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FROM TEACHING COLLECTIONS TO FAMILY ARCHIVES: A GENEALOGY OF SHEIKH KABARA LIBRARY, KANO

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Abstract

This study traces the genealogy of the Kabara Library in Kano, Nigeria, one of the collections of oldest manuscripts embodying a legacy of centuries-old network of scholarship and literary production in Bilad al-Sudan. The history of the library dates to the late eighteenth century when Sheikh Umar Kabara migrated to Kano from Kabara near Timbukutu, alongside his private teaching collections. The collections were inherited and subsequently developed by his progenies, particularly the famous Qadiri scholar, Sheikh Nasiru Kabara. Using archival ethnography and in-depth interviews with members of the Kabara family, this research argues that libraries represent important sites not only for the production, distribution, and consumption of knowledge, but also contested spaces of power. This study is based on the premise that the Kabara Library, now under the custody of Sheikh Qaribullah, son and successor of Nasiru Kabara, has passed through a complex history of ownership, acquiring a distinct sociality of its own in the intellectual and social history of Kano.

Keywords: Library, manuscripts, history, genealogy, Kabara, Kano.

Introduction

The importance of Kano as an intellectual crossroad in the history of sub-Saharan Africa is widely recognized. Since the adoption of Islam in 1350 as a state religion, Kano had experienced regular influx of streams of foreign scholars from the Timbuktu region, who either sojourned or settled permanently in the city. The city drew considerable benefits from the arrival of itinerant scholars who brought books on different aspects of Islamic Studies from different parts of the Muslim World. Books were certainly the most important vehicles through which various branches of Islamic scholarship were disseminated across different parts of the Sahel, leading to the emergence of private collections. There are many private manuscript archives in the city of Kano, most of which are currently endangered.

This article is about one of these rare manuscript libraries, the Sheikh Kabara Library, Kano, and the politics behind its formation. The Kabara Library houses one of the oldest manuscripts in Kano, embodying a legacy of centuries-old network of scholarship and literary production in Bilad al-Sudan. Its history stretches to the late eighteenth century when Sheikh Umar Kabara, migrated to Kano from Kabara near Timbukutu, with his private teaching collections. These were inherited and subsequently developed by his progenies, particularly the famous Qadiri scholar, Sheikh Nasiru Kabara. The Kabara Library houses a number of rare manuscripts such as the oldest copy of *Asl-al-Wangarriyyin* in Kano; an extant copy of Ibn Yazid's *Risala* that was brought to Kano by the celebrated sixteenth century scholar, Shaykh Muhammad *bn* Abd al-Karim al-Maghili (1425-1504); a 440-year-

old Arabic dictionary, *Al-Kamusul mubid*; and *Kitab al-Shifa'* believed to have been written by Shaykh Abdullah al-Suqa.

This study is based on the premise that the Kabara Library, now under the custody of Sheikh Qaribullah, son and successor of Nasiru Kabara, has passed through a complex history of ownership, acquiring a distinct sociality of their own in the intellectual and social history of Kano. Relying on archival ethnography and in-depth oral interviews with members of the Kabara family, this essay posits that libraries represent important sites not only for the production, distribution, and consumption of knowledge, but also contested spaces of power.

Literature Review: Libraries as Spaces of Knowledge and Power

While libraries continue to play their traditional roles of collecting and providing access to knowledge, there is growing interest in scholarly exploration of their cultural and symbolic significance as active sites of knowledge production. How do libraries shape the wider social, political, and intellectual landscape, and vice versa? The conventional notion of libraries as repositories of knowledge whose exclusive function is collecting and preserving information, has been contested and deepened by a range of emerging theoretical trends that have prompted innovative thinking around the politics of libraries.¹ These theoretical submissions were prompted by emerging approaches in book history and studies of manuscript cultures which challenges the notion of libraries as docile storehouses of information. Even books and manuscripts as the contents of libraries are being subjected to varieties of interpretation that recognizes their instrumentality as objects of social production.

In Africa, students of book history and archives are increasingly coming to terms with the historical connections between libraries and politics,² and the role of books and manuscript collections in the construction of national and familial heritage. One of the earliest literatures on this tradition is *The Meanings of Timbuktu* edited by Shamil Jeppie and Souleymane Bachir Diagne. This book explores the intellectual history of Timbuktu and the wider region including the Sokoto Caliphate. Contributors to this volume focus on different aspects of book production, ranging from writers, traditions of Islamic calligraphy and reading.³

Similarly, in their edited book, *The Trans Saharan Book Trade: Manuscript Cultures, Arabic Literacy, and Intellectual History in Muslim West Africa*, Graziano Krätli and Ghislaine Lydon underscore the importance of manuscript collections as vehicles of social production:

¹ Library as Place: Rethinking Roles, Rethinking Space, Council on Library and Information Resources, 2005; www.clir.org/pubs/abstract/pub129abst.html; James K. Elmborg, "Libraries as Spaces: Between us Recognizing and Valuing the Third Space," *Reference and User Services Quarterly* 50, no. 4 (2011): 338–50; Malcolm B. Brown and Joan K. Lippincott, "Learning Spaces: More than Meets the Eye," *Educause Quarterly* 26, no. 1 (2003): 14.

² Gregory H. Leazer and Robert Montoya, "The Politics of Knowledge Organization: Introduction to the Special Issue," *Knowledge Organisation* 42, no. 5, 367–371.

https://web.archive.org/web/20201210093142id_/https://www.nomos-elibrary.de/10.5771/0943-7444-2020-5-367.pdf; Elizabeth B. Fitzpatrick, "The Public Library as Instrument of Colonialism: The Case of the Netherlands East Indies," *Libraries and the Cultural Record* 43, no. 3 (2008): 270–285; Paul T Jaeger, Ursula Gorchma, Lindsay C Sarin and Carlo Berlot, "Libraries, Policy, and Politics in a Democracy: Four Historical Epochs," *The Library Quarterly* 83, no 2, (2013).

³ Shamil Jeppie and Souleymane Bachir Diagne (eds.), *The Meanings of Timbuktu* (Cape Town: HSRC Press, 2008).

As vestiges of the past, book manuscripts increasingly have become objects of cultural appropriation on the part of the countries they represent. Seen as national treasures, they become coveted, exhibited and exposed to the national and international gaze, as one of the many links of a scriptural genealogy to which countries in postcolonial Africa are bound by necessity as well as by choice. Within this political context, they are meant to exalt the past glories of societies and the pride of the people who created and preserved the texts before transmitting them from one generation to the next. Real as well as virtual monuments are built to celebrate them. Whether they consist in the creation of manuscript libraries in Nigeria, Mali and Mauritania, the establishment of national manuscript centres in Algeria, or the use of information technologies to ensure preservation and access to manuscript collections in Morocco, all these initiatives reveal the same political strategy, consisting in the institutional embrace of the African manuscript heritage on the part of states that have neglected it for the longest time, to the point of jeopardizing its survival.⁴

The *Trans Sabaran Book Trade* is a rich collection of essays by specialists, exploring different aspects of manuscript traditions across Africa, from Morocco to Timbuktu and Kano. The study pioneered a unique approach to manuscripts which confers agency to books by giving primacy to their materiality and sociality, not just as objects of reading, but also as items of trade, cultural appropriation, and consumption.⁵ In the same conceptual vein, students of Information Science are questioning the orthodox reading of libraries as mere sites of information. Gregory H. Leazer and Robert Montoya, in their work on the political construction of knowledge organization, give us a glimpse of the extra-curricular role of libraries beyond their epistemological meaning as knowledge organisation spaces:

Despite a strong tradition of disciplinary focus in information science, much of the literature is still given over to fairly simple notions of social form and structure. A nascent knowledge organization practice dedicated to social difference is explicitly motivated by justice and nomenclature. Not only is knowledge organization a tool of cultural hegemony, but also it can be read as a product of cultural ordering and bias.⁶

From the foregoing, it is deducible that libraries have been associated with institutions of power and social hierarchies. This is particularly the case with scholarly families and institutions, which appreciate the power of library in the construction of authority and social status. Thus, in view of their

⁴ Graziano Krätli and Ghislaine Lydon (eds.), *The Trans-Sabaran Book Trade Manuscript Culture, Arabic Literacy and Intellectual History in Muslim Africa* (Leiden: Brill: 2011), xii.

⁵ Ibid, IX.

⁶ Gregory H. Leazer and Robert Montoya, "The Politics of Knowledge Organization," 367.

power of acquisition, classification, and ordering of books, the library, whether public or private, is much more than just a storehouse of inactive apolitical materials for the reading public. Libraries and archives represent spaces of power, which reproduce social and epistemological asymmetries in the society,⁷ exerting influence not only on the organization and categorization of knowledge, but also shaping the power dynamics of access to information, representation, and inclusion. This approach recognizes the primacy of the broader contexts within which libraries exist, over their contents. It is on the basis of this premise that I attempt a genealogy of the Kabara library as a symbol of social status and a site of contestation among the protégées of its founder.

The Meanings of Kabara

In order to appreciate the complex genealogy of the Kabara Library, it is important to revisit the history of Kabara quarters in Kano and its connections with Kabara town located on the bank of the River Niger near Timbuktu⁸ in present day Mali. The place is widely recognized as an important centre of learning and scholarship. Ibn Battuta described the town as a well-established centre of Islam whose scholars were particularly known in Timbuktu. Many Muslim scholars of Timbuktu claim their origin from Kabara. The importance of this small ancient town went beyond the immediate environs of Timbuktu to other areas of the wider region of Timbuktu's intellectual and cultural sphere such as Kano. Kabara in contemporary Kano emerged in the fifteenth century as one of the earliest settlements around the palace of Sarkin Kano but the original name of the area was Jarkasa. The place was predominantly inhabited by *cucumawa* royal slaves. As the settlement grew and expanded, it attracted the influx of more migrants from various places.⁹

Kabara represents more than just a place name in the intellectual history of Kano. It has symbolic significance as a foremost neighborhood for Islamic learning and scholarship. The cultural and intellectual significance of the place in Kano began in the later part of the eighteenth century with the coming of a scholar from Kabara in 1787. Mallam Umar was a grandson of Askia Muhammadu Taoure of Songhay Empire and a brother to Kabara Farma Alu, one of the figures behind a “revolt against Askia Muhammad Bunkam in 1588.”¹⁰ Malam Kabara abandoned his royal pedigree and privileges and migrated to Hausaland in pursuit of knowledge. He studied under the tutelage of various scholars in different centres of Islamic learning especially Hausaland where he sojourned in Katsina and established a theology school and attracted a large number of students. Mallam Kabara had great respect for scholars. He travelled far and wide to meet erudite scholars. It is reported that the coming

⁷ Sofya Aptekar, “The Public Library as Resistive Space in the Neoliberal City,” https://academicworks.cuny.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1003&context=slu_pubs; Samaila Suleiman, “Archives as Spaces of Power: The Social Life of the National Archives of Nigeria,” *Ibadan Journal of Humanistic Studies* 31 (2021): 48-67.

⁸ The Timbuktu intellectual tradition was based on *Naql*, the (chain intellectual authority) and the journey of books across North Africa via Timbuktu to other regions of Bilad Sudan. Timbuktu tradition provided the intellectual grounds for the Sokoto jihad. Sokoto Caliphate ended as a political movement. The culture of writing, collection, and documentation of manuscripts in Kano belong to the broader Timbuktu tradition.

⁹ Ibrahim Muhammad Kabara, “The History of Kabara Ward,” B.A. Dissertation, Department of History, Bayero University, Kano, (1990), 30.

¹⁰ John Hunwick, “Obituaries,” *Sudanic Africa* 7, (1996): 1-4.

of Mallam Kabara to Kano was connected to the activities of Danfodio from whom he learnt a lot especially in the field of Islamic theology.¹¹

Mallam Kabara arrived Kano with his collection of manuscripts, which he used as a teaching library. Although we do not know the precise contents and size of his collections, a family source recalls four rare titles in the original collection: *Al-Kanẓ al-Mudalsim*, *Al-Qamus al-Muhit*, *Aqidatul Subra*, *Al Majamuatul Kubra*.¹² Apart from *Al-Qamus al-Muhit*, the remaining books were authored by Malam Kabara himself. His arrival in Kano marked an important landmark in the history of Kano, attracting many migrants including Islamic clerics such as Mallam Bako from Katsina and Mallam Usman Zabi from Zazzau. Mallam Kabara came to Kano during the reign of Emir Sulaimanu and settled originally at Adakawa before the Emir invited him to settle close to his palace for spiritual consultation.¹³

Another tradition obtained from the house of Mallam Shamsu Jarkasa tells the story of the coming to Kabara of Mallam Ali *bn* Abdullah from Gao in today's Eastern Mali. Mallam Ali is reported to have been appointed by Danfodio as the Chief Quranic reciter for Kano.¹⁴ His arrival marked another important landmark in the intellectual history of Kabara. Like Mallam Kabara, Mallam Ali, had a royal pedigree but chose scholarship over royalty and migrated to Hausaland around 1794. The source relates that although Mallam Ali and Mallam Kabara never met, they were acquainted with each other through scholarly correspondence. Mallam Ali sojourned at Bidda before proceeding to Kano where he met Mallam Kabara. Mallam Ali established his Zawiyah,¹⁵ which became a famous centre for Quranic exegesis in northern Nigeria. The private collections of the family were unfortunately burnt down during the Kano Civil War in the nineteenth century with only a book on Tafsir surviving.¹⁶

Between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the progenies of Mallam Kabara had not only become the dominant scholarly family in Kabara but also the centre of the Qadiriyya Sufi order in sub-Saharan Africa. The successors of Mallam Kabara—Mallam Mai Muhammad na Zaure, Malam Ahmadu, Malam Ibrahim Natsugune, and Sheikh Nasiru Kabara—inherited not only the Qadiriyya authority from their precursor, but also held and continued to expand his manuscript collections.¹⁷ Before his demise, Malam Kabara had instructed that his books should not be shared as part of the family inheritance. His descendants heeded to this will especially under his immediate successor.

¹¹ Sheikh Qaribulla, 67, Leader of Qadiriyya Brotherhood in Nigeria and West Africa, interviewed in Kano, 17 December 2016.

¹² Qaribulla, interview cited. Tracking the journey of books and the formation of private collections in precolonial Africa is a daunting intellectual exercise because of the complex nature of the book production and distribution ecosystem. From manufacturers of the paper and ink to the author, copyist, and traders the book passes through a complex chain of production, distribution, and consumption.

¹³ Kabara, "The History of Kabara Ward," 30.

¹⁴ Andrea Brigalia, "Learning, Gnosis and Exegesis: Public Tafsir and Sufi Revival in the City of Kano (Northern Nigeria), 1950-1970," *Die Welt des Islams* 49, (2009): 349.

¹⁵ Zawiyah is an Arabic term denoting a Sufi center or lodge where Sufis gather for spiritual purposes such as meditation, study and prayer.

¹⁶ Malam Ja'afar Jarkasa, 56, interviewed in Kano, 14 December 2016.

¹⁷ Qaribulla, interview cited.

Sheikh Nasiru Kabara and the Making of the Kabara Library

Although family tradition traces the genealogy of the Kabara Library to the original collections of Mallam Umar Kabara, it was Sheikh Nasiru Kabara, the famous Qadiri scholar and descendant of Mallam Kabara who formally instituted the library in the twentieth century. Born in 1922, Nasiru Kabara received his original authority in the *Al Bayt* and *Kuntiyyah* branches of Qadiriyya from his in-law and teacher, Mallam Ibrahim Na Tsugune.¹⁸ With the demise of Mallam Ibrahim Natsugune, Sheikh Nasiru Kabara became the leader of the family and the Qadiriyya brotherhood. Sheikh Nasiru Kabara paid premium attention to rebuilding and expanding the literary treasure he inherited of the family. Apart from the intellectual capital and reputational history of Mallam Kabara, Sheikh Nasiru Kabara had other comparative advantages over his predecessors. He began his career in the age of documentation that saw the large-scale collection of Arabic manuscripts across Nigeria and the establishment of colonial libraries and archives. It was the age of print and photocopy, which allowed for the mass production and distribution of books. While scholars depended on caravan traffic for their supplies of books in precolonial Kano,¹⁹ the twentieth century saw the advent of new literary opportunities associated with new printing and publishing technologies. Nasiru Kabara also traveled widely, visiting libraries in Baghdad, Timbuktu, and Libya among other. His extensive networks in the Maghreb, Timbuktu and Iraq played important role in the making of the library and his reputational success.



Sheikh Nasiru Kabara holding a copy of the Quran.

¹⁸ Asif Folarin Ahmed, “The Qadiriyya and its Impact in Nigeria”, PhD. Thesis, Department of Arabic and Islamic Studies, University of Ibadan, (1986), 209.

¹⁹ Ghislaine Lydon, “A Thirst for Knowledge: Arabic Literacy, Writing Paper, and Saharan Bibliophiles in the Southwestern Sahara,” in Graziano Krätli Ghislaine Lydon (eds.), *The Trans-Saharan Book Trade*, 58.

It is challenging to determine, with precision, the number of collections added to the library by successors of Mallam Kabara before Nasiru Kabara took over. What is certain is that Nasiru Kabara is generally understood to be a prolific writer and voracious bibliophile who sacrificed time and resources to develop the small collections. After the demise of Mallam Umar Kabara the library project was neglected and many books were lost with a few surviving. Sheikh Nasiru Kabiru's penchant for book collection and desire to restore and preserve the intellectual heritage of the family allowed him to recover important manuscripts such as *Al-Kanʿ al-Mudalsam* and *Qamus al-Mubit* that formed part of the teaching collections of their ancestor from Kabara. Sheikh Nasiru also enriched the library by adding 6000 titles in both manuscripts and printed books to the collections, using his personal resources. According to Paden, Sheikh Nasiru Kabiru was instrumental to the restoration of interest in Jihad classics among the ulama.²⁰ Murray Last reported how on one evening after months of engagement, Nasiru Kabara brought the only known copy of *Asl al-Wangariyyun* to M.A. Al-Hajj.²¹ Sheikh Nasiru Kabara himself had written over 200 works,²² in the form of theological and historical pamphlets and books covering a number of subjects. The thematic priority of his scholarly production, according to Roman Loimeier, is the history of the Qadiriyya and its development in Kano as well as “defence and legitimation of certain rites of the Qadiriyya like the celebration of the mawlid of Abd al-Qadir or the use of the bandiri drums in the dhikr of the Qadiriyya.”²³ He is even reported to have a private copyist in the person of Sharu Bala Gabari.

The collections of the library were initially housed in the first residence of Nasiru Kabara where he established his Zawiyya. He later transformed the family house of Malam Kabara into the famous Qadiriyya House (*Darul Qadiriyya*) adjacent to the Emir's Palace by imbuing it with an aura of aesthetic splendor.

²⁰ John Paden, *Religion and Political Culture in Kano* (California: University of California Press), 152.

²¹ Murray Last, “The Book in the Sokoto Caliphate,” *The Meanings of Timbuktu*, 144. However, the only available copy I saw when I visited the library is a duplicate. The first commentary on this manuscript was done by M.A. Al-Hajj although he did not give the source of the copy he used.

²² The lists of the works are available in the introductory part of his Hausa version *Tafsir* titled *Ihsan al-Mannan fi Ikbraaj Khabaya al-Qur'an* published by World Islamic Call Society, Tripoli, Libya. Roman Loimeier in his work “The Writings of Nasiru Kabara” listed 117 titles of Nasiru Kabara's works. John Hunwick in *ALA II* lists 146 works credited to Nasiru Kabara.

²³ Roman Loimeier, “The Writings of Nasiru Kabara (Muḥammad al-Nāṣir al-Kabari),” *Sudanic Africa* 2 (1991): 167.



The famous Qadiriyya, the spiritual headquarters of Qadiriyya House, near the Emir's palace in Kano. Source: photo by Samaila Suleiman.

A special space was allocated for the collections in *Darul Qadiriyya*. The library continued to grow as more books were added until the space was not able to accommodate them. Thus, a new block was built solely for the library and officially launched in 1993 in a modest ceremony, which coincided with the day of Ashafa graduation. It was written on the gate thus: *Maktabat al-Shaykh Malam Kabara al-Qadiriyya*.²⁴



Manuscript Section of the Library. Source: photo by Samaila Suleiman.

²⁴ This can be loosely translated as *The Library of Sheikh Malam Kabara Qadiriyya*.



Market Editions Section of the Library. Source: photo by Samaila Suleiman.

The Politics of Patrimony

With the demise of Sheikh Nasiru in 1996, his son, Qaribulla, was installed as the Khalifa on 7th October 1996.²⁵ During the ceremony, the new Khalifa was decorated with the family regalia consisting of a turban, sword, and the classic book of Sheikh Kabara, *Al-Kanz al-Mudalsim* to symbolize transition to the new regime of power and authority under Qaribulla.²⁶ The inclusion of *Al-Kanz al-Mudalsim* in the ceremony demonstrates the extrinsic value of books as important symbols of authority. As “important component of religious authority,”²⁷ the progenies of Sheikh Nasiru Kabara understood the symbolic advantages of the library in the construction of power and authority.

Although the emergence of Qaribulla as the Khalifa was celebrated by members of the family, his half-brother Abduljabbar invested his time and resources building his own spiritual centre, *Mujamma’ Aṣḥāb al-Kahf wa’l-Raqīm*, which was interpreted as an act of sabotage against the leadership of Qaribullah. This was the beginning of mutual tension and suspicion between the two camps. The nature of the internal politics within the Qadiriyya family has been described thus:

Although the tension created by this incident has gradually eased, relations between the followers of both camps remain strained, with occasional physical attacks and ongoing confrontational assaults on social media. According to

²⁵ Abdullahi Hamisu, “The Mujamma Aṣḥāb al-Kahf wa’l-Raqīm of Shaykh Abduljabbar Nasiru Kabara: An Anti-Salafi Mass Movement in Contemporary Northern Nigeria,” *Journal for Islamic Studies*, 36, (2017): 218. Sheikh Qaribulla presently resides in Darul Qadiriyya where the library is located and is quite committed to its upkeep, maintenance, and safety.

²⁶ Professor Matabuli Shehu Kabara, 56, Professor, interviewed in Kano, 2023.

²⁷ Bruce S. Hall and Charles C. Stewart, “The Historic “Core Curriculum” and the Book Market in Islamic West Africa,” in Graziano Krätli Ghislaine Lydon (eds.), *The Trans-Saharan Book Trade*, 109.

Abduljabbar and Qasiyuni, Khalifa's alleged misuse of his connection with the Police Force to physically obstruct the followers of Abduljabbar and Qasiyuni from having full access to Gidan Kadiriyya and conduct their own religious activities, is the factor that has caused most tension in the fragile relations between the two camps.²⁸

The group of Abduljabbar also accused Sheikh Qaribulla of romance with the Salafis in Kano. It was against the background of this contention that a group of researchers, including a famous Salafi academic in Kano, was embroiled and almost lynched at *Dar Qadiriyya* when they visited the library in 2016. The altercation began when supporters of Abduljabbar heard the news. They immediately besieged the house in protest, hurling insults at the visitors. The protestors believed that giving a Salafi scholar access to the library was not only insulting to the intellectual legacy of their forebear, but also disrespectful to the Qadiriyya brotherhood as a movement.²⁹

The Contents of the Library

The library houses a large number of manuscripts written in Arabic and Ajami (Hausa and Fulfulde). They are on various subjects. Fatihu, son of Qaribulla, has done an index of the manuscripts and listed 425 titles.³⁰ There are 150 manuscripts without distinctive titles, names of authors or copiers. The subjects covered in the books include Arabic grammar, morphology, literature, semantics, prosody, etymology, dictionaries, tafsir, hadith and its methodology, prophet's biography, jurisprudence, and its principles, theology, mysticism, legal verdicts, supplications, biographies, medicine, astronomy, geography, politics, history and logic. The library is arguably the richest family archive in Kano in terms of number of collections.

Below is a list of selected manuscripts in the library, indicating author, date, pages, and other descriptions as the case may be.

Al Kanẓ al Mudalsam

Author: Malam Umar Kabara

Date: undated

Pages: 457

Description: A summary of 11 books on *Salawat ala al-Annabi*. The book was later summarized by Sheikh Nasiru Kabara in *Al-Malja'u al-Akbar wa al-Manja al-Anfar* in 1985.

Aqidatu al-Sugra

Author: Malam Umar Kabara

Description: Comments on Ash'ari School of Theology

Auliya' Timbuktu

²⁸ Abdullahi Hamisu, "The Muamma Aṣḥāb al-Kahf wa'l-Raqīm," 220.

²⁹ Matabuli Shehu Kabara, Interview cited.

³⁰ Alfatih Qariballa, "Presentations of some Arabic Manuscripts in the Shaikh Umar Al-Tambuki's Library, (Malam Kabara)" B. A. Project, Department of Arabic, Bayero University, Kano (2008).

Muhammad bn Ahmad Baba Al Arwani: copyist

Date: 1376 AH; 1954/54 CE

Description: Intellectual biography of 13 Timbuktu scholars: Mahmud bn Umar Aqit, sayyidi Al Wafa Al arwani (author's grandfather), Muhamamad Sankore.

Kitab al Qarin

Author: Al Waliyu al Wangari

Copyist: unknown

Pages: 6

Description: Arabic Language

Fatab al Rabb Al Latif 'Ala Manzuma Muhammadul al Maulidi fi 'Ilm al Faraid

Author: Mualye Ahmad bn Bayeer al Arwani.

Description: Islamic system of inheritance.

Naẓamus Aqidatu Sunusi

Author: Muhammad bn Ahmad al Wankari

Description: Islamic theology.

Al-Qamus al-Muhit [The All-Encompassing Ocean]

Author: Majd al-Deen al-Fayrouz Abadi

Copyist: Umar Yaseen b. Abi Bakr b. Ahmad

Date: Thursday 15th Ramadan, 1001 AH

Theme: Arabic Lexicology/Dictionary

Description: Consisting of 497 pages, sized 27x17 cm, with 29 lines appearing on each page. The manuscript was written with black ink in clear Naskh script. However, chapters and entries were written with red ink and in a slanted manner. Further explanations were made on the margin of some pages.

Al-Faridat fi al-Nahw [The Unique (Epistle) on Grammar]

Author: Jalal al-Deen Abu Bakr b. Abdurrahman al-Siyuti

Copyist: Anonymous

Date: undated

Theme: This is a one thousand-verse poem on Arabic grammar and morphology

Description: It contains 108 pages of 22x16 cm. Brief annotations were made to the verses on the margin. And it was written with black and red inks in Maghrebi script.

Al-Durar al-Lawami' [The Glittering Jewels]

Author: Shaykh Muhammad al-Tahir b. Ibrahim al-Fallati al-Barnawi (Fayramma)

Copyist: Anonymous

Date: 1371 AH

Theme: Morphology

Description: Consisting of 156 pages with each page, except the last one, containing 6 verses. The manuscript was written with black ink in Maghrebi script, with subheadings only being distinctively colored in red.

This is a different manuscript copy of the previous work. It was annotated by the author himself and was copied only 43 years after its completion in 1179 AH by one Othman b. Muhammad.

Husnu al-Sani' fi 'Addi ma fi al-Qur'an min al-Badi' [The Marvelous Creation in Counting the Rhetorical Expression in the Holy Qur'an]

Author: Al-Haj Muhammad, better known as al-Wazir

Copyist: The Author himself

Date: Undated

Theme: Rhetorical inimitability of the noble Qur'an

Description: a poem consisting of 141 verses and written with black ink in clear Maghrebi script on reddish papers. Red ink had been used to make the subheadings distinctive. The manuscript consists of 54 pages of 22x16 cm with annotations in the author's handwriting.

Tazkirat al-Shafiq al-Jami'atu Lima'arifat al-Tariq [The Comprehensive Reminder of the Compassionate on Learning the (Sufi) Path]

Author: Shaykh Abd al-Qadir b. Musa al-Jilani

Copyist: Anonymous

Date: Undated

Theme: Sufism/Islamic mysticism

Description: a poem written in ordinary Naskh script. However, it is a photocopy of an original copy found in the author's library in Baghdad. It consists of 15 papers of 20x15 cm with each paper containing 15 lines. It is noteworthy, however, that the manuscript is incomplete from the end as the last verses found on the manuscript do not sound conclusive.

Sahih al-Bukhari (vol. 1) [The Authentic (Collection) of Bukhari]

Author: Imam Abu Abd Allah Muhammad b. Isma'il al-Bukhari

Copyist: Muhammad Amasil

Date: 1073 AH

Theme: Collection of Prophetic traditions

Description: The manuscript consists of 492 pages of 15x12 cm and written in Maghrebi script.

Al-Risala al-Jaliya li makanati Nijeriya al-Ilmiya Qabla Kiyau Dawlat Sakwato al-Asima al-Aliyya min al-Qarn al-Thani ila Muntasaf al-Qarn al-Thani Ashar al-Hijri

Author: Sheikh Qaribullah Nasiru Kabara

Date: 1993

Description: Intellectual biography of Nigerian scholars before the Sokoto Caliphate.

Back to the Cradle: Mallam Nasiru Kabara in Timbuktu.

On their visit to Kabara and Timbuktu, Sheikh Nasiru Kabara accompanied by Qaribullah were impressed by the rich manuscript culture and their penchant for history in the region. They found a written tradition that one of the scholars in the family had once migrated to Hausaland. They also met their relatives in Kabara. The prominent imam of Kabara, now in Bamako, is a relative.³¹ During their second visit, he organised a dinner for them and invited many scholars. They saw manuscripts authored by Shehu Danfodio, which were not extant in Hausaland—even in the collections of Waziru Junaidu.³² As a tribute to their exciting journey of rediscovery to their cradle in Kabara, Sheikh Qaribullah offers a lucid description of his impression about Timbuktu and their family connections with the place in poem reproduced below:

Timbuktu my cradle
I love it as long as I live
I have not seen a city like Timbuktu
In all my wanderings
Oh! My city Timbuktu
Be in peace
I wouldn't have existed without you
I am in love with you
You are an antidote to my affliction
You are the center of learning
And source of exoteric and esoteric knowledge
Saint Nasiru told me
“Oh! Qaribullah, the secrets of Allah are in Timbuktu”
Timbuktu, the center of excellence
The cradle of my Saint Umar
Goodbye Timbuktu

Conclusion

This article has attempted a study of the social life of Sheikh Kabara Library from its nineteenth century genesis as a private teaching collection of Mallam Kabara to its transformation into a family archive in the twentieth century. The history of the library challenges the conventional view of books and libraries as neutral and apolitical objects. I have demonstrated how the Kabara library became implicated in the broader politics and sociology of the Qadiriyya brotherhood in Kano. It is envisaged that this study will stimulate further scholarly exploration of the historical and social significance of private collections in Nigeria and beyond.

³¹ The family tradition of origin has been corroborated by Dr. Salisu Bala of the Arewa House, Kaduna, when he visited the family house in Kabara in 2009 where he met and interacted with one of the members of the Kabara family in Mali.

³² Qaribulla, interview cited.