

The Intellectual and Scholarly Activities of Sayyida Rahmatullahi: A Tijaniyya Female Islamic Scholar and Muqaddama, 1966-2014

Mubarak Tukur

Umaru Musa Yar'adua University, Katsina Nigeria

Lecturer, Department of History and Security Studies

PhD Fellow, Gerda-Henkel Stiftung, Makerere University Kampala

Email: saltuk.mt@gmail.com /mubarak.tukur@umyu.edu.ng

Abstract

Sayyida Rahmatullahi a traditional female Tijaniyya Muslim scholar in Dandume, Katsina State of Northern Nigeria, never attended any Western education but was blessed with encyclopaedic knowledge. She was an amazing and reputed woman intellectual who dedicated her life to dissemination of Islamic knowledge in teaching of married women, teenage girls, widows and divorcee women, by establishing Islamiyya schools for them in the villages and town of Dandume. She committed herself in delivering many lectures aimed at educating women about the religion of Islam. It is against this background that this paper explores and examines the core values of Sayyida's intellectual activities of lectures and the organization of tafsir (Qur'an exegesis) as being one of the first females to organize such kind of male-dominated activities in Dandume. The paper adopted the theory of Gender and Development (GAD), which explains the active participation of Muslim women in revitalising of the Islamic religious teachings, and used a historical methodology which relying on primary and secondary sources. The objective of this paper is to show the relevance of the historical development and emergence of female scholars preaching in a patriarchal society. This paper brings out some of the aspects of Sayyida Rahmatullahi's intellectual scholarly contributions in the field of women Islamic scholarship.

Keywords: exegesis, audio-visual lectures, Tijaniyya Muqaddama

Sufism, is a process of discipline which seeks to refine an individuals' character by ridding him out of constraints and weakness that may curtail him from serving the cause of his Lord, for which he has been created. It aims at taming his character and cleansing him of greed for material wealth and the fear of any other than their Lord (Martin, 2005). Sufi brotherhood means a path that a Sufi Muslim may follow to attain a personal religious experience, and it may also mean an organisational framework for transmitting this method. There are many Sufi brotherhood organisations in the world across the African and the Middle Eastern part of the world. In Africa more especially in Western African countries, the *Qadiriyya* and *Tijaniyya* Sufi brotherhood became the most prominent in the region. The *Tijaniyya* is believed to be an upshot of the *Qadiriyya* sect more especially in Northern Nigeria (Seesemann, 2010).

The *Tijaniyya* brotherhood is an Islamic *Sufi* movement started by Sheikh Sherif Abi al-Abbas Ahmad ibn Muhammad al-Fasi al-Tijani (1735-1815) in

1781 A.D. in Morocco. The brotherhood has since spread to different countries. Nigeria is one of such places where this brotherhood has been well known today among the Muslims. However, prior to the introduction of *Tijaniyya* brotherhood in Hausa land, the historical context was very favourable for the development of the *Qadiriyya* brotherhood. This development went along concurrently with the Expansion of Islam in the area, and it reached its climax with the 1804 Jihad and the consolidation of the Sokoto Caliphate (Sulaiman, 2015).

The prominence of Sufism throughout West Africa has provided opportunities for leadership roles for women not usually granted through their societies or other forms of orthodox Islam. More specifically, the *Tijaniyya* brotherhood, primarily with large followers in Senegal and Nigeria played a key role in expanding the access for women to the practices of the movement. Perhaps one of the main parts of Sufi teachings, is the teacher student relationship, otherwise known as *Muqaddam*, or spiritual guide (Hannah, 2014). This is the head of a particular *Zawiyya* (camp at the back of a mosque) and one of the highest positions in the structure of the *Tijaniyya* Sufi order whose responsibilities include among other things ensuring the opening and closure of daily *wazifa* and weekly Friday *zikr*. To fulfil this role, a person must know the rules, and be sufficiently grounded in doctrines of *Tijaniyya*, have a good temperament, and moral behaviour (Huston, 1999). The feminine version of this title is *Muqaddama* who officiates and acts the feminine role of a *Muqaddam*.

For most of History, the position of a *Muqaddam* was reserved for men. Women used to engage in these activities, but with strict seclusion without mingling with men or raising their voices so as not to attract the attention of men passing by the place where they camped. They always stayed at the back end of a Mosque or of the *Zawiyya* (Sh. S. Kara, personal communication). With the teachings of Shaikh Ibrahim Nyass in the 1940s, many women came to be appointed to serve the role of *Muqaddamas* within the *Tijaniyya* order (Hill, 2010), but had to embrace characteristics that inherently kept them subordinate to their male counterparts such as lowering their voices when seated in group circles (*Da'ira*).

Sayyida Rahmatullahi became the first *Muqaddama* in Dandume, and one of the prominent female *Muqaddamas* in Katsina in the 21st century, judging from the note paper of her initiation as *Muqaddama* by Shaikh Abul-Fatahi authorizing her to assume the role, and also initiate others (see Fig. 1). The letter stated thus as translated by Abul-Fatahi (1999):

In the name of Allah, the Beneficent the Merciful, all praise Be to Allah alone. Peace be upon His Prophet, Muhammad. May God Almighty Allah be pleased with our leader Shaikh Abul Abbas Ahmadu Tijani and his fellow men till the day of accountability. Whosoever saw this paper, should note that I Shaikh Abul-Fatahi, hereby initiated Sayyida Rahmatu, of a royalty extract, the daughter of Shaikh Khalilu Hamidu Dandume, as *Muqaddama*. As such I permitted (*Ijaza*) her to give and proclaim the *Tijaniyya* Sufi order litanies of morning and evening (*Lazimi*), *Wazifa*

and Friday *Zikir* of the sunset to any person willing to accept the order from her both men and women. I got this permission from my Shaikh (teacher) Alhaji Ibrahim Nyass, who was granted it from his Shaikh Ahmadu Sukarriju, him also from his Shaikh Abdu-Lawi, him also from his Shaikh and our leader Alhaji Ali-bin Isah Attamasiny, him also from his Shaikh, Saint who linked and connected people. His position is highly reached in Sainthood. Shaikh Ahmad bin Muhammad Attijani Al-Hassani from his grandfather, the leader of human beings, a role model, Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). With this, I, Shaikh Abul-Fatahi I am calling and directing myself and you (Sayyida Rahmatullahi), to fear God in all our doing and wherever we found ourselves, to follow Allah's directives, desist from what he forbids us to do wherever we found ourselves, and to guide the rest of the Ummah (Muslim society).

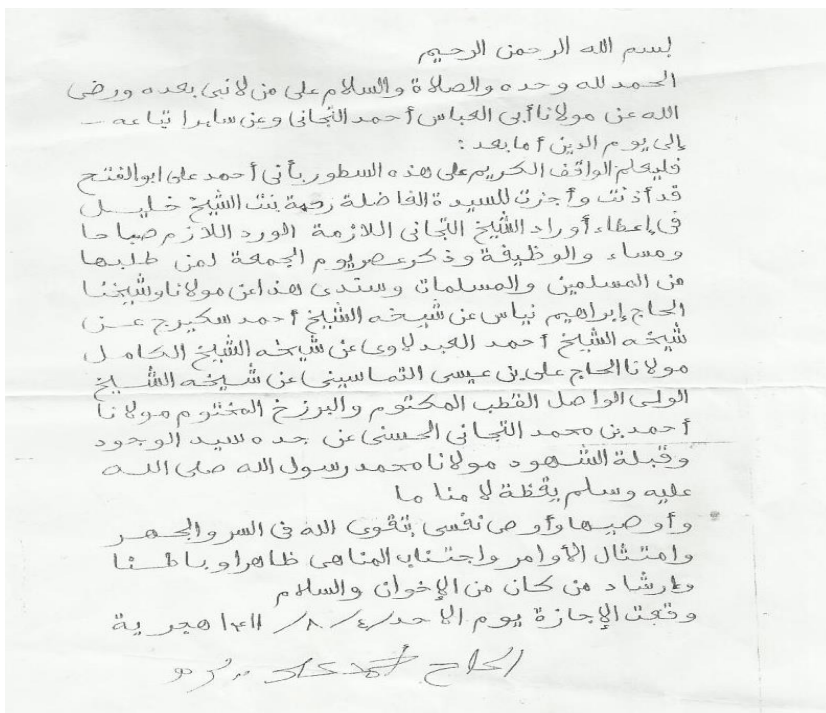


Figure 1. A copy of Sayyida's letter of appointment as a *Muqaddama* in 1990

Source: Shaikh Muhammadul Khadi Khalilu's collections February 2015

Purpose of the study

For women participating as a *Muqaddamas*, there are extensive challenges and barriers, yet understanding the outcome of their struggle helps to understand the determination which many of them embody. These scholars played a significant role, which necessitated the need for a proper study. Their emergence continued to be relevant in the spread of Islam in Northern Nigeria. This paper examines the life and times of Sayyida Rahmatullahi as one of the

female *Tijaniyya* Islamic scholars, and the roles she played in the spread of Islam in Dandume in Katsina State and some parts of Northern Nigeria.

Gender and Development

The Gender and Development approach highlights the socially constructed differences between men and women in terms of gender roles and power relations. Reeves and Baden (2000) argue that society has promoted different expectations of maleness and femaleness, where men and women are expected to carry out different roles; and that there exist hierarchical power relations embedded in social institutions, where women tend to be treated as being subordinate to males. GAD therefore emphasises the need to challenge the unequal division of labour and power relations between men and women. The GAD approach was deemed suitable for this study in that Sayyida Rahmatullahi, in her bid to uplift the education of women in her community demonstrated that women can perform equally as well as men, without having to compromise on the teachings of Islam.

Methodology

Research entails inquiring for new knowledge and research methodology involves the techniques, skills, and procedures used for the collection, interpretation and analysing data. As such, sources for the conduct of this research were subjected to rigorous and critical evaluation in ascertaining their validity, reliability, authenticity, accuracy and coherence. This work employed the use of primary, secondary and other related source materials. Oral interviews formed the main basis of this paper. The interviews were conducted during the fieldwork, with people who had had both direct and indirect contact with Sayyida Rahmatullahi, and were capable of feeding the researcher with valid information. In addition, her recorded sermons and lectures provided another source of information to the development of this paper. Other sources of data were in form of books, journal articles, theses and dissertations, audio-visuals, government publications, and maps. All these have been helpful to this research work.

Sayyida Rahmatullahi's Education

The personality in this paper who is Sayyida Rahmatullahi, was a *Tijaniyya* Sufi woman scholar who also rose to the position of an initiator "*Muqaddama*". She was born in July 1966, at Dandume of Katsina State in Northern Nigeria. Grown up in the family of religious scholars, she started her early education when she was just two years old, beginning with *Huruful Hija'iyya* (Arabic letters), then *Babbaku* (the first step of learning Arabic Alphabet). After mastering *Babbaku*, she started learning how to merge them by using the Arabic signs to provide meaningful Arabic sentences, using what is known as "*Wassula*" (Arabic sign). In those days, a teacher usually wrote for his students from *'A'uzubillahi mina sh-shaitanir-rajiim* (I seek refuge and protection in Allah from devil), to *Suratul Fiil* (the Elephant) in the Qur'an. Beyond these, he would withdraw his assistance to the students to write. Sayyida Rahmatullahi continued to write the Qur'an by herself, until the time she could

memorize the whole of it, which was accomplished at the age of eleven years (Interview with Shaikh Muhammadul Khadi, 55 years, scholar). She then ventured into studying other religious and Arabic books.

A follower of the Sufi order, she also read books on Sufism. She read all these books at home with her father, Shaikh Khalilu Hamidu. Sayyida Rahmatullahi started with *Fiqhu* (Islamic jurisprudence) comprising of books like *Akdari* (on Jurisprudence); *Ishmawi* and *Iziyya* (on purification, prayer, ablution); *Ibn Rushdu* and *Dan Ashir* (on poems, jurisprudence, and trade); and *Risala*, *Askari*, and *Muktasar* (on pilgrimage, alms giving, human relationship and purification). In the field of Arabic Language and Arabic poems, she read books such as *Alburda* and *Hamziyya* (poems on love of the Prophet); *Daibatul Garrah* (Arabic poem); *Ishriniya* (on praise); *Diwani* (a praising book of Shaikh Ibrahim Nyass); *Mukamatul-Hariri* (comprising many disciplines of knowledge in form of stories and storytelling on Arabic language); and *Shu'ara* (on Arabian poems before the coming of the Prophet). In the field of Arabic grammar, she read books like *Ajrumiya* (on learning Arabic language); and *Li'irabi* (Arabic poems).

However, her being a Sufi scholar, she read books on Sufism like *Daliya* (on seeking for knowledge, and abandoning worldly things and praising of the *Tijaniyya* scholar by the name Shaikh ibn Nasir); *Ma'arifa* (on knowledge of knowing of God); *Munyatul Muridi*, (poem on the basic teachings of *Tijaniyya*); *Buguyatul Mustafidi* (commentary on the *Munyatul Muridi*); *Al-Yakutatul Faridha* (on the brief history of Shaikh Ahmad Tijjani and basic issues in *Tijaniyya* and its followers); *Jawahirul-Ma'ani* (complete *fatwa* [legal opinion] of Shaikh Ahmad Tijjani); and *Rimahu* (on steadfastness in the process of seeking and knowing the Knowledge of God).

Sayyida Rahmatullahi's Lectures

Sayyida Rahmatullahi made her first public appearance in 1992, before a gathering of more than eighty married women. She surprised all the people who attended the lecture by her being outspoken, bold, composed and intelligent when she faced the gathering of those women (Interview with Malama Umma, 35 years, Layin Shehi Road, 6 February 2015). From this lecture, people started expressing their love for her and began inviting her to deliver Islamic lectures to them, during naming or wedding ceremonies.

There are hundreds of Sayyida's lectures and *tafsir* (Qur'anic exegesis) recorded in both audio and video sets. Most of these lectures were done during the *Maulud* ceremonies (celebrating the birthday of the Prophet) and Ramadan *tafsir* (interpretation of the glorious Qur'an during the Islamic month of Ramadan, fasting period). Others include the occasional lectures at naming or wedding ceremonies in some places like Katsina, Kogi, Kaduna, Zamfara, and Zaria. The use of modern technology such as the new media (broadcasting of her lectures and teachings in the TV stations as well as radio), has greatly helped in dissemination of the teachings and religious activities of Sayyida Rahmatullahi. Her visual and audio-visual lectures have penetrated all the nooks and crannies

of most cities, towns and villages of most part of Northern Nigeria, educating millions of women about Islam and Sufism.

Gidan Shamaki, formally a leader of the Shi'ite sect in Dandume had a disagreement with some of the leading members of this sect and so defected, claiming the sect deceives the women of Dandume. He organized a gathering of women, and invited Sayyida Rahmatullahi to give a lecture at a time when the Shi'ite sect embarked on luring women to its membership (Malama Umma).



Figure 2. A caption of Sayyida Rahmatullahi during one of her lectures

Tafsir by Sayyida Rahmatullahi

Tafsir is an Arabic word for exegesis, which means interpretation of the verses of the Qur'an. A Qur'anic *tafsir* often explains the places, the time sequence contained in the Qur'anic verses, as well as giving meanings and explanations on why verses were revealed and the history behind their revelation. Three main types of *tafsir* were applied; *bil-riwayah*, based on the Qur'an and Sunnah; *bil-diraya* based on Ijtihad ("diligence" independent reasoning); and *bil-Isharia* (which explains hidden meanings based on esoteric knowledge) (Interview with Shaikh Malam Tukur, 3rd February 2015. Islamic Scholar).

Ijtihad is the concept of making personal judgments on various issues of life that are not covered in any school of jurisprudence, and which is based on mutual consensus of scholars' judgement on a particular matter. It is said that when there are incidents in life not discussed in the Qur'an or Hadith, then one can practice Ijtihad using basic common sense, experience, and knowledge of Islamic teachings. Scholars wrote different books on *tafsir* that are used in different parts of this world. For example, Sayyida Rahmatullahi used the book

of Jalalaini, a *tafsir* written by Shaikh Jalaluddeen al-Mahdi, and his student Shaikh Jalaluddeen al-Suyudi in conducting her *tafsir*. She also consulted other related books before conducting the *tafsir* (Interview with Shaikh Malam Tukur, 3rd February 2015. Islamic Scholar).

According to Malama Umma, Sayyida Rahmatullahi started conducting *tafsir* in early 1997, which was done twice a week on Thursdays and Fridays from 7:00 to 10:00 pm. However, by 1998, during the month of Ramadan, some members of the first cohort of Sayyida's students suggested to her that instead of the two days, they should use the whole month of Ramadan to do *tafsir*, and she welcomed the idea. This set the beginning of the Ramadan *Tafsir* from that year. The usual time was changed from night to daytime (Interview with Malama Umma, 35 years, Layin Shehi 4th March 2015, scholar and Sayyida's Mistress of the ceremony).

According to Malama Umma, gatherings used to be organised annually, consisting of almost a thousand women who would listen to Sayyida's *tafsir*. Malama Umma further explained that arrangements and provision of equipment, such as speakers, amplifiers, wires, microphone and mats were catered for by the women who occasionally contributed money among themselves. Malama Umma



Figure 3. Sayyida Rahmatullahi doing a live Ramadan *Tafsir* on Nigerian Television Authority. Source NTA Funtua 2015

used to be the mistress of the functions and would make formal introductions before the commencement of the *tafsir*. Her statement read in Hausa language thus:

Assalamu alaikum warahmatullahi ta'ala wabarakatuhu, zaku saurari tafsiri daga bakin Sayyida Rahmatullah Shaikh Khalilu tare da mai ja mata baki, Malama Aminatu Shaikh Kabir Khalilu Daga ayah ta kaza.... zuwa ayah ta...kaza” (Malama Umma).

The above expression states that “peace be upon to you (the gathering of the women), you are going to listen to a *tafsir* from Sayyida Rahmatullahi Shaikh Khalilu together with her assistant (who read verses from the glorious Qur’an) in the name of Malama Aminatu Shaikh Kabir Khalilu, from verse... to verse...”.

At the end of the *tafsir*, there used to be question-and-answer sessions, in which Malama Umma selected the questions submitted by the women and read them for Sayyida to give responses. Most women enjoyed the question-and-answer sessions, as different questions such as those relating to complications of menstruation period, fasting, matters regarding family problems, and other matrimonial questions used to be discussed (interview with Malama Umma).

In the final analysis of her *tafsir*, a reciter, who happened to be her own blood sister, usually recited verses from the Qur’an, while Sayyida interpreted the meaning of those verses. This *tafsir* used to be done from the first day of Ramadan to the twenty seventh day of the month. When it came to closing of the *tafsir*, an elaborate ceremony used to be organized. No fewer than five thousand women from various places would attend the ceremony, including some invited important personalities. Turai `Yar`adua, wife of the former Nigerian president, the late Umaru Musa `Yar`adua, (an adherent of *Tijaniyya* brotherhood), was a regular guest to the closing ceremony. They called it “*Hatama*” which means closing. At this occasion, Sayyida Rahmatullahi delivered lectures on sensitive religious issues affecting women in Islam, and also, some invited guests would deliver lectures to the congregation before the final closing prayer (Sayyida’s last video, Ramadan *Tafsir*).

Establishment of *Islamiyya* Schools by Sayyida Rahmatullahi

Sayyida Rahmatullahi, established over fifteen Sufi-based *Islamiyya* (madrassah) schools for married women within and outside Dandume, reflecting the recognition given to female education, especially the married ones, and its broader acceptance. These schools were generally named as *Madrasatu Ansaru Dinissalam Li-Ummahatil-Mu’uminati* (school for helping married women parents in Islam), the first one being one at Sayyida’s family house opened in 1990, with eight (8) married women students. Indeed, women from various wards within Dandume continued to troop into Shaikh Khalilu’s house to attend lessons. Eventually, this necessitated Sayyida Rahmatullahi to consider opening a branch of her school outside her father’s house (Interview with Malama Jummai and Malama Ummu Aimana). The first school established by Sayyida Rahmatullahi outside her own family house was the one at Dajin Mare Quarters in 2001. Lessons would start by 2:30 pm and end at 5:00pm on Saturdays, Mondays, Tuesdays and Wednesdays (Sunday was excluded because it was a market day). Qur’an recitation was done daily. Books used included Qur’an, Hadith, *Fiqhu*

(Islamic jurisprudence), *Anashid* (poems) and *Sira* (Islamic History of the prophet). At the time of conducting this research, the number of married women at this school was estimated at more than one hundred (Malama Jummai and Malama Ummu Aimana).

Due to increased demand and population of students in these schools, several classes were created in the entryways (*zaure*) and various garages of private houses whose owners gave Sayyida free usage. As such, the schools evolved and developed from informal classes of young married women to established schools. At the time of study, some of Sayyida Rahmatullahi's pioneer students happened to be teachers at these schools (Malama Ummu Aimana).

The married women who attended *Islamiyya* mentioned how attending these schools had changed their lives and that of others; and how it helped them in understanding their religion, particularly on issues related to co-wife, relationships in Islam, living patiently and harmoniously with their neighbours, etc. Some of them preferred attending the *Islamiyya* to learning at home with a male or female scholar (as some husbands preferred) because in the schools, they learned different books, ideas and became exposed to different teachers. They were not distracted by household activities or by children (Renne, 2012). As rightly observed by one of the informants, "children will be around you, they will even laugh at you when they hear you reading". Women also benefited from attending *Islamiyya* by learning how to offer prayer, how to take ritual bath and perform ablution properly, and also how to get along with their husbands, and the handling of pregnancy, child birth, childrearing and training.

As for logistics associated with funding the *Islamiyya* schools, members of communities where each school was established would provide a motorcycle for transporting the female teachers assigned to the place. Sayyida Rahmatullahi continued to establish these *Islamiyya* schools until 2012 when she established such schools before her death, and this tradition has continued even after then (Malama Jummai, one of the closest and pioneer students of Sayyida Rahmatullahi).

Discussion

Previously, women were excluded from becoming *Mukaddimas* because of their lack of access to education because it required extensive Qur'anic and Islamic education. The above account of the educational practices by married women students relates to the GAD issues concerning women's autonomy and authority. Some Northern Nigerian feminist scholars, such as Hauwa Mahdi argue that without equal access to public space, education, and political office, the subordinate position of Muslim women in Northern Nigerian society will persist. Bilkisu Yusuf also makes this point, although she views the expansion of women's education in Kano (both state-run adult education programs and schools founded by Islamic organizations) and the establishment of women's organizations, such as FOMWAN (Federation of Muslim Women's Association of Nigeria) as an important means of addressing these concerns (Renne, 2012).

There have been other forms of Islamic education for married women elsewhere in Northern Nigeria. For example, in Kano, adult education classes were established in 1983 and classes for married women begun in 1987 by the *Da'awa* organization founded by Aminuddeen Abubakar. In Sokoto, women's Islamic education was associated with the earlier efforts of Nana Asma'u, the daughter of Usman Ibn Fodio (Masooda B. and Hilary). Such schools were not available for married women in Dandume, until Sayyida Rahmatullahi embarked on this effort.

Conclusion

The acceptance of female leadership in Mosques and Madrasas is a significant change from much historical practice, signalling the mainstream acceptance of some form of female Islamic authority in many places. Today, Sayyida Rahmatullahi is remembered as a transformer of Dandume married women, who helped them to properly understand the religion of Islam. She provided models for Islamic learning and encouraged Muslim women to strictly adhere to and put it into practice what they learned in the *Islamiyya*. It should be understood that the legacy made by Sayyida Rahmatullahi still continues to exist even after her death and the *Islamiyya* schools established continue to flourish.

References

- Abul-Fatahi, S. (1999). *Reference letter indicating the initiation of Sayyida Rahmatullahi as a 'Muqaddama'*. Written in Arabic, translated into Hausa language by Shaikh Malam Tukur, and translated to English language by Mr. Emmanuel on the 23 July, 2016.
- Renne, E. P. (2012). Educating Muslim Women and the Izala movement in Zaria City. *Islamic Africa*, 3, p.56.
- Hannah P. (2014). *Challenges, negotiations and feminism in the Tijaniyya Order in Senegal and Nigeria*. (Unpublished Senior Honors Project presented to the Honors College). East Carolina University Greenville.
- Hill, J. (2010). All Women are guides: Sufi leadership and womanhood among the Taalibe Baay in Senegal. *Journal of Religion in Africa*. brill.nl/jta.
- Huston, A. S. (1999). The development of women's authority in the Kano Tijaniyya, 1894-1963. *Africa Today*, 43-64.
- Martin, L. (2005). *What is Sufism?* Lahore: Suhail Academy.
- Reeves, H., & Baden, S. (2000). *Gender and development: Concepts and definitions*. BRIDGE Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex.
- Sulaiman, Z. (2015). *A history of Tijjaniyya brotherhood in Katsina, C. 1906 to 2009'*. (Unpublished MA dissertation dept of History). Bayero University Kano.
- Seesemann, R. (2010). Sufism in West Africa. *Religion Compass*, 4(10), 606-614, 10.1111/j.1749-8171.2020.00241.x