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Fī Lawḥin Maḥfūz: Towards a Phenomenological Analysis of the Quranic Tablet

Yonder heart by tracery of earth unscored,
Cometh keeper of the mysteries to be
Mirror-holder to the Tablet the preserved
Double grows it of the script from doubt that free.¹

Abstract: This article looks at the *lawḥ* (wooden tablet) in traditional Quranic education in Africa, through the lens of the phenomenology of religion. It argues that, the set of pedagogical practices that are sustained with the support of the *lawḥ* can be understood as a complex ritual of initiation into Islamic notions and beliefs. As in Eliade's classical phenomenology, this ritual takes the form of a symbolic re-enactment of a primordial myth and acts as the support of a symbolic identification between the initiate and a sacred ancestor. A symbol, at the same time, of the archetypal Quran (*al-lawḥ al-maḥfūz*), of the metaphysical reality of the Prophet (*al-ḥaqīqa al-muḥammadiyya*), and of the pupil's human form, the *lawḥ* allows for the symbolic identification of the protagonist of the initiation (the pupil) with the protagonist (the Prophet) of Islam's most primordial myth (the revelation of the Quran).

1 Introduction

Due to the limited availability of paper before the development of the modern paper industry, the wooden tablet (in Arabic, *lawḥ*) was used for centuries as the principal support for the practice of literacy in Africa—just as anywhere else in the Muslim world. So ubiquitous was the *lawḥ* in African Muslim cultures, that in many instances, it also became the main symbol of Islamic literacy and Quranic scholarship. Still to this day in northern Nigeria, the stylized image of a *lawḥ* can be seen, used as a decorative pattern on the walls of a house, probably belonging

¹ From a Turkish poem by Emir Adil quoted and translated in Gibb 1900, vol. 1, 423. This essay is dedicated to Iliya, Na-Yaya and Nura of Sabuwar Kofa (Kano), as well as to the memory of the late Garba Mai Tebur. I wish to express my thanks to Louis Brenner for his comments on an earlier draft of this paper, and to Francesco Zappa for the many conversations that contributed to the development of my central idea.



Fig. 1: Decorated walls of a house (probably belonging to a Quranic teacher) in Zaria, 2008.
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to a scholar, in Zaria (Fig. 1) and as a tombstone signaling the resting place of Quranic teachers in the cemetery of Kano (Fig. 2). In Maiduguri, a modern monument in the form of three *lawh*-s can be seen in a public square, probably as a homage to the fame of the city as the ‘capital’ of traditional Quranic learning in Nigeria. It is entirely normal for objects in common use in a society to become a symbol of the category of people they are associated with, like a shovel for a baker, a sickle for a farmer, a hammer for a factory worker, a rolling pin for a housewife. This process is so obvious that its explanation does not need any particular anthropological insight. Religious symbols, however, require a different set of premises to be understood. In fact, the exceptional appeal of religiously charged images and objects should be understood not only as an immediate consequence of their wide use by a specific social group (clerical or otherwise), but also in relation to the broader net of sacred ideas and notions (myths) to which they are connected in the context of a specific religious system. In other words, when we look at religiously charged objects, we have to keep in mind that they are already a symbol of something, *before* becoming practical objects of common use, rather than vice versa.



Fig. 2: Iron gravestone in the shape of a Quranic tablet in the Goron Dutse cemetery of Kano.
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Building on some theoretical insights developed by the recent anthropology of Islamic education in West Africa, as well as on some ideas drawn from Mircea Eliade’s classical works on myth and ritual, this essay will argue that in traditional northern Nigerian Muslim societies, the *lawḥ* was not only an indispensable practical tool for the transmission of Quranic knowledge, but also the central piece of a complex set of symbols that used to support an educational and initiatory process based on the ritual re-enactment of the myth of the Quranic revelation.

2 Embodied epistemology

Published in 2001, Louis Brenner’s monograph *Controlling Knowledge* remains one of the most comprehensive and theoretically inspiring studies on religion

and education in a West African Muslim society. Reconstructing the history of the several experiments of reform and counter-reform of Islamic education attempted in Mali during the colonial and post-colonial periods, Brenner argues that a fundamental shift was produced by the epochal rupture of colonization and modernization. This was not so much an ideological divide between religious and secular education, but rather between the 'esoteric episteme' conveyed by the traditional Quranic school system on the one hand, and the 'rational episteme' promoted by new actors represented by both State secular schools and private Islamic schools on the other. For Brenner, the difference between the two categories was less about the content of the notions imparted than about their conceptions of knowledge. The old Quranic school system was aimed at transforming the pupil's inner and social persona through a process that had an essentially 'initiatic nature.'² In contrast, the modern Islamic schools, just like the secular ones, reconfigured (Islamic) knowledge as a formal, disembodied set of notions that was to be conveyed to the pupil in an objectified, quantifiable fashion. In the modern schools, the personal relationship between the pupils and their teacher became looser, and the esoteric and initiatic dimension which constituted an integral part of traditional Quranic learning was lost or at least, diluted. The disappearance of the numerous esoteric notions and practices traditionally associated with Quranic learning (ritually 'drinking' the ink used to write the Quran; manufacturing talismans based on Quranic verses, etc.) is probably one of the most apparent signs of what Brenner calls the 'rationalization' of knowledge mediated by the modern Islamic school.³

In her studies on traditional Quranic education in Mauritania, Corinne Fortier has added another dimension to the anthropology of Islamic education in West Africa, highlighting the role played by the sensory and corporal dimension in the pedagogical practices of West African Muslim communities. Through the impact of sound and corporal pain, the Quranic schools studied by Fortier are

² Brenner 2001, 7.

³ The best attempt to look at the practices of Quranic talisman-making as an integral part of the epistemology of the Quranic school and of the worldview transmitted by the traditional scholars, is probably Mommersteeg 2001. A study based on the opposite theoretical assumption is El-Tom 1985, where the practices of 'drinking the Qur'an' (i.e. writing selected verses on a wooden slate and drinking the water that has been used to wash the ink off the slate) for healing or apotropaic purposes, are interpreted as a sign of the resistance of the 'local' substratum of the Berti people of Sudan, threatened by a supposedly intrinsically puritanical 'Arab' Islam. The main problem with the latter argument is that such supposedly 'Berti' practices have been attested, virtually identical, across most of the Muslim world—among Berti, Yoruba and Hausas just as much as among Arabs, Persians and Turks.

meant to inscribe Islam in the bodies of the pupils and to shape an embodied Muslim subjectivity.⁴ The idea that the educational practices of traditional Muslim West Africa must be read essentially as techniques of embodiment has recently been taken up and developed into full-fledged analyses in the studies of Rudolph Ware and Zachary Wright, who use the related terms of (respectively) ‘embodied knowledge’ and ‘living knowledge’ as theoretical tools to unpack the logic of traditional religious education in Islam, in particular (but not exclusively) in the West African context. Related, but not identical to, Brenner’s ‘esoteric episteme’, embodied knowledge involves ‘initiatory personal transmission, and knowledge beyond texts or words which came to possess (and thus be manifested by) the being of the practitioners’.⁵ Ware and Wright’s two monographs, titled respectively *The Walking Qur’an*⁶ and *Living Knowledge in West African Islam*,⁷ provide two compelling attempts to look at traditional Islamic pedagogy in Africa—both in its elementary level (the Quranic school, main object of Ware’s study) and in its higher one (the legal, theological and Sufi training addressed by Wright’s work)—as epistemologies of embodiment.

In the following couplets, the contemporary Nigerian Muslim scholar Muḥammad Kani Gusau, points to a similar conceptual opposition between the disembodied, abstract religious knowledge of modern education and the ‘embodied Islam’ transmitted as ‘living knowledge’ in the vestibules (*dahālīz*) of the traditional scholars. While the first transmits a superficial (albeit extensive) and purely mental understanding, the second induces the intimate transformation of the pupil’s subjectivity. As a close student of the famous scholar Shaykh ‘Uthmān Mai Hula (d. 1988), but at the same time a graduate of Bayero University Kano, the author is himself a product of both systems and is well aware of the attack that the traditional system is undergoing in contemporary Muslim Africa—an attack to which these verses can be seen as a sort of response.

4 Fortier 1998 and 2003.

5 Wright 2010, 33.

6 Ware 2014. See also Boyle 2007.

7 Wright 2015.

إذ اللا نظامي حاز تقوىً وطاعةً	•	يفوق النظمي اللأ أبالي بمخلص
فيا ويح من يسعى لإفساد ما بنا	•	دهاليز أهل التقى والتخصص
لقد كان للإسلام مأوا وملجأ	•	بها في قديم مع حديث كمخلص
[...]		
فما الأوليا والأتقيا وذوو الهدى	•	سوى من تلامذة الدهليز خُص
هنالك فرق بين من هو عالم	•	ومن هو علماني لأجل التخصص
فعلم يُورث طاعة الله فائق	•	مجرد علم فيه حبّ التشخص
فهذا بيان ليس دما لغيرها	•	ولا كته توطيد ركن مننص
ولم لا وإني زرتها ودريتها	•	سنيئا طوالا غير راض بمرقص

For the informal system surpasses in piety and character-building
the formal one, which has no concern for (teaching) uprightness.

Woe to those who conjure to destroy
What is built in the vestibules of the pious and learned.

In them Islam has been guarded and preserved
From ancient to modern times, as in a safe-box.
[...]

The saints, pious and righteous of the past
Were all graduates of the traditional system.

How big is the difference between an authentic scholar
and a secular one, who dresses up (like a scholar)...

A scholarship that brings about fear of God is far better
than one that generates love of ostentation.

These words are not intended as a critique against anyone
But to support a pillar that has been made to shake.

And what else could I do, when I have been visiting them and known them
For many long years, without indulging in amusements.⁸

⁸ Gusau 1988, 46, 49. The author is mentioned in ALA II, 302–303, but his name there is mistakenly spelt as Kuni. This impressive poem is a long elegy (*rithā'*) for his teacher Shaykh 'Uthman Maihula, in over 1,300 verses, containing a detailed biography of the latter.

3 Traditional Islamic education in West and Central Africa

Most descriptions in the available literature point to the existence of a common system of Islamic education adopted across West and Central Africa throughout the pre-colonial period.⁹ Like its counterpart in the pre-modern Middle East, this system was articulated into two, markedly different levels: an elementary level (the *kuttāb* of the classical North African and Middle Eastern world) and a higher level (called in the Arab world as *majlis* or *ḥalaqa*). This was not only a difference in the level of sophistication of the notions imparted, but also a distinction between two conceptually different, though intimately linked institutions. The study in the *kuttāb* constituted a general initiation aimed at molding the social and religious being of a child, and ultimately transforming him (or her) into a Muslim. Training in the *majlis*, on the contrary, provided the context for the transmission of the specific skills and the associated behavioral dispositions of the specialized group of

⁹ Regional differences are usually relative to external aspects like funding (for example, the state-sponsored system of medieval Borno vs. the mendicancy of Quranic students in Hausaland) or on techniques that facilitated the integration of the schooling in the various rhythms of the social and economic cycles of urban and rural, agricultural and nomadic communities. Some useful descriptions (in chronological order of publication) of traditional Quranic schooling in various West African Muslims societies are the following: Santerre 1973, focusing on northern Cameroon's Fulani communities; Mustapha 1987, esp. 78–115, focusing on Quranic education in Borno (Kanuri-speaking area of north-eastern Nigeria); Cissé 1992, mainly concerning Mali; Hassan 1992, on the Hausa-speaking urban communities of northern Nigeria; El-Ghassem 1997, on the nomadic Hassaniyya of Mauritania. Of the above, Hassan's book will be particularly interesting for the reader of the present volume, as it includes a rich and vivid description of the aesthetic and material culture of writing that revolves around the Quranic school: techniques of production of inks and corn-stalk pens; materials and uses of different wooden slates; production of decorated slates; calligraphies on Quranic manuscripts and talismans; links between the decorative patterns of embroideries on gowns and hats, and those of Quranic illuminations. An unpublished thesis (Diagana 1989) provides a detailed description of one of the most ancient West African traditions of Islamic education among the Soninke of southern Mauritania, with interesting insights into both its elementary and higher levels. Another important contribution, focusing on the Yoruba of south-western Nigeria and mainly on higher Islamic learning, is Reichmuth 1998. The topic of higher Islamic education in West Africa is also addressed in Reichmuth 2000, Tamari 2002, Lydon 2004, Tamari 2006, and Hall/Stewart 2011. Selected studies on specific disciplines of the traditional West African Islamic curriculum include Chamberlin 1975 (mainly on legal studies, but includes also one of the best descriptions of elementary Quranic schools in Kano, 131–136), Tamari 1996 (on Quranic exegesis), Tamari 2005 (on Arabic literature), Brigaglia 2009 (on Quranic exegesis).

the *'ulamā'* (scholars), as well as (for those who were exposed to it only occasionally), for the cultivation of specific aspects of practical and theoretical Islamic learning relevant for the daily life of an adult Muslim.

In the traditional *kuttāb*, the Quran is the only subject studied and the wooden tablet (*lawḥ*) is the only material support. The terms used for the *kuttāb* in West African languages usually refer either to the act of reading (Soninke: *xaran-yinbe*, from Ar. *qara'a*, 'to read'), to the object of study (Bambara: *kuranekalan*, 'place where the Quran is read'), or to the material support (Hausa: *makarantar allo*, 'school' (lit. 'place of reading') of the wooden tablet', from Ar. *al-lawḥ*, 'tablet', 'slate', 'wooden board'). In the *majlis*, on the contrary, the various disciplines of the traditional curriculum (*fiqh*, theology, grammar, literature, Sufism etc.) are studied by closely reading a book which in West Africa was, until fairly recent times, always in the form of an unbound manuscript of paper leaves (*ṣuḥuf*). The different supports of writing/reading used in the two stages of Quranic education (*lawḥ* and *ṣuḥuf*, wooden tablet and page leaves) reflect a Quranic symbolism that will be fully described later in this article.

In West Africa, the *majlis* is usually located in a vestibule attached to the house of a scholar. In some languages of the area, it is named after the new support of learning (the book), which has taken the place of the wooden slate of primary education (Bambara: *kitabukalan*, 'place where books are read'). In other languages, it is named after the disciplinary training which takes the place of the Quran as the main object of study (Hausa: *makarantar ilimi*, 'school of [multi-disciplinary] knowledge'). In yet other languages, it is named after the place where the sessions take place (Hausa: *makarantar soro*, 'school of the [teacher's home] vestibule'; Bambara: *bulonkonokalan*, with the same meaning) or after the tidy and quiet sessions which characterize its method (Soninke *maysi*, from Arabic *majlis*, 'assembly of seated people'). As most of the following discussion is based on observations made in a northern Nigerian context, I will use the two Hausa terms *makarantar allo* and *makarantar soro* to refer to what is, in reality, a global institution attested in a much broader geographical space.

The two institutions have a sharply different visual and sensory impact. The *makarantar allo* has an apparently chaotic arrangement: a crowd of students of both genders, loudly reciting at the same time but at a different pace, over and over again, a different set of verses of the Quran. Each of the students reads from his or her own individual tablet and tries to outdo the voice of his or her neighbor creating a characteristic, apparently cacophonous chorus. Everything in the *makarantar allo* evokes the world of primordial, undifferentiated substance (*hayūla*), a world that is yet to be transformed into a meaningful cosmos by the hierarchies and differences created by God and sustained by religious law. It is the domain of children, whose

bodies bear the mark of sexual differentiation only in potency, and who are not considered by the religious law as legally responsible, rational Muslim adults (*mukallaf*) trusted with the responsibility of following the religious precepts.

The *makarantar soro*, on the contrary, is the world of adult (prevalently male) Muslims. It is a place of silence, clarity and structure, evoking the differentiated cosmos governed by the rational rules of religious law. Male students, usually forming an orderly circle, surround their teacher and take turns in reading from their books. Unlike the child of the *makarantar allo*, who is encouraged to shout his daily portion of Quranic verses as loudly as possible to surpass the voice of his peers, a man in the *makarantar soro* will patiently wait for a hint of the teacher to signal that it is his turn to read, and will soften the tone of his voice, while humbly lowering his head, whenever he asks a question. Through the tone of his voice and through almost imperceptible moves and gestures, the physical attitude of the student in the *soro* embodies the dignified self-effacement that is characteristic of the code of conduct (*adab*) of the *‘ulamā’*.¹⁰ The two following pictures are taken in two sections of one of the most conservative (in terms of pedagogical techniques) institutions of Islamic learning of Kano city, the school of Malam Shamsu in Jar Kasa ward. The family who runs this school is linked to the oldest chains of transmission of the Tijāniyya in Kano and defiantly resisted the reforms in Islamic schooling promoted by the new networks of the Kano Sufi orders that, starting from the 1950s, aligned with the Tijāni revival led by the Senegalese Shaykh Ibrāhīm Niasse (d. 1975) and with the Qādiri revival led by the Kano Shaykh Muḥammad al-Nāṣir Kabara (d. 1996). In this sense, this school, along with a few others, can be said to represent the legacy of the oldest layer in the history of Islamic education in Kano.

10 The role of the informal institutions of higher Islamic study in West Africa has often been underestimated in the anthropological literature on the region, leading to the erroneous assumption that the level of the Islamic learning in West Africa was shallow and superficial. This assumption is based not only on a deep-seated prejudice concerning the role of literacy in pre-colonial African societies, but also on the impression left upon many observers and travelers by the elementary *makarantar allo*. Quranic schools, in fact, often held on simple mats by the roadside, were naturally the most visible dimension of traditional Islamic learning. Higher sessions of Islamic learning, on the contrary, always took place more discretely, and therefore disappeared from the picture in most anthropological accounts, leaving the wrong impression that the rote-learning of the Quran practiced in the elementary school was the only form of Islamic knowledge available in pre-colonial African societies. Tal Tamari’s studies on higher traditional Islamic education in Mali have been among the first to shed light on the qualitative aspect of traditional education in Muslim Africa (Tamari 2002, 92). In terms of the quantitative reach of Islamic learning, Ivor Wilks argues that basic Arabic literacy was almost universal among the adult male population of Salaga (northern Ghana) in the eighteenth century (Wilks 1968, 166).



Fig. 3: A traditional *makarantar allo* in Kano (*makarantar Malam Shamsu, Jar Kasa ward*).
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4 Islamic initiation

The pedagogy of the *makarantar allo* deliberately encourages passivity. The study consists for the most part in the rote-learning of the Quran, with little emphasis on comprehension of the text.¹¹ Although many basic Islamic ritual practices (ablutions, prayers, fasting), cultural dispositions (associated with age, learning and gender) and beliefs (popular hadiths on angels, prophets etc.) are also learnt by the pupil of the *makarantar allo*, in most cases no formal textbook is used to impart this knowledge in an objective form. Today, most urban northern Nigerian Quranic schools have also introduced some basic textbooks taught

¹¹ For a thoughtful discussion of the role of memorization in traditional Moroccan education, see Eickelman 1985, 57–71.



Fig. 4: A study session at the *makarantar soro* of Malam Shamsu, Jar Kasa ward (Kano).
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at the elementary level, side by side with the Quran.¹² These short textbooks, however, are always recent (twentieth-century) curricular additions to the *makarantar allo*, and they were introduced with all likelihood under the influence of the pedagogy of modern Islamic schools. In the context of the pre-colonial *makarantar allo*, the study of books of religious law, Hadith and Arabic grammar as independent subjects was never encouraged. The principle of memorizing sections of

12 The most common ones are the following three: (1) *Qawā'id al-Islām* ('The foundations of Islam'), popularly known in Hausa simply as *Kawa'idi*, an anonymous compendium of essential theology (basically, an ultra-summarized version of Muḥammad al-Sanūsī's famous compendium of Ash'arī theology known as *al-'Aqīda al-ṣuḡhrā*) and ritual practices (a summarized version of the chapters on ablution and ritual prayer from al-Akhḍarī's *Mukhtaṣar*); (2) *Tsarabar iyali gun mai basira* ('The gift to bring to the family, for those who have intellect'), a similar pamphlet, but in Arabic-script Hausa, written by Muḥammad Dan Almajiri of Fagge (Kano); (3) *Majma' al-baḥrayn fī aḥādīth sayyid al-kawnayn*, a selection of prophetic hadiths dealing with essential matters of faith, rituals and ethics, compiled by Kamāl al-Dīn Ādam Na-Ma'aji of Al-findikī (Kano).

the Quran before learning Arabic and understanding its meaning has long been discussed by classical authors. Al-Ghazālī (d. 1111), for instance, defended this practice in his *Ihyā' 'ulūm al-dīn*,¹³ arguing that among the masses, non-comprehension is to be preferred to miscomprehension, for the latter can lead to conflicting readings of the text and trigger sectarian conflict.¹⁴

The passivity that is so characteristic of the *makarantar allo*, is also to be related to the fundamental idea, typical of classical Islamic philosophy, that children in their pre-pubertal age have not developed a full 'aql (intellect; in Hausa *hankali*). This idea is also reflected in the corresponding rule of classical *fiqh*, according to which the prescriptions of the divine law are only obligatory after a Muslim child has turned into a *mukallaf*, i.e. he or she has reached puberty. Until very recent times, no gender segregation and only minimal veiling for girls used to be enjoined in the *makarantar allo*, even in contexts like urban Kano, where the exclusion (in Hausa *kulle*) of adult women (after puberty and before the cessation of menses) from public space, was considered as the norm. In today's Kano, the absence of gender segregation between pre-pubertal boys and girls is the norm only in the most conservative Quranic schools. Modern Islamic schools, on the contrary, always organize the space into gender-segregated rows and tend to be very emphatic about the use of the veil for female pupils, even those of a very tender age.

At the *makarantar allo*, the Quran forms the entire conceptual horizon of the student's universe of meaning. Typically, the learning of the Arabic alphabet is not addressed as propaedeutic to the reading of the Quranic text. The names of the letters of the Arabic alphabet are learnt only within composite words, the first verses of the Quran being learnt as indissoluble units which are recited and memorized but never broken up into isolated letters. Ibn Khaldun reported that in his time (fourteenth century), this method was characteristic of elementary *kuttāb* pedagogy in Andalusia and the Maghreb, contrary to the Egyptian use, where isolated letters were taught first, the composition of individual words second, and Quranic verses were only taught at a third stage.¹⁵ It is easy to see how the Maghrebian and West African system more closely reflects characteristic Muslim beliefs about the uncreated nature of the Quran. Introduced to the Quranic text as a

¹³ Quoted in Chamberlin 1975, 140.

¹⁴ 'Under the circumstances, a shallow comprehension of the Qur'an, giving the student a false sense of mastery, would have been worse than no comprehension at all. The purity of the Qur'an would have been jeopardized and, with it, the perpetuation of the ideal and everyone's chance of salvation' (Chamberlin 1975, 141).

¹⁵ Quoted in Hassan 1992, 91.

whole, rather than to the individual letters of the Arabic language, the pupil will tend to be initiated to the signs of the Arabic alphabet not as a conventional, human-made code for the reproduction of sounds and the articulation of language, but as ciphers of God's eternal speech revealed to humans.

The various stages of the *makarantar allo* have already been discussed in the existing literature,¹⁶ but a brief summary is needed here before attempting to unpack the symbolism of the wooden tablet that is of direct concern to us. The first stage is called in Hausa *babbaku* (the consonants). On the very first day (traditionally a Wednesday), the teacher writes the text of the *isti'ādha* (the formula of refuge that is normally read before starting to recite from the Quran: *A'ūdhu bi'l-Lāhi min al-shayṭān al-rajīm*) and the *basmala* (opening formula of all Quranic suras but one: *Bismi'l-Lāhi al-raḥmān al-raḥīm*) on the pupil's tablet. After the pupil has learnt how to read and recite these formulas, the teacher (or one of his senior students) writes the text of the *Fātiḥa* (first sura of the Quran) on his (or her) tablet. After memorizing the *Fātiḥa*, the pupil will wash the ink off the tablet and drink the water. He will then proceed in the same way for other suras, starting in reverse order from the shortest suras at the end of the Quran to the longest ones at the beginning. At this stage, only the consonantal body of the Quran will be written on the pupil's slate by the teacher or by one of his senior students, without vowels, so that the pupil will focus his attention on learning the consonants. The *babbaku* stage usually ends at sura 106 (Quraysh), that is, after the completion of nine of the final short suras. Having reached this point, the pupil will have encountered every possible grapheme of the Arabic language (all the letters in their initial, median, and final realizations, as well as certain distinctive combinations of letters like *lām-alif*, the *hamza* in its different positions etc.), at least once. During this process, the student will be helped to learn all these graphemes by a special naming system in the Hausa language. Contrary to the standard Arabic naming system, which identifies each letter with the same name for all its possible graphic realizations (initial, median, final), Hausa has a different name for each single grapheme. Example: *jim-karami* (literally, small *jim*) for the initial *jim*; *jim-sabe* (literally, *jim*-twisted) for the median *jim*; *jim-sabe koma-baya* (literally, *jim*-twisted and retorted) for the final *jim*. This nomenclature has been devised to facilitate the learning of the different written realization for a Hausa-speaking pupil.¹⁷ The letters are also learnt in the order in which they appear in the Quran,

¹⁶ Especially Hassan 1992.

¹⁷ For more details, see Hassan 1992, 83–88 and appendix no. III, as well as McIntyre 1984. Only a systematic comparison with other languages of the area (Kanuri, Fulfulde, Songhay, Shuwa

starting with the *isti'ādha* (*alu, am-baki, wau, zalun...*, i.e.: *alif, 'ayn, wāw, dhāl*, etc.).

The second stage of the *makarantar allo* is called *farfaru* (the vowels). During the *farfaru* stage, the student learns to write by himself the same suras he had previously learnt to read during the *babbaku* stage, while at the same time adding the vowels to the consonantal body of the text. This is followed by a third stage, *hajjatu* (syllabbling), where the pupil is taught for the first time how to compose independent syllabic units (*ba, bi, bu; ta, ti, tu*; etc.) to write words. At the same time, during the *hajjatu* stage the pupil writes, memorizes and washes some of the longer suras off his wooden slate. In the tradition of western and southern Hausaland (Sokoto, Kebbi, Kano, Katsina and Zaria), only the final, shortest suras would be memorized by most students, and the teacher would normally let the students wash their daily Quranic passage off their wooden slates immediately after they have demonstrated that they can read it properly, even without memorizing it. In eastern Hausaland (eastern Kano and Hadejiya), on the other hand, there used to be more emphasis on memorization, and teachers would not allow their students to wash their daily lesson off the wooden slates until they had memorized it. This was certainly due to the influence of neighboring Borno (northeastern Nigeria), where Quranic schools were known for their stronger emphasis on memorization. Today, even where the traditional Quranic schools are still in place, the borders between regional variations are more diluted, and hybrid systems are more likely to be found.

Traditionally, at the end of the *makarantar allo*, after a student had completed the writing of the whole Quran on his wooden slate, a graduation ceremony would take place. During this ceremony, the new graduate demonstrated his skills in front of his teachers, gifts were offered to the pupil and donations handed to the teacher. A special leather-framed, colorfully written and decorated Quranic tablet (*allon zayyana*) was also manufactured for the occasion and kept by the student as a sort of certificate. This graduation, referred to in Hausa as *sauka* (literally, 'descent'), has been correctly identified by Salah H. Hassan as a major rite of passage in traditional Hausa Muslim society. Hassan also advanced the hypothesis that the *sauka* practiced by the Hausas might be connected with similar ceremonies mentioned in Lamin Sanneh's monograph on the Jakhanké Muslim clerical clan of Gambia, as well as with those mentioned in an article by Leland Donald on Quranic literacy in Sierra Leone.¹⁸ Considering the role that

Arabic, Tamashek etc.) can reveal whether or not the naming of the Arabic letters is based on the same system.

18 Hassan 1992, 95–100. The two works referred to by Hassan are Sanneh 1979 and Donald 1974.

Jakhanké/Wangarawa missionaries coming from the west had in the islamization of Hausaland,¹⁹ such a connection is indeed very probable. The same practice, however, can also be traced back to a North African model, the *khatma* (celebration marking the completion of Quranic studies) described in the Moroccan colonial literature as follows;

La *khatma* est plus ou moins importante selon la fortune de la famille de l'écolier. Les plus riches tuent un chevreau et font un immense couscous; ils donnent au *faqih* un *douro* (cinq pesetas); les autres, selon ce qu'ils peuvent faire, donnent à manger du pain et du miel, du pain et des fruits secs (figues ou raisins), du pain et de l'huile, et remettent au *faqih* une petite somme qui varie de dix à deux billions (2 fr. 50 à 0 fr. 50).

[...]

Le nouveau *taleb* est triomphalement conduit de l'école chez lui avec accompagnement de *tabbal* et de *ghaïta*; il marche avec componction, le capuchon de sa djellaba baissé sur sa figure, de façon qu'il ne voit que le sol à ses pieds, et il porte comme un livre ouvert, dans ses deux mains, la planchette qui lui a servi et sur laquelle sont écrits au centre la *fatiha* et les premiers versets de la *sourate* « *Al-Baqara* » par un *taleb* ayant une belle écriture. Sur les côtés, en biais, sont inscrits les premiers versets de la *sourate* 48 La Victoire ou La Conquête qui commence par ces mots: *Inna fatahna laka fathan moubina* (Nous avons fait pour vous une conquête évidente).²⁰

The production of decorated tablets—obviously associated with rituals like the one described above—is attested in Morocco and in the rest of North Africa.²¹ What is possibly unique to northern Nigeria is the degree to which the *sauka* ceremony as a communal rite and the production of *allon zayyana* as a specialized craft have survived the profound transformation of educational practices that has occurred everywhere in Muslim Africa over the last five or six decades. In Kano, in fact, *sauka* ceremonies continue to be performed not only in the surviving traditional Quranic schools, but also in most government secondary schools. Here, the *sauka* marks the completion by a given class of the first cycle of reading of the Quran, which is part of the compulsory curriculum of Religious Knowledge for Muslim pupils in all government schools. For the ceremony, a decorated Quranic wooden tablet manufactured by specialized scribes formed in the traditional Quranic schools is handed to the students of the modern schools (who, in most

¹⁹ Akinwumi/Raji 1990.

²⁰ Michaux-Bellaire 1901, 85–86.

²¹ Some fine examples are sold in online galleries, like the one, from twentieth-century Rabat, available at the following link: <http://www.bruno-mignot.com/galleries/tables-coraniques/3685-planchette-coranique-alluha-tunisie-arabes.html> (seen 1 July 2016). In the late 2000s, I saw some Tunisian samples for sale in the souk of the Medina of Tunis.



Fig. 5: A modern *sauka* ceremony (Kano, 2012): young boys from Ummul-Qura Islamiyya school holding *allon zayyana* displaying the mosque pattern. © Musa Ibrahim (Kano).

cases, have never used an *allo* before!) as a gift/certificate. Thanks to the incorporation of the *sauka* ceremony into the modern school system, the production of *allon zayyana* in Kano, instead of declining along with the associated institution of the *makarantar allo*, has expanded significantly over the last years. The picture on the title pages, that I took in the Sanka ward of Kano in 2008, shows decorators of *allon zayyana* at work. The decorated tablets were commissioned by a school for its graduating students. The decorative patterns used in the *allon zayyana* have also diversified: while older *allon zayyana* always display variants of the geometric decorations found in the local calligraphic Quranic manuscripts, today's samples include a wider range of figurative designs, often a variation of the mosque or Qibla pattern.²²

The role of the *sauka* ceremony as a form of social initiation into adulthood for Hausa Muslim boys and girls does not exhaust the complex set of multi-layered symbols that this ceremony encompasses. In his 1992 book, Hassan already sketched the argument that the full initiatic symbolism of the *sauka* ceremony

²² For older versions of *allon zayyana*, see the examples shown in Hassan 1992, appendices VI.14–VI.20. More recent versions are shown here (figures 32, 33 and 41).



Fig. 6: A modern *sauka* ceremony (Kano, 2005): girls from a government secondary school (Women Teaching College, Kano) holding richly decorated *allon zayyana*. © Andrea Brigaglia.

can only be understood by looking at the tablet itself not merely as a material support of writing, but also as a dense religious symbol. In the following section, I will try to develop and expand on Hassan's intuition, arguing that the entire cycle of study at the *makarantar allo*, with its culmination in the *sauka* ceremony, should be understood not only as a technique for the transmission of knowledge, but also as an initiatory process marked by ritual practices meant to symbolically re-enact the Quranic revelation.

5 The heavenly tablet and the universal soul

The practice of using a wooden tablet as the main support of elementary Quranic education is historically attested throughout the Muslim world (in sub-Saharan Africa as in North Africa, the Middle East and Central Asia) and is rooted in the

pre-Islamic Semitic (Jewish, Christian and other) Middle East. The limited availability of paper was certainly a major factor that continued to make the *lawḥ* an indispensable tool for Quranic schools in most of the Muslim world until fairly recently. Paper was very expensive and precious, and before the development of the modern paper industry, its use by small children was obviously considered as a senseless waste. This is not sufficient, however, to fully account for the significance that the tablet assumed during the process of study and memorization (*ḥifẓ*) of the Quran. As argued by Hassan, in fact, the *lawḥ* of the Quranic school should be seen not only as a material object, but also as a cultural symbol.

In a 2009 article, Anastasia Grib has tried to develop some of Hassan's intuitions. Analyzing an African decorated Quranic slate with zoomorphic symbols from the Brooklyn Museum of Art (New York), Grib concluded that the Quranic board should be seen as a space symbolizing the encounter between the Islamic ideas nurtured by the cultural elite of the '*ulamā*' and its local pagan clientele.²³ Two main methodological problems underlie Grib's analysis, severely undermining her conclusions. The first is the fact that the Quranic board described in the article, which the author connects to a pre-Islamic initiation ritual performed during the Neolithic in the western Sahel (as suggested by some paintings in a cave in Mali), is in fact from nineteenth-century Omdurman (Sudan). A paleographic observation of the script also suggests that it was actually penned by the hand of a Sudanese. The association between the material artifact (a nineteenth-century Quranic board from Omdurman), the ritual (a pre-Islamic, 'Pagan' initiation from the Neolithic age) and the location where such ritual was purportedly practiced (a cave in Mali) is too tenuous, both geographically and chronologically, to be meaningful. The second problem is that the zoomorphic images displayed by the Omdurman board, while interesting per se, are very untypical for a decorated Quranic tablet to allow for any generalization on the *lawḥ* as a religious and cultural symbol in Africa. While only occasionally attested on wooden tablets, however, such zoomorphic images are very common in talismanic practices that are widely documented in the region, as well as in the wider Muslim world. My conclusion, therefore, is that the Omdurman board preserved at the Brooklyn museum was not—as suggested by Grib—an *allon zayyana* used by a student in a syncretic Quranic/Pagan initiation ritual, but that it was the support used by a local practitioner for the production of a talisman—either designed to protect

23 Grib 2009.

against snakes and scorpions, and meant for use by hunters and herdsmen, or designed to harm an enemy or a rival.²⁴

While Grib sees the Quranic tablet as a symbolic space for the syncretic encounter between a 'local Pagan' ritual universe and an 'elitist Islamic' one, I suggest that the popular appeal of the *lawḥ* as a symbol lies precisely in the fact that the tablet is profoundly embedded in notions and ideas transmitted and sanctioned by the literate Islamic tradition. It is only in relation to the latter that its symbolism makes full sense. Seen from such a perspective, the African Quranic *lawḥ* as a material and cultural object is not the testament of the survival of a pre-existing 'Pagan' initiation superficially cloaked in Islamizing imagery, but is the support for a process of initiation designed to transmit and embody a system of beliefs and symbols that derive from mainstream (and by no means local) classical Islamic theology.

The *allo* of the Quranic school symbolically evokes and materially represents the heavenly tablet (*al-lawḥ al-maḥfūz*) where, according to a notion alluded by the Quran and developed by classical Islamic theology, the divine archetype of the holy book is kept by God unaltered, and the events destined to take place in creation are written. Salah H. Hassan already argued that 'the *allo*, as a medium for writing and transmitting the Qur'an, acquires the same sacred status originally associated with *al-lawḥ al-maḥfūz*'.²⁵ The idea that a Quranic archetype is preserved in a heavenly tablet is developed by Muslim commentators starting from verses 85:21-22, *bal huwa Qur'ānun majīdun / fī lawḥin maḥfūz[-in]* (Nay! This is a majestic Quran / in a preserved Tablet). The same verse can also be read, according to the Warsh transmission of the reading of *Nāfi'*, which is the traditional reading used in the Maghreb and West Africa, as *bal huwa Qur'ānun majīdun / fī lawḥin maḥfūz[-un]* (Nay! This is a majestic Quran / preserved in a Tablet). Besides containing the direct mention of a tablet, the Quranic terms used in verse 85:22 can also be understood to include an indirect allusion to the primary goal of the *makarantar allo*, that is memorization (*ḥifẓ*). The Arabic root *ḥ-f-ẓ*, in fact, whose primary meaning is 'to preserve' or 'to guard', is also used for

²⁴ The writing from the Quran and the zoomorphic drawings were either designed to be washed off the slate and drunk or, more probably, they were drafted by the practitioner on the wooden board in order to be used as a model to be copied multiple times on paper, then enclosed in leather bags and carried by his clients in the form of talismanic belts, necklaces or others. The use of zoomorphic drawings is very common in the history of Islamic talismanic practices and though controversial, it is by no means an exclusively local, African phenomenon. For a broad overview of talismanic practices from various epochs and regions of the Muslim world, see Hamès 2007.

²⁵ Hassan 1992, 149.

‘memorization’. The appeal of the practicing memorization on a tablet, therefore, is reinforced by the association of the two terms (*lawḥ* and *ḥifẓ*, tablet and memorization) in the Quranic verse.

The belief that the heavenly tablet also contains the knowledge of God’s decree (*qadar*) is developed from another Quranic verse (75:22), according to which God ‘writes down’ events before they occur: ‘No misfortune can occur, either on the earth or in yourselves, unless it was set down in writing before we brought it into being (*illā fī kitābin min qabli an nabra’ahā*)’.²⁶ Muslim exegetical traditions also connect the heavenly tablet with the so-called ‘night of destiny’ (*laylat al-qadr*, see Qur. 46:1-6 and 97:1-5). There is no universal agreement as to what exactly happened on the ‘night of destiny’. For many commentators, on that night the Quran was made to descend (*unzila*) from the heavenly tablet to the lowest heaven (*al-samā’ al-dunyā*), where the angel Gabriel received it before starting to transmit it, fragment after fragment, to the prophet Muḥammad. According to a slightly different version favored by many Sufis, it was the Prophet himself who, on that night, received the Quran in its primordial form, as synthetic unarticulated speech, directly from the heavenly tablet, before starting to receive it once again through the medium of Gabriel and in distinct portions, during the twenty-three years of his outward prophetic mission.

Regardless of who (the angel Gabriel or the prophet Muḥammad) is identified by different Muslim commentators as the recipient of the ‘descent’ of the Quran in the ‘night of destiny’, this first, synthetic revelation is always believed to have taken place from the archetype contained in the heavenly tablet. It is only in connection to a second, distinctive phase of the revelation, that commentators refer to the ‘page leaves’ (*ṣuḥuf*) mentioned by another verse of the Quran: ‘This is a lesson / from which those who wish to be taught should learn / written on honored / exalted, pure pages / by the hands of noble and virtuous scribes’ (80:11-16). There is an obvious parallel here between the practices of traditional education and the process of revelation as it is imagined in the Muslim religious tradition: in traditional education, the illiterate pupil of the *makarantar allo* receives a first Quranic imprinting by way of passive rote-learning on a wooden tablet,

²⁶ The same idea is also attested in the Jewish scriptures (Jub. 5:13; Enoch 93:2, 106:19). A full discussion of the theme of the heavenly tablet in the theology of Islam and in older Semitic religions is beyond the scope of the present paper.



Fig. 7: The image of a Quranic tablet from between the ninth and the eleventh centuries, in a column of the Cathedral of Palermo (Italy). © Giulia Sajeve.

while the mature pupil of the *makarantar soro* receives the analytical teaching of Islam by the medium of ‘lessons’ taken from books studied on ‘paper leaves’: just as in the process of divine revelation to the Prophet, so too in the Quranic school, knowledge acquired from the *lawḥ* precedes knowledge acquired from the *ṣuḥuf*. In both cases, the first is synthetic and inarticulate, while the second is analytic and intellectually discernible.

The web of symbols encompassed by the institution of the *makarantar allo* does not end here. Besides being a tangible symbol of a macrocosmic reality (the heavenly tablet), the wooden tablet can also be seen, on the microcosmic level, as a representation of the human form. Before discussing this dimension of the symbolism of the *lawḥ*, a brief digression is necessary in order to provide some descriptive data about the shape that the tablet assumes in different regions. With the limited evidence available from pre-colonial times, it is impossible to reconstruct the changes that the shape of the *lawḥ* underwent in the course of history. Indirect clues might come from archeological evidence. One interesting example is an engraving in the form of a *lawḥ* with Arabic inscription (Fig. 7), dating from between the ninth and the eleventh centuries, and found on a column of the Cathedral of Palermo (Sicily), which was previously the site of a mosque. The shape

of this *lawh* is strikingly similar to the one used today in Nigeria and the Central Sudan. Other ancient examples might be found in many areas of the Muslim world.

For the twentieth century, anthropological evidence supported by a wealth of photographic documentation allows us to identify a number of clear regional variant shapes of the Quranic tablet in different areas of the African continent, as described in the table below.

Tab. 1: A tentative typology of Quranic tablets used in various regions of Africa.

Distribution	Shape	Additional markers
Maghreb	Trapezoidal. One of the horizontal edges (usually the top one) is longer than the other one. Orientation is, in most cases, vertical (portrait).	No handle (head), no stand (foot). In the decorated forms, it often has a hole in the top, which is used to pass in a rope and hang it against a wall.
Libya	Perfectly rectangular. Vertical orientation.	Simple handle (head) in the shape of an upturned triangle or oval. ²⁷
Western Sudan (Mauritania, Senegal, Mali, Guinea etc.)	Classical shape of a gravestone: one horizontal edge (the top or bottom one) is straight, while the other one is curved.	The Western Sudanic tablet can be realized in three different variants which can appear in the same town and even in the same school, as shown by Fig. 8 (from Mauritania) where they are all represented. The first and most common has no handle; the second has one handle in the middle of the flat edge; the third has two handles on the flat edge.
Central Sudan (Nigeria, Niger, northern Cameroon, Chad, Sudan)	Anthropomorphic shape.	The tablet always has a 'head' which can be realized either in the form of an upturned triangle/oval (for junior students) or in the form of a small stick (with a crescent). The tablet usually stands on two 'feet' realized by cutting the bottom side into a concave downward curve, although the variant found in the Sudan is often 'feetless' (straight). Most of the examples shown in this paper are from Kano, Nigeria. For

²⁷ Images of Libyan Quranic tablets can be seen at the following link: <http://www.gettyimages.com/detail/news-photo/libyan-boys-read-the-quran-muslims-holy-book-at-the-al-news-photo/529095744>.

Distribution	Shape	Additional markers
Ethiopia	Rectangular and elongated.	an example from Abéché (Chad), see Fig. 9. For an example from Darfur (Sudan), see Fig. 10. The tablet usually has a handle in the shape of an upturned triangle/oval, as in Fig. 11. In most cases, it stands on no feet, but curious variants with one foot in the middle of the bottom edge are attested (for an example of the latter variant, see http://www.artethiopian.com/en/manuscript-ethiopian/36-amhara-quran-tablet-ethiopia.html).
Somalia	Rectangular and exceedingly elongated.	A small 'head' and two 'feet' appear only at times, as in the example shown in Fig. 12.



Fig. 8: Children from a Quranic school in Mauritania holding tablets in each of the three different shapes used in the Western Sudan. © Frédéric Bourcier.

Fig. 9: A Quranic teacher from the outskirts of Abéché (Chad) holds a tablet in an interesting variant of the typical, anthropomorphic Central Sudanic shape. In this case, the two tips of the half-moon (the 'head') are joined to the 'shoulders'. © Andrea Brigaglia.



Fig. 10: Tablets from a Quranic school in Darfur (Sudan). © Bakheit Nur Mohammed (University of Bayreuth).



Fig. 11: Quranic tablets in Zabi Molla, Ethiopia. Photo by Sara Fani and Michele Petrone (© Islam in the Horn of Africa Project, University of Copenhagen).



Fig. 12: A Quranic School in the Somali Refugee Camp of Daadab (Kenya). Here, the tablets have the characteristic elongated shape used in Somalia. © Daniel Burgui Iguzkiza.



Fig. 13: From right to left, the typical *allo* of a *kotso* (junior pupil), of a *tittibiri* (intermediate) and of a *gardi* (senior student) in Hausaland; finally, an *allon zayyyana* made in Kano in 2014. The anthropomorphic symbolism of the tablet and its initiatic function are most evident in the changes the tablet undergoes with the passage of the pupil from one stage of Quranic education to the next. © Andrea Brigaglia.

From the images above, as well as from the many images from Hausaland shown in various sections of this article, one can observe that the anthropomorphic symbolism of the Qur'anic tablet is particularly marked in the Central Sudan, a region stretching from Hausaland in Nigeria to the modern Republic of Sudan. It is here that the shape of the *lawḥ* has, more clearly than elsewhere, the traits of a human figure. In Hausa language, the different parts of the *allo* are explicitly named after the parts of the body they ideally correspond to: *kan allo* ('the tablet's head', i.e. the handle), *kafadar allo* ('the tablet's shoulder', i.e. any of the two upper corners), *cikin allo* ('the tablet's abdomen', i.e. the surface used for writing), *kafar allo* ('the tablet's foot', i.e. any of the two lower supports). This correspondence had already been observed by Hassan, who also added that 'an *allo* which is not carved at the bottom or is lacking the two legs' is called in Hausa a 'paralyzed tablet' (*gorgon* [sic] *allo*).²⁸

²⁸ Hassan 1992, 156–57. It should be, more correctly, *gurgun allo*. *Gurgu* actually means 'limping' or 'lame person'.

Another interesting aspect of the anthropomorphic symbolism of the *allo* in northern Nigeria is the ostensibly initiatic/symbolic nature of the changes in the shape of the tablet's handle during the different stages of education. These changes occur when the pupil passes from the lower rank of *kotso* (or *kolo*; a three to five-year old pupil who has just started the *babbaku* stage as described above) to the intermediate one of *tittibiri* (a more advanced pupil, who is engaged in the *farfaru* and *hajjatu* stages) and finally, to the stage of *gardi* (a student who is able to write any section of the Quran on his slate and has started the process of memorization). While the 'head' of the *lawḥ* of a pupil in the *kotso* stage has the shape of an upside down oval, in the one used by a *tittibiri* and a *gardi* it assumes the shape of a crescent, usually covered with a 'hat' of leather. My hypothesis is that this change has to be related, once again, to the symbolism of the *makarantar allo* as a process of religious initiation. Before going through the first rudiments of the Quranic writing, in fact, the intellect of a pre-pubescent *kotso* is believed to contain, as undisclosed potency, all the possibilities of human nature, as represented by the oval appearing as the 'head' of the tablet of junior students. It is only after being initiated to the practice of Quran-writing, that the student's intellect is molded into that of a Muslim, as represented by the sharpened crescent appearing as the 'head' of the tablet used by intermediate and senior students.

The process whereby a tool of religious knowledge transmission like the *lawḥ* is infused with religious symbols, gradually disclosed in the course of the pupil's transition from childhood to puberty, is reminiscent of the following observation by Mircea Eliade which, though expressed in a somewhat outdated language, has substantial validity.

It is through initiation that, in primitive and archaic societies, man becomes what he is and what he should be—a being open to the life of the spirit, hence one who participates in the culture into which he was born. For as we shall soon see, the puberty initiation represents above all the revelation of the sacred—and, for the primitive world, the sacred means not only everything that we now understand by religion, but also the whole body of the tribe's mythological and cultural traditions.²⁹

The anthropomorphic symbolism observed in the changes undergone by the shape of the tablet in Hausaland was not, in all likelihood, accidentally developed by the Quranic teachers and the associated guilds of craftsmen who used to produce their writing tools in Africa. That the association between the *lawḥ* and the human body is not casual, and that it is not exclusive to sub-Saharan Africa, is suggested by both anthropological and literary evidence. In North Africa, for

²⁹ Eliade 1965, 3.

example, pupils were instructed to take particular care in hiding their tablet under their outer cloaks (in the case of boys) or veils (in the case of girls), when walking to and from the Quranic school (*kuttāb*): the tablet was so imbued with the pupil's own being that a furtive, unintentional look by a passer-by could easily transmit the evil eye (*'ayn*) to the tablet's owner.³⁰ Textual references to an anthropic symbolism³¹ associated with the tablet (in this case, the heavenly tablet) can be found in classical Sufi literature. The Persian 'Abd al-Razzāq al-Qāshānī (d. 1329), for instance, in his *Kitāb al-qaḍā' wal-qadar*, suggests that the heavenly tablet mentioned by the revelation is the 'universal Soul' (*al-naḥs al-kullī*) of the philosophers.³² The same idea is echoed by 'Abd al-Karīm al-Jilī (d. 1428) in his influential work on the prophet Muḥammad's inner reality (*al-ḥaqīqa al-muḥammadiyya*) as the 'perfect man' or 'universal man', the first creation of God and the first degree of cosmic existence. The universal man, says Seyyed H. Nasr, is 'the prototype of the Universe as well as of man by virtue of which man, the microcosm, contains within himself all the possibilities found in the Universe. The microcosm and the macrocosm face each other as two mirrors in each of which the other is reflected, while both 'echo' in themselves their common prototype, who is the Universal Man'.³³ Now, the universal man is identified by al-Jilī also with the heavenly tablet³⁴, which is thus also a symbol of the *ḥaqīqa muḥammadiyya*.

The correspondence between the metaphysical reality alluded to by Sufis as the 'prophetic reality' and the 'preserved Tablet' of the Quran is also mentioned in a very explicit way in a commentary by the twentieth-century Egyptian Sufi and hadith scholar Muḥammad al-Ḥāfiẓ b. 'Abd al-Laṭīf al-Tijānī (d. 1978) on the prayer of blessings on the prophet Muḥammad known as *Yāqūt al-ḥaqā'iq*. According to al-Ḥāfiẓ al-Tijānī, 'Muḥammad's [metaphysic] reality (*al-ḥaqīqa al-muḥammadiyya*) is a preserved tablet (*lawḥ mahfūz*) which contains the perfection of being altogether'.³⁵

³⁰ I am thankful for this observation to a Moroccan participant at the conference *Approaches to the Qur'an in sub-Saharan Africa*, Institute for Ismaili Studies, Toronto, 21 May 2011.

³¹ Anthropic and not anthropomorphic, in this case, because at the level of metaphysical realities there is no 'form' as such.

³² al-Qashānī 2005.

³³ Nasr 1997, 110.

³⁴ For a detailed study on al-Jilī, see Lo Polito 2010.

³⁵ al-Tijānī (n. d.), 29.

6 Sauka as a re-enactment of the Quranic revelation

A final aspect of the *makarantar allo* needs to be discussed to complete the picture. There is a curious coincidence between the term which is used in Hausa for the ceremony that seals a cycle of Quranic studies (when the student has written and washed off from his tablet the entire text of the Quran once, from end to beginning) and the term used to translate the Arabic *nuzūl* ('revelation' of the Quran or other heavenly books). In both cases, the Hausa term is *sauka*. While the latter term is a literal translation of the Arabic *nuzūl* (literally, 'descent'), the fact that it is also used to refer to a pedagogical or devotional cycle of reading of the Quran (which in Arabic is rather referred to as a *khatma*, 'sealing') is curious. *Sauka*, in fact, is the most obvious translation for the first Arabic term (*nuzūl*), but not for the second (*khatma*).

A comparative look at other major languages spoken by Muslim groups of the region shows that the use of the same local term to translate the ideas of 'revelation' and 'completion of a cycle of Quranic reading' is not unique to Hausa, but recurs in many West African languages. The Nupe of central Nigeria translate both terms as *chi*. In Djerma (western Niger), *jumandi* (or *zumandi*) is used. The Adamawa dialect of Fulfulde (northern Nigeria) uses *jubbinki*. The various languages of the Mande cluster (whose various dialects are spoken between southern Mali, eastern Guinea, northern Côte d'Ivoire and western Burkina Faso) use *jiginj*.³⁶ In Wolof (Senegal) and Kanuri (north-eastern Nigeria), on the contrary, the terms used to translate the two Arabic terms of *nuzūl* and *khatma* are not the same.³⁷ This allows us to circumscribe an area, roughly delimited by the Kanuri-speaking areas of Lake Chad and the Wolof-speaking area of the Senegal river. This area corresponds to the historical region of influence of the Jakhanké clerical diaspora. This coincidence points to the possibility that a common Islamic lexicon was developed across different languages, probably under the influence of the pedagogical practices of a diasporic community. This might be a matter of interest for the historian, the anthropologist and the linguist. In addition to that,

³⁶ I owe the information on Bambara to Francesco Zappa. On the meaning of Kurana *jigi[n]* in Bambara, see also Tamari 2002, 94. I am also indebted for the information on Djerma to Hama Issa Fadel (Paris), for the information on Fulfulde to Sani Abdallah (Kano), and on Nupe to M. S. Ndako (Abuja).

³⁷ I thank Rudolph Ware and Dmitry Bondarev, respectively, for the information.

however, such a correspondence suggests that a common ritual of Islamic initiation associated with a specific Quranic pedagogy was adopted by the ethnic groups of a large area.

To explain the use of the term ‘descent’ as a double equivalent of ‘revelation’ and ‘cycle of reading’ of the Quran, one has to look, once again, at elementary Quranic studies in traditional Muslim societies as an Islamic initiation process marked by a series of rituals. By using the term ‘initiation’, here I do not refer only to the social dimension of a ‘rite of passage’ that marks the transition from childhood into adulthood as discussed in an earlier section of this paper. Rather, I look at initiation as a religious ritual meant to transform the inner and outer self of the subject by inscribing the foundational myths of the group in the latter’s consciousness. A religious initiation, in this sense, is always connected to the re-telling or re-enacting of a myth of origin that explains, at one and the same time, the existence of the group (a clan, a religious community etc.) and of the whole of reality. As suggested by Eliade’s classical studies on the phenomenology of myth, in fact, a ritual is always the re-enactment of a myth by way of symbols,³⁸ and a myth is the narration of a ‘sacred ontophany’ which becomes the ‘paradigmatic model for all human activities.’³⁹ In this sense, the ultimate goal of a religious initiation is the symbolic identification of the initiate with a sacred ancestor and the reaffirmation of the ‘paradigmatic model’ that the latter has set *in illo tempore*.

It is in this sense that, by evoking a terminological correspondence between the revelation of the Quran and the completion of a cycle of reading by the student, the traditional system of Quranic education described in this essay becomes a ritual re-enactment of the myth of the Quran’s ‘descent’. This ritual, mediated by the tablet (which, as we have seen, is at that the same time a symbol of the Quran, of the Prophet’s ‘reality’ and of the pupil’s self) allows the initiated member of the group (the Muslim pupil) to symbolically identify himself with his ‘sacred ancestor’ (the Prophet Muḥammad).

38 Eliade 1964.

39 Eliade 1959, 97–98.

Tab. 2: Quranic education as a ritual re-enactment of revelation.

	Myth	Pedagogy/Ritual
Event	<i>Sauka</i> (descent; revelation of the Quran)	<i>Sauka</i> (descent; completion of a cycle of reading)
Support	The heavenly tablet	The wooden tablet
Subject	An illiterate (<i>ummi</i>) prophet	A pupil who has not started to learn Arabic

In this way, the initiate participates in the ontophany of the creation of the universe as encompassed by the Quranic myth of the heavenly tablet and by the myth of the pre-existence of the ‘Muhammadan reality,’ which are two sides of the same coin. At the same time, he renews his commitment to the preservation of the group’s identity through the reaffirmation of the paradigmatic model (in this case, the practice of Islam) whose *raison d’être* is established by the myth.

7 Conclusion

At the conclusion of this analysis, the central argument of this article can be restated in the following way. The educational system of the *makarantar allo* should be looked at as a complex initiation process that involves various rituals and symbols. These rituals are structured around a thick web of analogies that allow the symbolic identification of the protagonist of the initiation (the child) with the protagonist (the Prophet) of the foundational myth (the revelation of the Quran) that establishes the group (the Muslim community). Louis Brenner’s insightful observation that the pedagogical methods employed in the traditional Quranic school ‘are fully consonant with the principles of an esoteric episteme in which layers of meaning are received gradually as an individual progresses through successive stages of learning’⁴⁰ remains valid, as well as Rudolph Ware’s more recent argument that ‘[i]f we begin to see embodiment as epistemology,’ seemingly arcane practices from the African periphery of the Muslim world

⁴⁰ Brenner 2001, 19.

‘might produce revealing insights about the history of knowledge in Islam’.⁴¹ Building on, and adding to Brenner and Ware’s works in the anthropology of Islamic education in Africa, my essay suggests that in order to unpack the full significance of the symbols they embed, traditional pedagogies should be understood not only as practices of knowledge transmission, but also as initiatory processes based on the ritual enactment of mythical materials.

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⁴¹ Ware 2014, 57.

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