

# Annual Review of Islam in Africa

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A R I A



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# EDITORIAL

The twelfth issue of *ARIA - Annual Review of Islam in Africa* (formerly *ARISA - Annual Review of Islam in South Africa*) is published as a special issue on Islam in Nigeria. Its publication was about to be announced at the beginning of 2014, when the sudden increase in the intensity and brutality of the 'Boko Haram' crisis prompted us to postpone its release in order to host more contributions on the topic. Having sacrificed punctuality for scientific comprehensiveness, we hope we are now able to offer our readers a mix of articles that capture at least some of the complexity of the drama that is unfolding in front of our eyes, and for too many Nigerians, inside their very lives.

Even though this particular issue is the fruit of the collaboration of one of the editors with a number of Nigerian colleagues, this is also the occasion to announce the constitution of a new editorial board, composed of Andrea Brigaglia (University of Cape Town), Muhammed Haron (University of Botswana) and Mauro Nobili (University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign). This editorial board will be responsible for a second, forthcoming issue (12/2, 2013-2014), as well as—we hope—of a number of future ones. With the constitution of this new board, we believe that the transition from the South African focus of the first series of the Review, to a broader, continental one, started with the 2008-2009 volume, can now be considered as definitively accomplished.

## Islam in Nigeria

For an issue that wants to complete the transition of the Review from a regional to a continental scope, it is quite appropriate to be dedicated to Nigeria. With a population estimated in 2013 at more than 174 million people—at least half of which, with all probability, are Muslims—Nigeria has the seventh largest population in the world and as such, it is still Africa's 'demographic giant.' It is also, increasingly, an economic powerhouse—the size of its economy having recently been alleged to have surpassed that of South Africa as the biggest in the continent. 'Naija' (as the country is colloquially known) is also probably the biggest manufacturer of contemporary African popular culture, with the film industries of 'Nollywood' and 'Kannywood' (Nigerian Hausa films, now often sub-titled in English for their growing international audience) selling in the millions on a continental scale.

Islam has been continuously present in what is today's Nigeria since at least the eleventh century, when the first Muslim rulers of the kingdom of Kanem (later to be named Borno) converted to the religion. It was also in the north of today's Nigeria that a momentous event such as the launching of the reformist movement led by Shaykh Usman Dan Fodio and the subsequent establishment of the Sokoto Caliphate (with Ethiopia, the biggest sub-Saharan African state in the nineteenth century) took place, profoundly affecting the cultural and political dynamics of the religion in the entire West African sub-region.

# BIOGRAPHIES

## Shaykh Isa Waziri (1925-2013), Exegete of the Qur'an

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This paper presents the biography of Isa b. Muhammad Gidado, better known as Shaykh Isa Waziri. He is known mainly for his Hausa oral *tafsir* (Qur'anic exegesis), which he conducted for many years during the month of Ramadan, and for his role as a *Waziri* (a kind of "ministry of religious affairs") of the Kano Emirate. Isa Waziri emerged during years of intense confrontation between the Sufi orders and the Izala movement as a voice of moderation and compromise. His recent death leaves a profound void in the public arena of Islam in Kano.

### **Birth and Education**

Born in Tudun Wazirci (Kano city) in 1925, his full name was Isa b. Muhammad Gidado b. Muhammad b. al-Mustafa b. Abi Bakr b. al-Mustafa. He was a descendant of Goni Mukhtar, a disciple of Shaykh Usman Dan Fodio (d. 1817) who had been sent as the latter's flag-bearer to Misau. After acquiring elementary Qur'anic and Islamic knowledge from his father, Shaykh Isa Waziri studied at different Qur'anic and *zaure* (Hausa term for informal circles of students studying in the house of a scholar) schools.<sup>1</sup>



(photo courtesy of author)

In 1936, he was admitted into the Judicial School at Shahuci, Kano, and in 1940, into the Kano Law School, where he graduated in 1944. His classmates in both schools included future prominent public figures such as Abu Bakr Jakada and Nasir Mustafa.

In 1962, Shaykh Isa Waziri, with other northern Nigerian students, secured admission into the famous al-Azhar University, Cairo. This was before the oil boom and the expansion of the Saudi missionary *da'wa* to Africa which would lead to the emergence of a generation of African scholars trained in Madinah. At that time, al-Azhar was the favourite choice for West African governments when sending promising students to perform Islamic studies. This group of students graduated in 1967. Other students in that group included Abu Bakr Jakada, Imam al-Din Bello, Abdurrazzaq Ilorin, Balarabe Dawud (Plateau State), Muhammad Dan Yalwa and Nasir Mu'adh (Kano). All of them were admitted into the College of Islamic Legal Studies at al-Azhar, where Isa Waziri studied Islamic Law with reference to the Maliki school of Law. Other Nigerian students, including Suwaid Ahmad, Hussain Sufi, Ali Na'ibi Suwaid, and Idris Kuliya Alkali were admitted into other colleges within the university.<sup>2</sup>

### Working Career

After graduating from Kano Law School in 1944, Isa Waziri taught a group of sons of Arab residents of Kano at Dahdou Yusuf School, Kantin Kwari. Later on, he moved to Sa'id Shor School which was a small school established mainly for the children of Sa'id Shor and those of his brother Ali Shor.<sup>3</sup>

In 1967, upon his return from Cairo, he was posted to teach Arabic and Islamic Studies at Bichi Teachers' Training College, and in 1969, he was transferred to the School for Arabic Studies, Kano. In 1971, he left his teaching career to take a judiciary post as *Alkali* (Hausa for *Qadi*, 'Islamic judge'). In 1974, he was transferred to Sumaila, later to Gezawa and finally to Shahuci in Kano city. After a car accident that kept him in hospital for two months in 1980, he decided to leave the judiciary and to go back to his earlier teaching profession; he duly took up the post of Vice-Principal at the Government Arabic Teachers' College, Gwale (Kano).<sup>4</sup>

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### Isa Waziri as an Imam

During one of the many coups that characterised the turbulent politics of Nigeria, General Murtala Muhammad (1938-1976) was assassinated on 13 February, 1976. After he was buried at Hausawa quarters, along Zoo Road, Kano, a new Friday mosque was erected very close to his grave in order to immortalise his good name. The mosque was officially opened by the first civilian Governor of Kano State, Alhaji Muhammad Abubakar Rimi (1940-2011). The emir of Kano, Alhaji Ado Bayero (1930-2014), personally led its first Friday prayer. Immediately afterwards, the emir of Kano publicly appointed Shaykh Isa Waziri as the imam of the mosque, which would become popularly known in Hausa as *Masallacin Murtala* (Murtala's mosque).<sup>5</sup> In his new public role as an imam, Shaykh Isa Waziri soon became regarded as one of the most eloquent and intellectually gifted preachers in Kano. His sermons would always provide a commentary on current issues of public concern, and would cover all aspects of human life.<sup>6</sup>

### Isa, Waziri of Kano

As an imam of *Masallacin Murtala*, Shaykh Isa Waziri gradually gained the fame that won him the title of *Waziri* of Kano, an appointment that was conferred on him by Emir Ado Bayero after the death of his senior brother, Waziri Shehu Gidado.

The main responsibility of a *Waziri* in the traditional Kano *sarauta* (royalty) system is that of being a special adviser to the emir on Islamic and judicial affairs. Thus, issues under the responsibility of a *Waziri* include the following: conducting interviews and allowing permits to Islamic scholars who intend to start *da'wa* (preaching) and public *tafsir* (oral Qur'anic exegesis); confirming the sighting of the moon to declare the commencement of the fast of Ramadan as well as its ending; intervening in the case of conflicts related to the building and the management of mosques; the imamship of

Friday mosques and, more broadly, the informal reconciliation and peace-building between relatives, neighbours, professional groups and associations and minority ethnic groups living in the Kano metropolis. Shaykh Isa's qualities as a conflict mediator had already become apparent in 1988 during the Kafanchan (Kaduna state) religious crisis, in which hundreds of lives and properties worth millions of Naira were lost in clashes between Muslims and Christians. As soon as the news arrived that Muslims were being killed in Kafanchan, it was feared that 'revenge' would be taken in Kano against the numerous Christian communities who live there. Throughout the two weeks of that crisis, Shaykh Isa Waziri was constantly seen and heard in Kano State-owned media such as Kano City Television (now Abubakar Rimi Television) and Kano State Radio Corporation, making forceful appeals to the people of Kano, especially the youth, to stay calm. Shaykh Isa's role on that occasion is still considered to be a key factor in preventing the escalation of the crisis in Kano state.<sup>7</sup>

In his functions as a *waziri* and conflict mediator, Shaykh Isa was following in the footsteps of an established family tradition. His father, Muhammad Gidado, had also held the title of *waziri* from 1909 to 1926. Under his tenure, the delicate transition of the judicial system of the emirate to meet the demands of colonial rule was being negotiated. The way in which *Waziri* Gidado contributed towards maintaining the relative independence of the emirate in a difficult time succeeded in making him a very popular figure. Gidado's succession to the position of *waziri* had not been untroubled. In 1903, the British had appointed a slave of the emir's palace named Danrimi Allah Barsarki, as the *waziri* of the first British-appointed emir Muhammad Abbas. At that time, Muhammad Gidado was the Chief Judge (*Alkali*) of the emirate. The move by the British to appoint a slave as *waziri* was probably intended to

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give the colonial ruler a stricter control over his actions. Danrimi's appointment, however, brought about a serious rift between him and Emir Abbas, resulting in the final decision by British Governor Lord Lugard to order the immediate removal of Danrimi from his position as the *waziri* of Kano in 1909.<sup>8</sup> Thereafter, the responsibility of appointing a new *waziri* was vested in the Emir. Hence the appointment of Muhammad Gidado as the *waziri* of Kano in 1909. Later on, the emir of Kano drew up some new criteria for selecting his *waziri*. These criteria included the following: the appointment of a *waziri* either from the ruling house or from its servants should be discouraged; the *waziri* must have strong credentials as an Islamic scholar; the *waziri* should be morally upright and enjoy popular support. Emir Abbas died in 1919 and was succeeded by Emir Usman II (known as Dantsoho, r. 1919-1926). The latter was succeeded by Emir Abdullahi Bayero (r. 1926-1953). Bayero also ruled Kano jointly with *waziri* Gidado, until the latter's death in 1937, at the age of seventy-eight.<sup>9</sup> Out of respect for Gidado, who had enjoyed enormous popularity, Abdullahi Bayero never appointed a new *waziri*, relying for the most part on the newly instituted figure of the *wali*, in the person of Wali Sulaiman, as his chief adviser on religious affairs. After the death of Bayero (1953), his son and successor Muhammad Sanusi decided to revive the title in 1958 by appointing, as the new *waziri*, one of the sons of Gidado, Abu Bakr, who was then the *Dokaji* (another aristocratic title) of Kano. After his death in 1971, *Waziri* Abu Bakr was succeeded by his junior brother Shehu who, like his father, earned the respect of the people of Kano as a moderate and sensible Islamic scholar.

### Isa Waziri as a Qur'anic Exegete

Even before being appointed as the *Waziri* of Kano, Shaykh Isa had gained a popular reputation for his public *tafsir* (exegesis of the Qur'an), which he used to deliver orally and via radio during the month of

Ramadan. His passion for teaching *tafsir* developed very early in his life, as he started teaching the subject as far back as 1967, after graduating from al-Azhar, and he continued teaching it at the School for Arabic Studies, from 1969.

The history of the establishment of Shaykh Isa Waziri's own *tafsir* circle can be traced back to 1975, when he started conducting public *tafsir* in Hausa during the month of Ramadan at the town of Zakirai. He continued to conduct public *tafsir* in all the other places where he was transferred to work, including Birnin Kudu and Gezawa. His *tafsir* became more widely known in 1980, when he started conducting the Ramadan exegesis in Hausa at the *Masallacin* Murtala, of which he had recently been appointed as an imam, at the request of the then Grand Kadi (Supreme Judge) of Kano State, Hassan Ibrahim Gwarzo. As is customary during the public deliverance of *tafsir* in northern Nigeria, he used to be accompanied by a *Mai janbaki* (reciter of Qur'anic verses), whose name was Ya'u Hairan. A locally trained *hafiz* (memoriser of the Qur'an), Ya'u Hairan used to recite according to the reading of Warsh, which is still the most popular in the traditional Qur'anic schools in Nigeria.

Most public Qur'anic exegetes in northern Nigeria read a commentary from one of the *tafsir* books they use, and then translate it into Hausa. Shaykh Isa Waziri adopted a simpler method, because he was aware that his listeners included people with different levels of understanding. Thus, he tried to use simple language which could be understood by all, with many references to practical examples from everyday life. Despite this, his exegesis was a very learned one, as it was based on a wide range of sources. Like many other northern Nigerian exegetes, his main source was Amad al-Sawi's supra-commentary to the *tafsir al-Jalalayn* by Jalal al-Din al-Mahalli and Jalal al-Din al-Suyuti, titled *Hashiyat al-Sawi 'ala al-Jalalayn*. Other sources he frequently consulted include the *Diya al-*

*Ta'wil* by 'Abdallah Dan Fodio, and the voluminous classical exegeses of al-Qurtubi, al-Nasafi, Fakhr al-Din al-Razi, al-Baghawi and al-Baydawi.<sup>10</sup>

Among the characteristics that helped his *tafsir* appeal to a huge sector of the Kano public (and, more generally, to the northern Nigerian one) was his non-partisan approach to interpretation, and his erudite notes on the linguistics aspects of the Arabic of the Qur'an. The first characteristic is particularly important, as the modern arena of public Qur'anic exegesis in Nigeria has been marked by harshly polemical and sectarian tones, as many Qur'anic verses were often interpreted by exegetes as being in denial of the legitimacy of Sufism. Among the scholars who delivered a public *tafsir* with strongly polemical veins was the main critic of Sufism in Nigeria, Shaykh Abubakar Gumi (d. 1992), and his two opponents Shaykh Muhammad al-Nasir Kabara (d. 1996) and Shaykh Tahir (Dahiru) 'Uthman Bauchi, respectively of the Qadiriyya and the Tijaniyya Sufi orders.

Although he was attached to a *silsila* (chain of authority) of the Qadiriyya Sufi order reaching back to Shaykh Usman Dan Fodio, Shaykh Isa Waziri never placed Sufi interpretations at the heart of his concerns in public exegesis. During a time of intense and sometimes heated confrontations, where public *tafsir* was becoming an arena for mutual accusations, the moderate approach of Shaykh Isa Waziri's *tafsir* helped boost its appeal to a sector of the Muslim public which was looking for a model of Sunni non-partisan approach. It is mainly for this reason that Shaykh Isa Waziri can be considered as one of the most universally respected religious scholars of today's Kano.

## Notes

- 1 Hauwa Hamza Fagge, "Tarihin Rayuwar Shaykh Isa Waziri," (unpublished paper, 1999), p. 20. See also author's interview with Shaykh Isa Waziri, 27 September, 2002. The Judicial School at Shahuci was then an elementary school of law, while the Kano Law School was a secondary institution.

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## FOCUS: BIOGRAPHIES

- 2 Auwalu Mustapha Zahradeen, "The Gidado Family Library: A Case Study of a Scholarly Community in Kano," (unpublished Master of Library Science thesis submitted to the Postgraduate School, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, 1988), p. 57.
- 3 Ibid., p. 57. Ali Shor was an Arab trader of Libyan origin based in Kantin Kwari, Kano.
- 4 Ibid., p. 58. See also author's interview with Shaykh Isa Waziri, 27 September 2002.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 This judgment is based on the author's personal observations over many years.
- 7 Hauwa Hamza Fagge, "Tarihin Rayuwar," pp. 79-81.
- 8 See Usman Sani Abbas, "Trends of Tafsir among selected Ulama in Northern Nigeria," (Unpublished PhD thesis, Department of Islamic Studies, Kano Bayero University Kano, 2005), p. 251.
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 Shaykh Kuliya Alkali, interview with the author.