

The life and times of a Scholar of Zaria (Nigeria): Shaykh Yahuza b. Sa'ad, 1883-1958

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Introduction

In the region of Nigeria, Arabic literacy became common as a result of the activities of Muslim merchants who crossed the Sahara from North Africa and beyond. It was also as a result of their activities that Islam gradually gained acceptance in what is today known as northern Nigeria. Amongst the books that became part and parcel of the curriculum of Islamic studies in that area, in addition to the Holy Qur'an and the Hadith corpus, were books such as the *Shifa'* of al-Qadi 'Iyad, as well as the standard corpus of Maliki jurisprudence including, among others, the *Risala* of al-Akhdari, the *Risala* of al-Qayrawani and the *Mukhtasar* of Khalil b. Ishaq.¹ These were the books to be found in the possession of most of the Jihad leaders of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. These books would also be kept by a range of scholars of Hausaland and Borno before and after the Jihad whose writings and repositories pioneered the development of a 'Nigerian' corpus of Arabic manuscript collections.² This paper will look at the life and the library of an important



personality amongst the scholars of Zaria (northern Nigeria), popularly known as Shaykh Yahuza. This paper argues that Shaykh Yahuza's contribution to learning and literary works cannot be compared to any other person in twentieth century Zazzau (the Hausa name for Zaria and its Emirate).

Historical Background

The son of Malam Sa'ad, the grandson of Malam Muhammad and the great grandson of Malam 'Abd Allah, Yahuza was born to a lineage of religious scholars in Wusonu on a Friday in the year 1204 after the Hijra (1883 CE).³ His parents, under the leadership of the clan head, migrated from Yantumaki, a village in the land of Katsina, and first settled in Turunku, Zazzau emirate. They provide an example of the migration of people that contributed to the growth and development of towns and cities in Africa since the tenth century CE.⁴ This migration was one of the processes through which linkages were established and skills were exchanged between communities. These movements or migrations are usually explained as being an attempt to

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satisfy certain basic material needs or to avoid certain challenges. In this specific case, however, the migration was part of the natural movement of Fulani nomadic communities in search of grazing lands and at the same time, aiming to enhance the reach of the scholarly activities of its religious scholars.

Travelling with their families, animals and luggage, the migrating group rested in a border town between the emirates of Zaria and Kano, possibly around the town of Makarfi. As the group could not agree on which direction to follow, some of them moved towards the direction of Kano. The other group, which moved towards Zaria, first settled in the city, in the area now called Limanci, but later relocated to Turunku where they would find more available land to farm and graze their cattle. This was a common pattern of the life-style of pre-colonial Hausaland, where people would often live in the city but maintain a farm-house where they would produce the necessary food to feed the family. At that time, the land tenure system had been recently transformed from a system of free land available to every member of the society into what was referred to as *Kasar Sarki* (Hausa for: "the land of the Emir"). Under this new system, the Sarki (Emir) had legal ownership of the land within the confines of every individual emirate, and would give available land to the groups who requested it, including newcomers.⁵

Zaria was known, long before the settlement of this particular group of migrants, as the home of a number of scholarly families, who lived especially in settlements around Kona,⁶ Juma,⁷ Kaura,⁸ Kakaki,⁹ Kofar Doka.¹⁰ While at Turunku, Malam Sa'adu, the father of *shaykh* Yahuza, developed the habit of going for studies to a certain scholar in Wusonu. Shortly after, Malam Sa'ad relocated there, and settled with his family devoting himself to learning those books dealing with *'ibadat* (acts of worship) according to the Maliki school.¹¹ It was during this period that Yahuza was conceived and he was born in 1883, twenty years before the colonial conquest of the Sokoto Caliphate.

Education

As customary in most scholarly families, Shaykh Yahuza started his childhood education at home

with his parents, where he completed his studies of the Qur'an. This was when he was seven years of age, under an assistant named Malam Abd al-Ra'uf who was also a student of Shaykh Yahuza's father and his son in-law. Not long after, Shaykh Yahuza would start a scholarly life far from his immediate family, when he accompanied his teacher 'Abd al-Ra'uf in his search for Islamic knowledge in the area of Borno (today's north-eastern Nigeria). Borno is known as one of the areas of Nigeria which are richly endowed with scholars who specialize in the memorization of the Qur'an and in its ancillary sciences (exegesis, calligraphy etc.). Situated at a commercial crossroads and in an area bordered by great ethnic diversity, Borno attracted both merchants and scholars, and sent out its scholars to other parts of the globe both for seeking and teaching knowledge.¹² Its location also made it an obvious resting place for people moving from West Africa to the east to perform the pilgrimage, and therefore it was known as an abode of scholars and men of God.

After his return from Borno, Shaykh Yahuza continued his higher Islamic studies with his father and with other scholars within the Zaria area; these scholars included Malam Akilu of Kusfa. The scholars of Zaria were traditionally renowned for their knowledge of Arabic grammar and literature. The same thirst for knowledge also took him as far as Kano, another important centre of scholarship in Hausaland. The pre-eminence of Kano in scholarly activity was due to its central position as an important commercial *entrepôt*. In Kano he learnt other disciplines such as astrology, a

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knowledge he was denied by his earlier teachers in Zaria. Shaykh Yahuza first settled in Gezawa village, one of the villages on the outskirts of Kano also known as 'Kano close settled zones.' This area offered available farm lands in addition to its proximity to the city. Madabo ward was where Shaykh Yahuza did most

of his studies while in Kano. The Madabo scholars constituted one of the earliest and most important scholarly networks in Kano with emphasis on the study of Maliki law, unlike the scholars of the neighbouring ward of Salga, who in addition to law also encouraged the teaching of grammar.¹³ The challenge in the learning tradition made it

quite difficult for Shaykh Yahuza to remain in Gezawa while attending classes in the city centre. It is important to note that Kano by this period of this study was still largely rural and there were no tarred roads, electricity and means of modern communication. Transportation was mostly by the use of donkeys and horses, which were only available to privileged people, mainly the royalty. This meant that Shaykh Yahuza travelled to and from Gezawa, about 20 km from Kano, in order to study. As a result, Shaykh Yahuza decided to relocate to Kano. There, he was in close proximity to the then-burgeoning scholarly class of the city, most of whom were adherents of the Tijaniyya Sufi brotherhood. Kano holds a central place in the history of the Tijaniyya and Islamic scholarship in Nigeria.¹⁴ Shaykh Yahuza did not, however, formally affiliate to the brotherhood at that time. It was also in Kano that he developed some interest in trading, which became one of his activities, in addition to his scholarly work.

After a long stay in Kano, Shaykh Yahuza returned home to Zaria, where he had begun his studies; on his return he was regarded as a scholarly authority, a position even his teachers in Kusfa acknowledged. Nevertheless, Shaykh Yahuza also continued to take classes occasionally at Waziri Umaru's in Kakakiward and at Malam Sani's, in Kofar Doka ward. It was from Malam Sani that Shaykh Yahuza finally took the litanies of the Tijaniyya, and was later made a *muqaddam* with the authority to initiate others. Shaykh Yahuza was among the first set of scholars from Zaria who submitted to the religious authority of Shaykh Ibrahim Niasse, following a similar move by an influential sector of the scholars of Kano a few years earlier. The network that was then emerging around the authority of Shaykh Ibrahim Niasse was mainly rooted in the claim that the latter was the *sahib al-fayda*, the 'depository of the flood,' a figure that was expected to appear and bring about an unprecedented expansion of the Tijaniyya. The expansion of the *fayda* Tijaniyya network was also strictly linked to a special set of litanies associated with Shaykh Ibrahim Niasse and used in the process of spiritual training (*tarbiya*) to bring about the rebirth (*fana'*) of the disciple and

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his attainment of divine knowledge (*ma'rifa*) in what was reportedly an exceptionally short time.¹⁵

Shaykh Yahuza had already written a poem in praise of Shaykh Ibrahim Niasse before meeting him. In the same way, Shaykh Ibrahim Niasse also mentioned him in one of his poems and blessed him and his students. Shaykh Yahuza was also among the early scholars of Hausaland (northern Nigeria) who visited Shaykh Ibrahim Niasse in his home in Kaolack, Senegal. It was during that visit, which he made in company of his son and present successor, Khalifa Muhammad Ghali, that he underwent his *tarbiya* (spiritual

training) under the care of Shaykh Ibrahim. It was also during that visit that Khalifa Muhammad Ghali was officially initiated into the Tijaniyya path, directly by Shaykh Ibrahim Niasse.¹⁶

Shaykh Yahuza's Writings

By the early part of the twentieth century, Shaykh Yahuza was already a well-known scholar in Zaria. Unlike other scholars of that city at that time, who were active teachers but only occasionally wrote new works, Shaykh Yahuza wrote many works in Arabic, and until his death writing remained his most cherished activity. His written works, following the categorization in an unpublished paper by Bello Ishaq,¹⁷ are categorized as follows:

a) Islamic (Maliki) jurisprudence:

- *Bustan ahl al-falah fi sha'n islah al-nikah*. On marriage. A manuscript copy is available at the Jos museum.
- *Fathal-Jawad fi sharh al-Irshad*. A full commentary on *Irshad al-salik*, a well-known book of Maliki law authored by the Iraqi scholar 'Abd al-Rahman b. Muhammad al-Baghdadi, known as Ibn 'Askar (d. 1332). This is one of Shaykh Yahuza's most important works and has been published several times. A manuscript copy is also available at the Kano State History and Culture Bureau.
- *Manhaj al-salik ila ma'rifat al-manasik*. On pilgrimage. A manuscript copy is available at the Jos museum.
- *Nuzum al-tahfiz*. A versification of the compendium of 'Abd al-Bari al-Ashmawi

(*al-Muqaddima fi'l-'ibadat*) on acts of worship according to the Maliki School, a short text often studied in traditional schools.

- *Rawdat al-bustan*. On the *Basmalah*.
- *Sha'n al-niyya*. On the rulings concerning the expression of intention in acts of worship.
- *Sharh al-Qurtubi*. A commentary on a didactic poem by Yahya al-Qurtubi (d. 1172) on acts of worship according to Maliki jurisprudence (*Urjuzat al-wildan*, also known as *Nazm al-Qurtubi fi'l-'ibadat*).

b) Theology:

- *Khulasat al-mabahith*. A manuscript copy is available at the Jos museum.
- *Miftah al-sibyan*. An 85 verses poem on the Oneness of God. A manuscript copy is available at the Jos museum.
- *Miftah al-tawhid fi ma'rifat sifat al-Majid*. A poem on the attributes of God according to the Ash'ari school.
- *Nuzum muqaddimat al-Sanusi*. A versification of one of Muhammad al-Sanusi's works on Ash'ari theology.

c) On the practices of the Tijaniyya Sufi order:

- *Fada'il al-Tariqa al-Tijaniyya*. On the benefits derived from the practice of the Tijaniyya Sufi order. A manuscript copy is available in the Jos Museum.
- *Matlab al-khillan fi fiqh ahkam wird al-Tijan*. On the rulings associated with the practice of the Tijani litanies. A copy is available at the Herskovits Library, Northwestern University (Paden collection).

d) Various poems (eulogies, odes, etc.):

- *Takhmis* of a poem known as *Taghittu*.
- *Takhmis* of a poem known as *Idha shi'ta*.
- *Takhmis* of a poem known as *al-Zuhd*.
- *Takhmis* of the poem known as *al-Burda*, by Imam Muhammad al-Busiri (d. 1294).
- *Shawqal-murid*. A manuscript copy is available at Ibadan University Library.
- *Murshid al-Ikhwan ila madh Ahmad al-Tijani*. A poem in

praise of Shaykh Ahmad al-Tijani (d. 1814).

- *al-Qasida al-daliyya: Hal li masirun nahwa Fasa muri'a*. A poem rhyming in *dal*, in praise of Shaykh Ahmad al-Tijani. A manuscript copy is available at the Jos museum.
- *al-Qasida al-lamiyya: Bushra li-ma qad ja'ana min 'alimi*. Verses thanking Ibrahim b. Ahmad b. Umar al-Wali for some verses the latter had written in praise of the author.
- *al-Qasida al-mimiyya: A-ya hubbi li-Kawlakha sir sari'a*. A poem rhyming in *lam*, in praise of Shaykh Ibrahim Niasse (d. 1975). Manuscript copies are available at the Jos museum, as well as at the Ibadan University Library.
- *Tabshir al-ikhwan bi-akhdh dhaykh al-Tijan*. A poem on the rewards associated with the Tijaniyya Sufi order. A manuscript copy is available in the Kaduna National Archive.
- *Targhib al-ikhwan fi madh wird al-Tijan*. A poem in praise of Shaykh Ahmad al-Tijani. A manuscript copy is available at the Ibadan University Library.
- *Targhib al-ikhwan fi madh wird al-Tijan*. On the virtues of the Tijani practices. A manuscript copy is available at the Ibadan University Library.
- *Taqrif Raf' al-malam*. Verses commending Shaykh Ibrahim Niasse's book *Raf' al-malam*, a defence of the practice of folding the arms over the chest during ritual prayer.
- *Targhib al-ikhwan fi hubb wa-madh qutb al-aqtab Ahmad al-Tijan*. A poem in praise of Shaykh Ahmad al-Tijani. A manuscript copy is available in the Kaduna National Archive.

State of Shaykh Yahuza Repository

Shaykh Yahuza's manuscripts were left to the mercy of his family and some of his students who cared to copy and keep personal copies; in the past,

this situation also applied to the manuscripts of most of the scholars of Hausaland. Although some of the books were published, copies were never properly marketed but were given to visitors to the house on *ziyara* (pious visit to a scholar or saint) because the purpose of writing was never to make a profit or to further an academic career, but solely for didactic and devotional purposes..

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solely for didactic and devotional purposes. Only at certain times could copies be found with marketers, who sometimes republished the book upon their own initiative, aiming to sell it during religious functions or to market it in the local bookstores. At his death, Shaykh Yahuza left no organized library of any significance and so nobody can say just where his books now are, including those books he used during his studies.

Efforts at immortalizing Shaykh Yahuza's scholarly legacy started with the establishment of an Islamic school financed by the late Alhaji Amin Sultani. Classrooms were built and all the necessary support was given to pay a small allowance to teachers and to pay for the supply of some reading material. This effort continued, especially in response to the increasing number of students applying for admission. Originally an Islamic school, the institution developed into a modern one, with a section that caters for primary and secondary education, in addition to the school for the memorization of the Qur'an.¹⁸ The school can claim that it has made a significant impact on the history of learning and scholarship in Zaria. In addition to the large number of students who graduated from it, the school is now recognized by the Egyptian embassy in Nigeria as one of the schools in Nigeria where candidates can compete for a scholarship for admission for degree programmes in Egypt. Several graduates have benefitted from this opportunity and one of them has even completed his PhD, while many have completed their MA degrees. Recently three students from the school sat and passed an Egyptian scholarship examination which earns them admission into Azhar University to read various degree courses.¹⁹

An important development in this respect came with the successful registration of the *Sheikh Yahuza Islamic Foundation*. Through the effort of the Foundation, a Library has been built and efforts are in place to equip it with all the available manuscripts and published books of Shaykh Yahuza, as well of other Nigerian and international Islamic scholars. The library is also expected to provide a reading and research space for international researchers, and it will have all the necessary modern equipment.

Conclusion

By looking at the personality of Shaykh Yahuza, this paper has shown how scholarship was an integral part of the culture of Hausaland from before the jihad of 'Uthman Dan Fodio in the early nineteenth century, as well as after it. That jihad only provided an additional stimulus for the scholars of Hausaland to move far and wide in search of advanced knowledge. Shaykh Yahuza and his family found themselves in this context in Zaria. Coming from a scholarly background, Shaykh Yahuza followed the same line and succeeded in retaining the legacy of his forefathers. The wave of Tijani revivalism initiated in the 1930s by the Senegalese Shaykh Ibrahim Niasse provided a new stimulus to scholarly activities and to writing,

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especially in the field of Sufism. Nigerian scholars belonging to the network of the followers of Shaykh Ibrahim Niasse were known for their dedication to the teaching of Maliki law and Ash'ari theology, as well as for their mastery of Arabic poetry, which they composed in large quantities. Before his death, Shaykh Yahuza established a culture of learning of a specific type in Zaria, and his writings were mostly didactic and devotional, aimed at educating his disciples in Maliki law and at training them in a specific method of Sufi knowledge. His life and his writings offer an important glimpse into the nature of Islamic scholarship in northern Nigeria in the mid-twentieth century. The ubiquitous use of the poetical language of the *qasida* (classical Arabic verse) by scholars like Shaykh Yahuza, trained entirely in West Africa, for didactic purposes (versifications of theological and legal treatises) and for devotional ones (poems in praise of the Prophet or of Tijani saintly figures) deserves more attention, as it showcases the depth of the engagement with classical Arabic literary forms in traditional West African Islamic scholarship.

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- of Zazzau (Sarkin Zaria Raba Wawa) and gave him the name Muhammad. For details refer to Abubakar 1979.
- 7 Unguwar Juma is one of the oldest settlements in Zaria and one of the major centres of Islamic learning that to date, has produced the Imams of the central mosque of Zaria city. The area became more renowned especially under Alkali (*qadi*) Muhammad Awwal who died in 1956.
- 8 Kaura was one of the settlements in Zaria that was occupied by the Habe (a term referring to the early Hausa speakers of Hausaland and also used in reference to the authority established in Hausaland before the 19th century jihad that brought to an end the Habe dynasty). Among the scholars who first settled in the area were Malam Musa (a one-time emir of Zazzau from the Mallawa clan), Malam Ya-Musa (a one-time emir from the Barebari clan), Malam Abdullahi from the Katsinawa clan) and Abdussalami (from the Sullubawa clan).
- 9 Scholarly activity started here at the beginning of the 19th century, and produced scholars noted in the field of Maliki jurisprudence (*fiqh*).
- 10 This school was established by Alfa Umar, a migrant from Futa Toro (today's Senegal), when he settled there for a rest while on his way to Mecca for pilgrimage.
- 11 Interview with Khalifa Malam Ghali Shaykh Yahuza. Malam Ghali is the present successor of Shaykh Yahuza as head of the latter's scholarly network. He is about 70 years of age.
- 12 According to Hamidu Bobboyi, the direction of movement of the Bornuan scholars and students includes areas around Fezzan and Tripoli (in today's Libya) to as far as Egypt to the north; Bagirmi, Wadai and Dafur (today's Chad and Sudan) to the East; Adamawa and the Benue valley (today's central Nigeria) to the South; Hausaland and beyond to the Volta Basin (today's Ghana) to the West. See Bobboyi 1996: 383.
- 13 Brigaglia 2009.
- 14 For a rich analysis of the role of Muslim scholars in the social and political history of Kano, see Paden 1973.
- 15 For a biography of Shaykh Ibrahim Niasse and a history of his movement, see Seesemann 2011. For a discussion of the history of the theme of the *fayda* in the Tijaniyya, see Brigaglia 2001.
- 16 Interview with Khalifa Ghali.
- 17 Ishaq 2005.
- 18 Here the writer acknowledges the efforts of educationists Malam Saidu Mukari, Malam Aminu Shehu and other members of the education committee. Malam Tanimu Sada has also played an important role that saw the school recognized and supported by the Kaduna State Government. As a result, the State is now responsible for the payment of the salaries of some of the staff members.
- 19 This was achieved through the efforts of Malam Abbas Dabo Sambo who pioneered the establishment and registration of *Sheikh Yahuza Islamic Foundation* with the Corporate Affairs Commission, a status that provides the school with the institutional framework to seek assistance within and outside the country.

Notes

- 1 Galadanchi 2007: xix-xxi.
- 2 Usman 2007: 52; Bello 1951; Usman 1979. Kani 1987.
- 3 Interview with Malam Aminu Shehu, University Lecturer, Institute of Education, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, June 7th 2010.
- 4 See Usman 1981.
- 5 This system provided the Sarki with a means of knowing his people and, more specifically, any newcomer, who was supposed to pay homage to the Sarki before he could be allocated a piece of land to build a house and to farm. For details refer to Gwadabe 2010.
- 6 Shaykh Haruna b. Jibrin (lived in about the 14th century) was the initiator of scholarly activity in this part of Zaria city. He settled and commenced his religious activities in that area, including conversion of the people to the religion of Islam. He is said to be the person who converted one of the emirs