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# Ka'ana Umar's 'CCI Quran': The Making of a Bornuan Manuscript in the Twenty-First Century

**Abstract:** This note describes the tools and the techniques used by Ka'ana Umar, a contemporary calligrapher based in Maiduguri, capital of Borno State (Nigeria), to produce a Quranic manuscript that is now preserved at the Centre for Contemporary Islam (CCI), University of Cape Town. The Quranic calligraphic tradition of Borno has been known for centuries as the most ancient and prestigious one in sub-Saharan Africa. Notwithstanding the many challenges it currently faces (from modernization to insecurity and the displacement of scribes), this tradition is still a living one, as the skills of Ka'ana Umar and of many of his peers in Borno amply demonstrate.

## 1 Introduction

When one of the authors of the present note was invited to participate in the conference on *The Arts and Crafts of Literacy in Sub-Saharan Africa* at the University of Cape Town, he presented a paper entitled 'Tools of Qur'ānic Literacy in Borno.' The paper offered an overview of the material culture of Bornuan Quranic manuscripts, describing pens, paper, inks and calligraphic aspects. To give a more vivid presentation, Mutai also brought with him a richly decorated Quranic manuscript that had been produced for the occasion by a Maiduguri-based calligrapher. During the conference, the manuscript was displayed as part of a small exhibition, and afterwards, it was offered as a gift to the CCI (Centre for Contemporary Islam), Department of Religious Studies, University of Cape Town, where it is presently preserved. In the following pages, the authors describe the various stages followed by the calligrapher who penned this manuscript and the other craftsmen involved in its production. The manuscript is here referred to as 'the CCI Quran'. Some excellent studies of Bornuan Quranic manuscripts are already

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In writing this article, the background provided by Dmitry Bondarev's work was especially crucial. The authors also wish to thank Bondarev for his precious advice on the correct transcription of Kanuri words.

available in the literature, from a ground-breaking article by Adrian D. H. Bivar,<sup>1</sup> to a detailed description by Adrian Brockett,<sup>2</sup> and of course the various studies (at the same time historical, linguistic and codicological) by Dmitry Bondarev.<sup>3</sup>

In writing this brief note, the authors wish to shift the perspective from the description of an object-manuscript preserved in a museum, a library or a private collection, to the narration of the process that led to the production of the manuscript itself. In this sense, this paper can be considered as a complement to Dmitry Bondarev's documentary 'Borno Calligraphy: Creating hand-written Qur'an in northeast Nigeria'.<sup>4</sup> By laying emphasis on the human subjects involved in the making of one particular handwritten copy of the Quran, the authors wish to present the Bornuan manuscript culture as a living legacy of the arts and crafts of literacy in Muslim Africa.

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<sup>1</sup> Bivar 1960, 199–205.

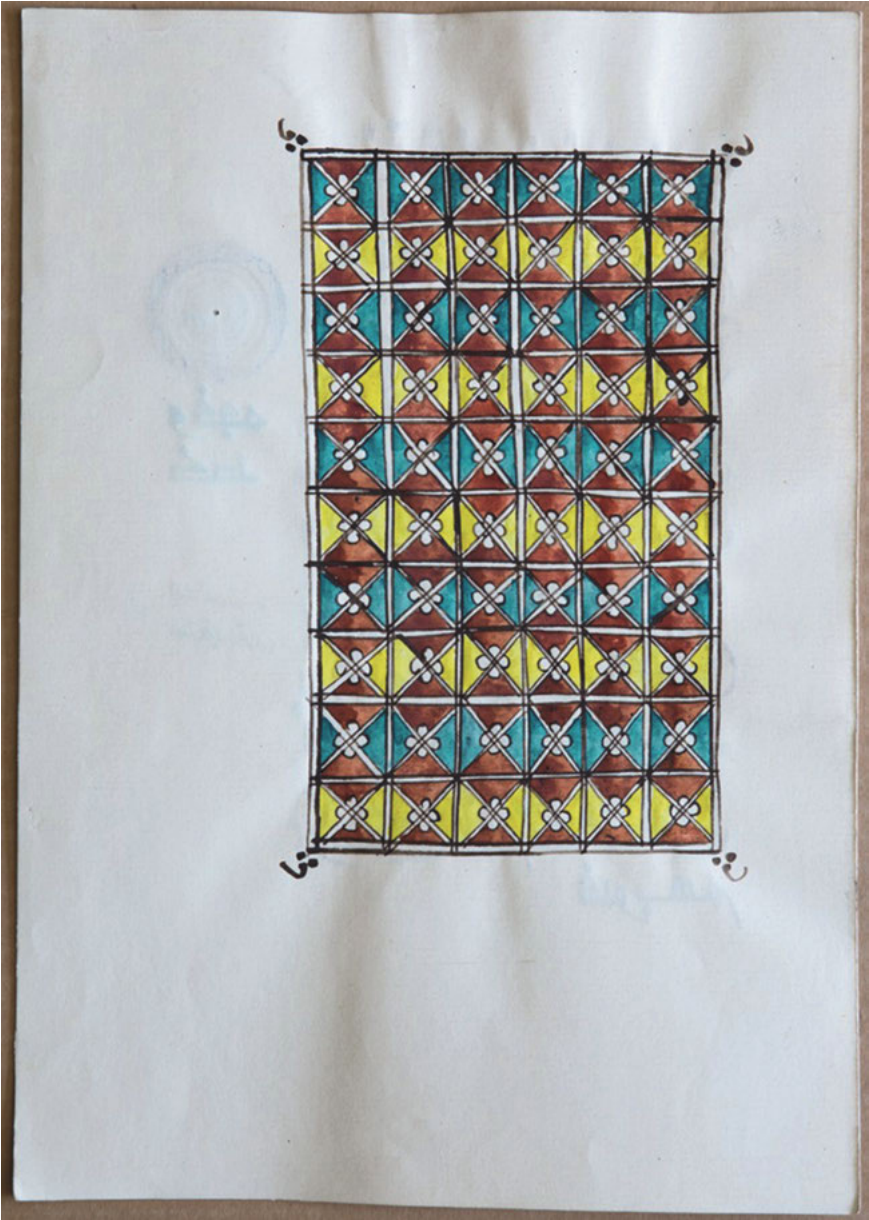
<sup>2</sup> Brockett 1987, 45–67.

<sup>3</sup> Bondarev 2006, 113–140.

<sup>4</sup> Available online at: <https://www.openaccess.uni-hamburg.de/multimedia/kalligraphie-borno.html>.



Fig. 1: The first page of the CCI Quran. © Francesco Piraino.



**Fig. 2:** A decorative pattern on the second page of the CCI Quran. © Francesco Piraino.

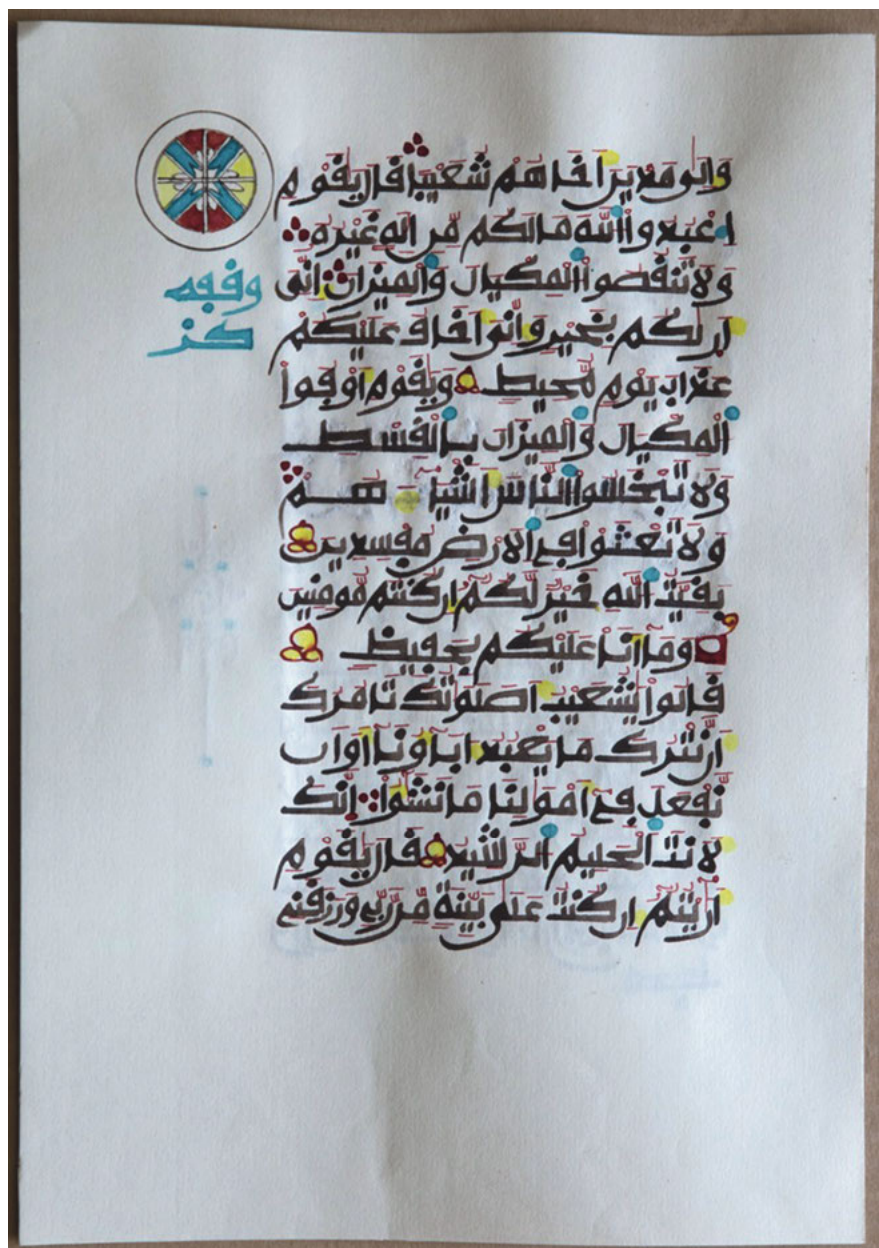


Fig. 3: A page containing a rounded *hizb* marker. © Francesco Piraino.





## 2 Conception

The idea of bringing a Quranic manuscript to Cape Town was conceived by Maimadu Barma Mutai, University of Maiduguri, Nigeria, as part of his efforts to preserve and promote the traditional culture of Quranic calligraphy of Borno, which arguably constitutes the richest calligraphic culture in sub-Saharan Africa.<sup>5</sup> This centuries-old tradition has been endangered for many years by the emergence of modernity with its challenges to traditional systems of knowledge transmission and to the various forms of craftsmanship that are associated with the production of manuscripts. The availability of cheap printed copies of the Quran has rendered the skills of the scribes less relevant today. However, as Andrea Brigaglia has already documented in the Nigerian context, there have been cases in which individual, exceptionally skilled scribes have redefined their traditional craftsmanship from that of an artisan to that of an artist, transforming themselves from scribes to calligraphers and thus maintaining their relevance in a rapidly changing market of literacy.<sup>6</sup>

In addition to the threat posed by modernization, over the last few years a new, unexpected and much more dangerous threat to the continuity of the transmission of the Borno calligraphic tradition has emerged in the form of the Boko Haram insurgency that has devastated large parts of Borno state. Entire villages and towns have been displaced or destroyed, leading to the loss of numerous manuscripts. Several Muslim scholars, including some of those who practised calligraphy, have been directly targeted and murdered by the jihadist insurgents. Moreover the traditional Quranic schools—which are the institutions where the primary calligraphic skills are transmitted, and which are, for the most part, under the control of the Sufi orders—have found themselves under attack both by the insurgents who accuse them of promoting an allegedly ‘corrupted’ form of Islam, and by the government, who (unfairly) accuses them of providing a fertile ground for insurgent recruitment.<sup>7</sup> In this dramatic context, the urgency of saving and promoting the Borno tradition of Quranic scholarship, arts and craftsmanship, was what motivated Mutai to commission a local calligrapher to make a copy of the Quran to bring to Cape Town for display at the *Arts and Crafts of Literacy* conference.

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<sup>5</sup> See in particular Bivar 1968, 3–15; Brockett 1987, 195–223.

<sup>6</sup> Brigaglia 2011, in particular 61ff.

<sup>7</sup> See Hoechner 2014, 63–84.

### 3 The calligrapher

Among the many Bornuan calligraphers Mutai had met during his doctoral research,<sup>8</sup> he chose to ask this particular manuscript of a young Muslim scholar and calligrapher called Ka'ana (Kaka Gana) Umar b. Abba Kyari b. Umar b. Goni Shariff *Sələm* ('Black' in Kanuri) b. Goni Sharif *Bul* ('White' in Kanuri), simply known as Umar Abba Kyari or, more commonly, as Ka'ana Umar. In his brief career, Ka'ana Umar is credited with having already produced about twenty calligraphic copies of the Quran for various clients.

Ka'ana Umar was born in 1980 in a ward called Goni Awanari Chingoa, in the Magumeri Local Government area of Borno State. He spent his early childhood in his home village, before moving to the city of Maiduguri in 1987. In Maiduguri, he studied the Quran with his uncle, Goni Ali Umar Mairami (d. 1996), who had studied with Goni Jalo of Makintari village of Konduga Local Government Area and who was the imam of Alhaji Mala Dalorima's Mosque, in Abbaganaram Housing Estate, Maiduguri. Ka'ana Umar continued his study of the Quran under the mentorship of his uncle, until he memorized it at the age of sixteen. After the death of his uncle, he moved to the area of Shehuri North (also in Maiduguri), where he spent the following four years specializing in the skills of a calligrapher. He achieved his expertise by writing the Quran several times on a wooden slate (*allo*) and then washing it off, and writing it again and again.

Ka'ana Umar finally wrote the whole Quranic text for the first time on paper in the year 2000 in Shehuri, where he still lives with his wife and five children. This copy was offered as a gift to the family of his deceased teacher, Goni Ali Umar Mairami, following a practice that is encouraged by local tradition. The second copy he wrote was sold for six thousand Naira to Babukar Jalomi in the town of Fashar, near Ka'ana Umar's village of origin. The third copy was purchased for ten thousand Naira by Babukar's brother, Malam Fannami. All the first three copies of the Quran he wrote, although penned in a beautiful style, contained some minor errors, cancellations and corrections. Developing his skills further, however, Ka'ana Umar was later able to write a fourth, more beautiful copy for an undisclosed personality, who bought it, through the mediation of Ibrahim (Bra) Goni Jibir in Abbaganaram ward of Maiduguri, for a price of nineteen thousand Naira. This copy features no cancellation or correction and all vowels and minor orthographic signs appear at the right place, thus demonstrating Ka'ana Umar's consecration as a full-fledged calligrapher. More wealthy patrons were gradually

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<sup>8</sup> Mutai 2014.





**Fig. 5:** The calligrapher, Ka'ana 'Umar. © Maimadu B. Mutai.

attracted by the skills of the young calligrapher, whose fifth copy was sold to a State Commissioner in Damaturu, Yobe State of Nigeria, whose name the calligrapher could not recall.

In the following years, Ka'ana Umar continued to write copies of the Quran, firstly as a part-time hobby, then gradually as a veritable trade as well as for teaching purposes. In the context of the primary traditional educational institution in Borno, called *sangaya* (Quranic schools), the reading, memorization, and continuous writing down of the text of the Quran are the main activities for teachers and students, while other subjects (Hadith, Islamic law, theology etc.) and activities only have a secondary status. Ka'ana Umar is proud of the institution he runs, which is known as the Keskari circle and is located in Shehuri North of Maiduguri. Here, over thirty students of various levels study the art of writing in

the *Barnāwī* Arabic script<sup>9</sup> under a cousin of Ka'ana Umar, Goni Umara son of Goni Ali Umar Mairami. Unfortunately, the Goni and his students were all displaced by the Boko Haram insurgency in 2013. The writing of the CCI Quran, therefore, was initiated by Ka'ana Umar at the Keskari circle, but completed in exile, in another location.

The CCI Quran is the eighteenth complete Quranic manuscript produced by Ka'ana Umar in his life so far. All of the manuscripts from the fourth to the seventeenth—the calligrapher proudly remarks—have no cancellations or corrections. In the CCI Quran, however, a few corrections appear here and there. This is due to the fact that this particular copy has been produced under a very tight schedule in order to be ready before the client's trip to South Africa, but also to the fact that this copy was written during a time of exceptional tension and insecurity in Maiduguri, at the very peak of the Boko Haram crisis. Only two *ḥizb* (sixtieths) of the Quran, were written by the calligrapher in his permanent residence, where he normally keeps all his writing tools. All the rest were penned by Ka'ana Umar while living as an internally displaced person (IDP) in a camp located in the GRA (Government Reserved Area) of Maiduguri, and later as an IDP in another camp in Maduganari ward. The calligrapher was in such a distressed condition that he was close to giving up the task. It was only thanks to the constant encouragement of the client, and the latter's insistence on the importance of displaying the traditional skills of Borno calligraphers in South Africa, that he was finally able to complete the manuscript in Maduganari, by the grace of God.

## 4 The tools

Several tools were used by the calligrapher in producing this copy of the Quran, and many of them were taken to South Africa by the purchaser for display at the *Arts and Crafts of Literacy* conference. The materials used for the production of this manuscript include pens, paper, ink, and other support items as explained below.

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<sup>9</sup> For the argument that *Barnāwī* is a particular style of a traditional Arabic script that has developed independently in Central Africa (and not as a derivation of the *Maghribī* as previously assumed), see Brigaglia/Nobili 2013.

## 4.1 Paper

The paper used for this manuscript was obtained by the calligrapher at the Maiduguri Monday market. The paper bears the watermark 'Royal Executive Bond'. This is a thick (100gsm), high quality paper produced by BILT (Ballarpur Industries Limited) in India. In Maiduguri, it can be found in two markets, namely the Post Office stationery market and the Monday market. No paper is produced locally in Nigeria, and while Italian manufacturers like Andrea Galvani used to be the greatest suppliers in pre-colonial and colonial times, India has more recently taken over as the biggest exporter of paper used for manuscripts in Nigeria. Boxes of 500 BILT sheets are available in the market, as well as at selected bookshops in Maiduguri, but the larger (A1) size used for this manuscript is only available at the Monday market. The calligrapher purchased two bundles of A1-sized Royal Executive Bond paper, at the cost of five thousand Naira (ca. 30 US dollars). The A1-size (594 mm × 841 mm) folios used for this manuscript are cut into two. After removing some offcuts, the calligrapher obtains two folios of 265 mm × 380 mm. The folios thus obtained are then folded so as to obtain four pages of 265 mm (height) × 190 mm (width). This particular size folio, which is the standard one for decorative Quranic manuscript in Borno, is called *jamba* in Kanuri, while a smaller size, half of the *jamba*, is called *wadami* (lit. 'son of a dwarf', meaning 'short' in Kanuri). The paper also comes in different colours: the white, cream, and light green variants are usually associated with a thicker paper, which preserves the ink's natural colour for many years and is therefore preferred by the local calligraphers.

## 4.2 Pens

Pens for writing manuscripts in Borno are usually from a material called *suli*, *kangale* or *suwu* in Kanuri. A *suli* can be a piece of cornstalk, reed straw, cane-stem, or any of the many types of strong bamboo-like hollowed canes that are very common in the Lake Chad basin area. A pen (*alkalam*) is cut from the *suli* by using a simple razorblade that is obtainable from any street vendor. Cutting a pen is one of the first skills learnt by the pupils of the traditional Quranic schools. Some of the pens used for this particular copy by Ka'ana Umar are made of the reed straws commonly used for thatching (in Kanuri, *suli sigdibe*), some of which he purchased at the Maiduguri Monday market. Others are made of cornstalks (in Kanuri, *kangale ngawulibe*, 'stalk of guinea corn' or *kangale argambe* 'stalk of millet').

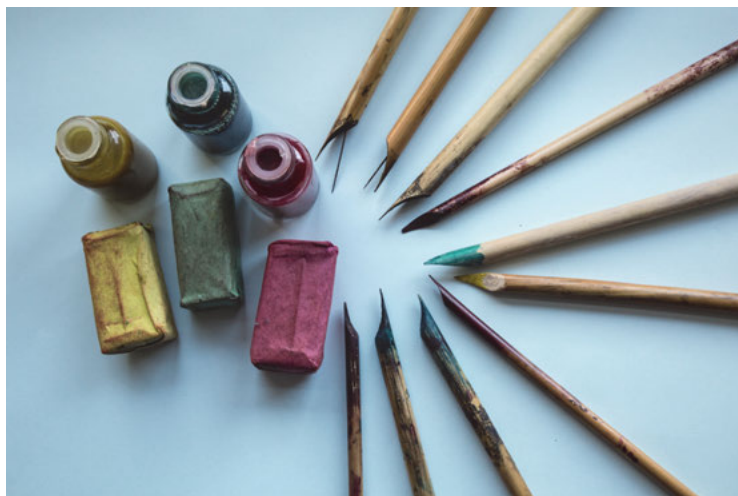
In writing the CCI Quran, Ka'ana Umar used seven different types of pen. Several of the pens were given to the purchaser along with the completed manuscripts and can be observed in Fig. 6. Bornuan Quranic manuscripts are always written in four colours: black, red, yellow and green. The various types of pen are named after the colour of the inks and the parts of the writing for which they are reserved. Ka'ana Umar gave the following list of the seven types of pen he used to write the CCI Quran:

- i. *Alkalam yambarbe* ('pen of/for red ink'). A thick-pointed pen used for writing, in black ink, the consonantal body of the text.
- ii. *Alkalam kime surabe* ('red pen of/for sura'). A thick-pointed pen used for writing, in red ink, the headings of each Sura.
- iii. *Alkalam zamibe* ('pen of/for yellow ink'). Used to write the letter *hamza* in yellow ink.
- iv. *Alkalam shikkalbe* ('pen of/for vowels'). A thin-pointed, red-ink pen used for vowels and illumination.
- v. *Alkalam libtarabe* ('pen of/for green ink'). Used to write the *hamzat al-waṣl* in green ink.
- vi. *Alkalam kuri kəritabe* ('pen of/for circling a circle'). Small compass, realized by attaching a needle to a pen and used for tracing the red circles that mark every *ashar*, i.e. every tenth verse of a given Sura.
- vii. *Alkalam hizb kurtabe* ('pen of/for tracing a *hizb*'). Small compass, realized by attaching a needle to a pen and used for markers of *hizb*, i.e. each sixtieth part of the Quran.
- viii. *Alkalam hizubram*. Double compass, realized by attaching a needle to a double-pointed pen. It is used to draw concentric circles for *hizb* markers.<sup>10</sup>

When writing the Quran, the Bornuan calligraphers use a specific technique, holding the pen in such a way as to give the desired calligraphic style. In Borno, pens are always held with the right hand, between the index and the middle finger, with the thumb pressed upon the pen, about two inches from the nib. This holding technique provides the calligrapher with the ability to manipulate his design with precision. Generally speaking, the pens retain the natural appearance of the materials they are made from. Contrary to other regions of the Muslim world, no specific decorations are usually made on the pens in Borno. The pens are used continuously until they are worn out and replaced with new ones. Two

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<sup>10</sup> Some Borno calligraphers use the common compass (*bahari*) for drawing the circles used in *ashar* and *hizbi* markers. Ka'ana Umar, however, prefers to use the more traditional technique described here, following a practice used by all the calligraphers working in his institutions.



**Fig. 6:** Samples of pens and inks used by Ka'ana 'Umar for the CCI Quran. © Francesco Piraino.



**Fig. 7:** The *alkalam hizubram* cut and used by Ka'ana 'Umar. © Francesco Piraino.

pens can be considered as the most fundamental ones for writing a complete Quran: one big pen, *alkalam yambarbe*, is used for writing the consonantal body of the text in black ink; one small pen, *alkalam shikkalbe*, is used for writing the vowels and parts of the illumination in red. In order to write a copy of the Quran of medium size, a calligrapher will need about ten pens of each of these two types.





**Fig. 8:** Traditional Borno pencases made from gourds and from braided straw.  
© Francesco Piraino.

### 4.3 Pen cases

Pens are kept by Borno scribes and calligraphers in pencases (called *fofiyo* in Kanuri), derived either from oblong gourds or from braided straws.

### 4.4 Inkpots

The traditional inkpot (*aduwaram* in Kanuri) is made of a small spherical gourd, to which leather strings are attached to allow the calligrapher to hang it on the wall for increased stability, or to carry it. Today, however, plastic containers are much more common, as they can be safely sealed to prevent the ink from spilling out. Ka'ana Umar normally uses such plastic pots.

### 4.5 Inks

Following the Bornuan tradition, the consonantal text of the CCI Quran is written in four colours: black, red, yellow and green. All the colours are produced locally using relatively inexpensive traditional recipes.



Fig. 9: The Traditional Bornuan inkpot. © Francesco Piraino.

#### 4.5.1 Black ink

The black ink used to write on paper is known as *yambar* in Kanuri. Various recipes are used in Borno for the production of *yambar*. The most common recipe is a mixture that includes *kəngar* seeds (*acacia nilotica*), a combination of iron oxides (*səmbal*), and gum arabic (*kango*). The purpose of the latter is to make the ink glossy. The most common type of gum arabic used in Borno is the one derived from the *kolkol* tree (*acacia senegal*). In some recipes, the *kango* (resin) of the tree called *karamga* (*acacia seya*) is also added. Charcoal is not used in the production of *yambar*, but it is a very common ingredient of the black ink used by Quranic students to write on their wooden Quranic boards. The charcoal, usually obtained from the wood of a tree called *cingo* or *cungo* (desert date tree, *balanites aegyptiaca*) is always the basic ingredient for the black ink used on wooden boards. In this case, the charcoal is reduced to powder and subsequently boiled for several hours with a mixture of gum arabic and water, until it acquires the desired density and texture. As the ink used on wooden boards is also normally washed off and drunk by the students, the recipes used for this purpose do not contain iron oxides, which are, on the contrary, a frequent ingredient of the inks used for writing on paper. However, the calligrapher of the CCI Quran, Ka'ana Umar, does not use iron oxides in producing his *yambar*. For the ink used to write the consonan-

tal body of the CCI Quran, he used gum arabic from *acacia senegal* (*kango kol-kolbe*), as well as *acacia nilotica* (*kəngar*), and then he let the concoction soak in water within a metal container, a procedure which—as he said—is sufficient to provide the required metallic content to the final product.

#### 4.5.2 Red ink

The red ink is known in Kanuri as *kimearam* and is used for the titles of Suras; for the vowels; for the pause markers (*wakaf*); for the tri-circular verse markers (*tusu*); for most of the marginal annotations; for the rounded decorative patterns marking the beginning of each sixtieth part (*ḥizb*) of the Quran as well as its half (*nişf*), quarter, (*rub*) and eighth (*thumn*).

#### 4.5.3 Yellow ink

The yellow ink is known as *zarni*, *kurwum* or *kərnagə* (all meaning yellow in Kanuri). It is used for the disjunctive *hamza* (*hamzat al-qaṭʿ*), as well as for colour-filling the *tusu* (tri-circular verse markers), the *kumsa* (fifth-verse markers) and the *kuri* or *ashar* (tenth-verse markers).

#### 4.5.4 Green ink

The green ink is known as *kəliaram*. It is used for *libtara* (the conjunctive *hamza* or *hamzat al-waṣl*), as well as for the marginal notes dedicated to specifying the number of pauses in each sixtieth part of the Quran.

### 4.6 Board

For smooth writing, the calligraphers in Borno always prepare a suitable platform or base on which to put the paper for writing. Most calligraphers place the folio on a wooden board of the type that is normally used in the Quranic schools and sit on a mat on the floor, placing the board on their laps. Ka'ana Umar and his colleagues in the Keskari circle, however, always use a square piece of board of the type that is locally used to make house ceiling, upon which they place the paper to write. Ka'ana Umar's writing board is cut from a ceiling board.



**Fig. 10:** The *bayanaram* used by calligrapher Ka'ana Umar. © Francesco Piraino.

## 4.7 Layout marker

The layout marker used to create the margins of each page is a rectangular board made of paper and cardboard and called *bayanaram* (literally, 'marker' in Kanuri). The size of the margins is marked by four sticks (*sundok*, i.e. 'broom') sewn into the board or the paper with cotton strings. The *bayanaram* is placed by the calligrapher under the page he is preparing to write. By exercising a light pressure on the paper, the calligrapher is thus able to create a light rectangular mark that he will use as the page layout.

## 5 Leatherwork

Leatherwork has a long history in Borno, but in all likelihood, its practice was increasingly popularized with the islamization of the region, thanks to the wide availability of skins of slaughtered animals especially during the Islamic festivities. At any rate, leather work in the region is usually associated with mainly Muslim ethnic groups like Tuareg, Hausa, Kanuri and Kanembu. The hide of domestic animals like sheep, goats and cows are usually preferred, not only because of their easier availability, but also because they tend to be stronger and able to withstand the ravages of time. From the information obtained in the field, the

leather work is specifically carried out in Maiduguri by two sets of professional categories known in Kanuri as *məndəlma* and *kəlidəma*. Both professions need to be understood in their specific activities, which are vital in the traditional processes used for the preservation of Quranic (and to a lesser extent, non-Quranic) manuscripts.

### 5.1 *Məndəlma* (pl. *mundulma*, ‘tanners’)

The *mundulma* bear the task of removing the hair from the skin, using indigenous chemical elements extracted from the seeds of the *kəngar* tree. After the removal of the hair from the skin, the latter are sun-dried by the *məndəlma*, who finally takes the dried hides to the Maiduguri Monday market for sale. The profession of *məndəlma* is handed down within certain families.<sup>11</sup> Among the *mundulma* still working in Maiduguri are Alhaji Mustapha and Malam Usman, both operating at their centre in the Məndəlmari ward of Maiduguri metropolis. Their families trace their origin back to the time of Kukawa (capital of Borno from 1814 to 1907) and were given their present residence in Yerwa/Maiduguri to practice their *məndəl* profession, when the Borno leaders decided to move their capital to the new city in 1907.

### 5.2 *Kəlidəma* (pl. *kəlidəwu*, ‘dyers and leatherworkers’)

Some of the leathers used for binding and for the cases of the CCI Quran are coloured. The most prominent of the colours used is red, but yellow and green are also used in the decorations. At the Maiduguri Monday market, there is a second category of traditional craftsmen who specialize in dyeing, cutting to size and decorating the leather brought by the *məndəlma*. This category of leatherworkers is known in Kanuri as the *kəlidəma*. In the Bornuan tradition, Quranic manuscripts are left unbound, covered by a red, hard cover made by enclosing cardboard in a leather fold; they are tied with a leather cord, and finally preserved in a decorated leather satchel (*baktar* in Kanuri; *gafaka* in Hausa) provided with a strap used for hanging or carrying the volume. The *baktar* can easily be distinguished from other types of leather bags used in the region. Its use is reserved for scholars and their students, and it can contain manuscripts of the Quran, other books, various papers and writing utensils, as well as the wooden tablet used by

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<sup>11</sup> Seidensticker 1993, 197–219.





**Fig. 11:** The CCI Quran in its leather cover. © Francesco Piraino.

the Quranic students. The *baktar* is always made by a *kālidāma* and the most decorated ones are always reserved for storing and carrying copies of the Quran. The design of the *baktar* can feature various colours. In most cases the main body of the *baktar* is in a simple white/beige (*bul*) colour, with multi-coloured decorative patterns in circular or hexagonal shape appearing on the front of the satchel, as well as on its flap. Each region or place known for the production of the *baktar/gafaka* in Nigeria (Sokoto; Kano; Borno etc.) is known for its peculiar shape and design. Usually, the *baktar* from Borno appears as a harder, rectangular cube, while the *gafaka* from Sokoto and Kano is smoother and flexible. A double-twisted rope of about one-foot length is always attached to the *baktar/gafaka*.

As well as the red leather cover and the *baktar*, the CCI Quran is also preserved inside a red leather case in the form of a rectangular cube slightly smaller than the *baktar*, wrapped/closed with a long leather strip and provided with a handle. Wrapped in its leather cover, the CCI Quran is preserved in the red leather case, kept, in its turn, inside the decorated *baktar*. The leather work was commissioned by the calligrapher from a *kālidāma* based in the Maiduguri Monday market, at the cost of ten thousand Naira. This *kālidāma* is deaf and is known as Muwa, and one of the authors of the present note had to communicate with his son Abubakar who is also a trained leather worker. Abubakar pointed out that, of



**Fig. 12:** The *baktar* (left) and the leather case (right) used to preserve the CCI Quran. © Francesco Piraino.

roughly a dozen various leather items they produce, the *baktar* is the most in demand. The disruption created by the Boko Haram insurgency—as Abubakar observed—has threatened their craft, but nevertheless, they are still able to sell an average of one *baktar* per day from their shop in the market.<sup>12</sup>

## 6 Conclusion

Despite the many challenges it faces, the ancient Quranic manuscript culture of Borno is still alive today. The CCI Quran, which was produced using only local traditional techniques, testifies to such resilience. Thousands of professional and non-professional calligraphers can be found in the region of Borno today. According to Ka'ana Umar, in Maiduguri alone one can find about two thousand people who are able to write the entire Quranic *muṣḥaf* from memory, with different de-

<sup>12</sup> Mutai, interview with Abubakar, *kalidama* in the Maiduguri Monday market (Maiduguri, September 2013).

grees of quality, in the local *Barnāwī* script. In an interview with one of the authors, the calligrapher pointed out that he could identify at least five excellent calligraphic hands in the Keskari circle alone, while in the wider scholarly network of his family, he could boast about twenty such professional hands.<sup>13</sup> Today, this culture relies on the occasional commission of single manuscripts from individual sponsors. Three main factors contribute to the continuing relevance of handwritten Quranic manuscripts in Borno today: (1) the fact that for many Muslims trained in the local Quranic schools, the Eastern (*naskh*) script used in most printed editions of the Quran is either unfamiliar or aesthetically unappealing; (2) the widespread belief that a handwritten Quran carries more blessing (*baraka*) than a printed one; (3) the desire of some wealthy individuals to support what is perceived as a symbol of the cultural heritage of Borno.

One of the authors of the present note (Maimadu B. Mutai) has long been engaged in researching the history of the orthography and calligraphy of the Quran in Borno, leading to a PhD in the department of Arabic and Islamic Studies of the University of Maiduguri. The Centre for Research and Documentation in Trans-Saharan Studies, where Mutai is currently the deputy director, is continuing such research. On an international scale, the most important programme for the study of Bornuan Quranic manuscripts is the Early Nigerian Qur'anic Manuscripts project (<https://www.soas.ac.uk/africa/research/kanuri>) led by Dmitry Bondarev (previously at the School of Oriental and African Studies, London, now at the Centre for the Study of Manuscript Cultures, Hamburg). In recent years, some Nigerian political institutions have also started to realize the importance of such a tradition. The Commissioner for Arabic and Islamic Education of Yobe State, Alhaji Lawan Shettima, in particular, has initiated an innovative programme in the form of a yearly competition of Quranic handwriting, modelled upon the competitions of Quranic recitation that are common all over the Muslim world. In this competition, local Quranic calligraphers submit their completed copies of the entire Quranic text to a jury made up of local calligraphers, who vote the most accurately and beautifully written copy, awarding its author a prize. The effect of such an initiative is partially hampered by the strict code of conduct followed by many traditional scribes of Borno, who often avoid displaying their calligraphic work, preferring to leave it anonymous for fear of losing part of their rewards from God. Nevertheless, if they continue, such initiatives are destined to have a positive impact on the promotion of the traditional Bornuan manuscript culture, in particular among the youth, and in preserving the unique local version of the Arabic script, the *Barnāwī*.

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13 Mutai, interview with Ka'ana Umar (Maiduguri, September 2013).

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