentorship demonstrates that technology has strengthened the transmission of knowledge while preserving its intellectual authenticity.

From a theoretical perspective, Asad's (1986) conception of Islamic tradition as a dynamic and evolving discursive practice. The evidence demonstrates that continuity does not imply rigid preservation or resistance to change. Instead, the Qur'anic intellectual tradition of Kanem–Bornu has survived because of its capacity to adapt institutional structures, pedagogical methods, and educational technologies while preserving its fundamental epistemological principles. This process of adaptive continuity explains the remarkable resilience of Islamic scholarship in Borno despite colonial intervention, educational reforms, economic challenges, and contemporary security crises. Ultimately, the continuity between eighteenth-century Kanem–Bornu and twenty-first-century Borno demonstrates that the present revival of Qur'anic studies is deeply embedded within a centuries-old intellectual tradition. Contemporary educational institutions, scholarly networks, and research initiatives draw their legitimacy, pedagogical philosophy, and academic orientation from historical foundations established during the formative period of Kanem–Bornu's Islamic civilisation. The resurgence of Qur'anic scholarship should therefore be understood not as a revival of a forgotten tradition but as the continuing evolution of one of Sub-Saharan Africa's most enduring centres of Islamic intellectual life.

4.6 Repositioning Kanem–Bornu in African Islamic Intellectual History

One of the most significant implications of this study is the need to reposition Kanem–Bornu within the historiography of Islamic civilisation. Previous scholarship has often

concentrated on the political achievements of the empire while giving comparatively limited attention to its contribution to intellectual development. The present findings demonstrate that Kanem–Bornu should be recognised not merely as a political entity but as a major centre of Qur'anic scholarship, Arabic literacy, manuscript production, and religious education whose influence extended across much of West and Central Africa.

The intellectual achievements of Kanem–Bornu compare favourably with those of other celebrated centres of Islamic learning in Africa, including Timbuktu, Jenne, Agadez, and Sokoto. Its extensive scholarly networks, sophisticated educational institutions, and enduring manuscript traditions indicate that the region played a central role in shaping Islamic thought south of the Sahara. Greater scholarly attention to this heritage would contribute to a more balanced understanding of Africa's place within the global history of Islamic civilisation.

4.7 Preservation of Indigenous Islamic Knowledge Systems

The study also demonstrates the resilience of indigenous Islamic educational systems in preserving religious knowledge over several centuries. Traditional Qur'anic schools, scholarly mentorship, oral transmission, manuscript culture, and community-based educational support collectively sustained Islamic scholarship despite colonial intervention, political instability, and educational transformation.

This finding has important implications for educational policy. Rather than viewing traditional Qur'anic education as incompatible with modern educational systems, policymakers should recognise its historical effectiveness in promoting literacy, ethical development, social cohesion, and intellectual discipline. Integrating the strengths of traditional Islamic education with contemporary pedagogical innovations offers a viable approach to strengthening educational quality while preserving cultural and religious heritage.

4.8 Preservation and Digitization of Arabic Manuscripts

The findings underscore the urgent need to preserve the manuscript heritage of Kanem–Bornu. Thousands of Arabic manuscripts remain dispersed across private collections, mosques, family libraries, and educational institutions throughout the Lake Chad Basin. Many of these documents continue to face threats from environmental deterioration, inadequate conservation facilities, armed conflict, and limited institutional support.

The preservation, cataloguing, digitization, translation, and critical editing of these manuscripts should therefore constitute a strategic priority for governments, universities,

museums, libraries, and international research organizations. Digitization initiatives would not only safeguard valuable historical documents but also expand global scholarly access to Africa's Islamic intellectual heritage, thereby facilitating new research on Qur'anic studies, jurisprudence, history, linguistics, and manuscript culture.

4.9 Countering Extremist Narratives through Authentic Islamic Scholarship

The resurgence of Qur'anic studies in Borno also has broader implications for peacebuilding and religious resilience. The findings indicate that authentic Qur'anic scholarship has historically promoted moderation, ethical conduct, intellectual inquiry, and social responsibility. These characteristics contrast sharply with extremist interpretations that distort Islamic teachings to justify violence and social division. Strengthening traditional centres of Islamic learning, supporting qualified scholars, and expanding access to authentic Qur'anic education can therefore contribute to preventing religious radicalisation. Educational institutions rooted in the Kanem–Bornu scholarly tradition possess considerable potential to promote critical religious literacy, intercommunal dialogue, and peaceful coexistence within contemporary Muslim societies.

5 Conclusion

Kanem–Bornu developed one of the most sophisticated systems of Islamic learning in pre-colonial Africa. Its educational institutions—including traditional Qur'anic schools, mosque-based learning circles, scholarly lodges (zāwiyahs), manuscript libraries, and structured teacher–student networks—formed an integrated intellectual system supporting advanced studies in tafsīr, ḥadīth, fiqh, Arabic grammar, theology, logic, and related Islamic sciences. Royal patronage, scholarly mobility, trans-Saharan intellectual exchange, and vibrant manuscript production transformed Kanem–Bornu into an influential centre of Islamic scholarship whose influence extended throughout the Central Sudan. The study further demonstrates that manuscript culture was a principal pillar of Kanem–Bornu's intellectual tradition. Arabic manuscripts preserved religious knowledge, legal scholarship, theological debates, educational curricula, and scholarly correspondence while facilitating sustained intellectual exchange with major centres of learning across North and West Africa. A major contribution of the article is its demonstration that the resurgence of Qur'anic studies in contemporary Borno is best understood as a process of historical continuity. Traditional Qur'anic schools remain foundational institutions, while universities, colleges of Arabic and Islamic studies, manuscript digitisation projects, digital learning platforms, and international scholarly

collaboration represent adaptive extensions of earlier traditions. The study identifies key drivers of this resurgence, including renewed recognition of Islamic education, expansion of higher education, digital technologies, manuscript preservation initiatives, strong community participation, supportive government policies, and growing international academic collaboration. The article concludes that the enduring vitality of Qur'anic scholarship in Borno reflects the remarkable resilience of the intellectual institutions established in eighteenth-century Kanem–Bornu. It recommends strengthening manuscript preservation, integrating traditional and formal education, promoting interdisciplinary research, investing in digital humanities, supporting community-based educational initiatives, expanding international collaboration, and recognising Kanem–Bornu as one of Africa's major centres of Islamic intellectual heritage.

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