An Archaic Form of Kanuri/Kanembu: A Translation Tool for Qur’anic Studies

Abu ʿUbayda ʿAbd al-Hamīd al-Janāwnī, a 3rd/9th century Ibāḍī scholar and ruler of Jabal Nefūza (a mountain area in Tripolitania, modern Libya) spoke, in addition to Arabic and Berber, the language of Kanem (al-lugha al-Kānimīyya). This fact indicates that Kanem played an important role in North Africa at that time and the Ibāḍīs had close links to the Lake Chad area where Kanem imposed trade control. One of the earliest trans-Saharan trade routes led to this region, starting from Tripoli going further down through Waddān and Fezzan, and the earliest Islamic and Arabic influence entered the region by this path. By the 7th/13th century, Kanem had expanded its activity along three quarters of this Saharan corridor and Islam had already become established among the ruling Sayfuwa dynasty. References to the early development of Islam in Kanem occur in the works of al-Bakrī (d. 487/1094), Yāqūt (d. 626/1229), Ibn Saʿīd al-Maghribī (d. 685/1286–7), Abūʾl-Fidāʾ (d. 732/1331) and Ibn Khaldūn (d. 808/1406). These accounts are also backed by local tradition which shows the first Sayfuwa rulers as propagators of Islam and eager learners of the Qurʾān.

Apart from the links to the Ibāḍīs and, later, the Hafsids to the north, Kanem had cultural relations in the west – with the Almoravids (through Gao and Timbuktu) and the Almohads. The first known writer in Arabic of sub-Saharan origin was a scholar from Kanem, Abū Isḥāq Ibrāḥīm ibn Yaʿqūb al-Kānimī, who was ‘educated in Kanem and travelled to Marrakesh some time before 595/1198–9. There he was received by the Almohad Sultan Yaʿqūb al-Manṣūr.’ These western links had various important and still apparent outcomes for the Islamic tradition in the Kanem area, such as adherence to the Ḍaylī school, the use of the archaic Qayrawān script, the considerable popularity of the Kitāb al-shifā’ of the Almoravid scholar al-Qāḍī ʿIyāḍ (d. 543–544/1149), and the Almohad Ibn Tūmart’s (d. 524/1130) creed al-Murshida.

The expansion of the Sayfuwa activities to the east of Lake Chad resulted in the gradual colonisation of Borno – an eastern province of Kanem, which was known to Muslim writers from as early as the 8th/14th century. According to the local chronicles, in 606/1210–646/1248 the Kanem court moved to Borno, keeping strong control over its lands in the east. Notwithstanding the later political perturbations that led the Sayfuwa to the decisive shift from Kanem to Borno in the 9th/15th century, the two provinces had political and cultural links for centuries, stronger at one time, weaker at another. For this reason, the early development of Qur’anic studies in Kanem and Borno in the 7th/13th to 8th/14th centuries may be appropriately referred to as the Kanem-Borno phase.
dynasty shift and population displacement to Borno, the Sayfuwa political system, the developing Islamic tradition and Kanembu (the language of Kanem) were brought to the areas east of Lake Chad.

Starting from the late 8th/14th centuries, Borno became a centre of Islamic studies in the central bilād al-Sūdān. The foundation of the capital Birni Gazargamu in 884–885/1480 by Sultan ‘Alī ibn Dunama (Mai Ali Dunamami) was the beginning of a period of rapid growth in political development and economic prosperity. As was by now the norm for the Sayfuwa dynasty, the new royal capital became a centre for Islamic scholarship: ‘There were … successful efforts at consolidating the indigenous stands of Islamic scholarship … and a significant movement of scholars into the area from the other part of the Muslim world.’ For three centuries, until its destruction in 1808, Birni Gazargamu was renowned in bilād al-Sūdān for the extensive production of fine calligraphy copies of the Qur’an, from small size manuscripts to large royal-style volumes.

Four such royal Qur’ans, dating back to the 10th/16th–11th/17th centuries, were found by A.D.H. Bivar in the late 1950s. The margins of the Borno Qur’ans bear various tafsīr in Arabic together with interlinear translations from Qur’anic Arabic into archaic Kanembu. This makes the manuscripts unique in providing direct evidence for the intensive study of tafsīr at a time when Borno was at the height of its political power in the region. The famous system of Qur’anic learning as practised today in Borno, north-east Nigeria, is inherited from that period. The readers of the Journal of Qur’anic Studies have already been introduced to the peculiarities of this method, unique in West Africa. One of the advanced stages of Qur’anic learning is the study of tafsīr. ‘The most important method of tafsīr in Borno is the Tarjumo, a system of translating Qur’anic Arabic into precise and ‘technical’ Kanembu which dates back well into Sayfuwa times.’ From the above quote three (so far unanswered) questions arise. What kind of ‘technical’ Kanembu does the system use? How far back does this method go? What is the sociolinguistic function of this variety of Kanembu in modern Borno society?

1. Kanembu as used in the System of Qur’anic Interpretation

The vernacular language discovered in the MSS is an archaic form of Kanembu, a group of dialects spoken east of Lake Chad and linguistically classified as an eastern subdivision within the dialect continuum of the Kanuri language. Historically, Kanuri emerged as the language of Borno during the gradual population shift of the former Kanembu speakers from the Kanem area to Borno between the 7th/13th and 9th/15th centuries. These days, the Kanuri and Kanembu dialects have undergone significant change from that early period, but are still mutually intelligible. The language of the Borno Qur’ans’ glosses (henceforth LG) is, however, considerably distinct from modern Kanuri and Kanembu dialects, and is unintelligible to their
Fig. 2: Yerima Mustafa Qur’an, manuscript YM, 11th/17th – 12th/18th century.
speakers due to many archaic features in its phonology, morphosyntax, and lexicon. Surprisingly, the ‘technical’ Kanembu used in today’s study of tafsir, commonly referred to by ‘ulama‘ as Tarjumo, is structurally very close to LG and almost as unintelligible to modern Kanuri and Kanembu speakers as LG is.

Comparison of LG in the two early Borno manuscripts and its modern variety in the form of Tarjumo allows us to follow the development of archaic Kanembu used as a translation tool for Qur’anic Arabic. The first manuscript, ‘Shetima Kawo Qur’an’ (ShK), is dated back to the 10th/16th century (see Fig. 1). The second, ‘Yerima Mustafa Qur’an’ (YM), was created in the late 11th/17th to early 12th/18th centuries (see Fig. 2). The material for modern Tarjumo has been taken from writings and audio records generously provided by Imam Habib Shettima of Maiduguri.

Tables 1 to 3 show samples taken from these different periods, each taking consecutive phrases from the first half of Q. 2:20 as illustrative examples.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Q. 2:20</th>
<th>yakādū‘l-barqu yakhtarū abṣārahum</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a</td>
<td>Q. 2:20</td>
<td>yakādū‘l-barqu yakhtarū abṣārahum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b</td>
<td>be.near.3SG.IMPF the-lightning snatch.3SG.IMPF sight-their</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c</td>
<td>The lightning almost snatches away their sight</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d</td>
<td>LG &amp; T (I) ShK</td>
<td>(II) YM</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e</td>
<td>[be.near]-? [lightning]-SJ snatch.VN-ADV sight-their-DO</td>
<td>be.near-? [lightning]-SJ sight-their-DO snatch.VN-ADV be.near-?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>f</td>
<td>[the lightning] [nearly] snatches away their sight</td>
<td>nearly, [the lightning] nearly snatches away their sight</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Commentary: *rbít = Kanuri wartō (seize); āuru = Kanuri ru (sight);*
a. Q. 2:20  
*kullamā adā‘a lahum mashaw fihī*

b. whenever gleam.3SG.PERF for-them walk.3PL.PERF in-it

c. whenever it flashes on them they walk on

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>(I) ShK</th>
<th>(II) YM</th>
<th>(III) Tarjumo</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>d</td>
<td>sit-falfal-knh</td>
<td>kita-falfal-gnh</td>
<td>falfal-kiswasōgin tandī-ro tandī-yeh lejada ti-gin lejada</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e</td>
<td>it flashes-when [they]IO they run</td>
<td>it flashes-when [they]IO they-SJ they.go it-in</td>
<td>it.flashes-whenever they.IO they-SJ they.go it-in they.go</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>f</td>
<td>when it flashes they run</td>
<td>when it flashes they walk</td>
<td>when it flashes to them they walk</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Commentary**

The indirect object postposition -ro is written above Arabic *lahum* (for them) in both ShK and YM. In this phrase the postposition -ro, as occurred in ShK, YM, and Tarjumo, collocates with Arabic la- with the basic meaning ‘for, to, in favour of’.

| Table 2 |
|--------|--------|--------|--------|
| a      | Q. 2:20 | wa-idhâ azlama ‘alayhim qāmū | |
| b      | and if darken.3SG.PERF on-them stand.3PL.PERF | | |
| c      | and when darkness falls around them they stand still | | |
| LG & T | (I) ShK | (II) YM | (III) Tarjumo |
| e      | it.darkens-DEP IO they they.stand | it.darkens-DEP IO they-SJ they.wait | it.darkens-DEP they-on it.darkens-DEP they-SJ they.stand |
| f      | when it darkens they stand | when it darkens they wait | when it darkens over them, when it darkens, they stand |

**Commentary**

The indirect object postposition -ro is written above Arabic ‘alayhim (on them) in both ShK and YM and collocates with the Arabic preposition ‘alā with the basic meaning ‘on, upon, on top of’. In Tarjumo, for the same Arabic phrase, ‘alayhim (on them), a different postposition -lan is used. Unlike ShK and YM, Tarjumo shows the distribution of -lan and -ro between the two Arabic prepositions, ‘alā and la respectively (cf. Table 2, commentary).
ShK, the earliest of the manuscripts, represents a concise method of translation with: a) morpheme cuts to show grammatical relations, omitting lexical content (for example, the Kanembu subject, genitive, and direct object markers are solely written just above the nominative, genitive and accusative case markers in Arabic), and b) word for word translation.

YM exhibits a) morpheme cuts, b) word for word translation with recurrent use of lexemes and grammatical markers to avoid ambiguity, and c) phrase/sentence translation either delivering a verbatim representation of the Qur’anic text, or based on a *tafsir*.

Tarjumo uses methods b) and c), based on *Tafsir al-Jalalayn* only.

Since Arabic is a VSO language but Kanembu is a SOV language, it raises the problem of constituent order representation. In word for word translations, when taken as a string of glosses, a violation of the basic Kanembu SOV word order may be observed (Table 1d-II-III, 2d-II-III, 3d-II-III, where the verb occurs initially). As a solution, a correct word order is provided in the same line which leads to recurrent use of lexical and grammatical units (the same examples as above, where the verb repeats at the end of the phrase).

Archaic Kanembu, as attested in the LG of ShK, YM, and Tarjumo also differs in the way it was influenced by spoken Kanuri. We observe consonant weakening (e.g. Table 1d, I-II-III: b > f > w in *rbit* > *rufit* > *wurit* (snatch) and reanalysis in verb morphology (e.g. Table 2d-II-III: *lejaynō* > *lejada* (they go)). The change in syntactic structure however, is less obvious and probably took place independently of the spoken language (e.g. Table 1d, I-II-III: *rbit-ro* > *rufito* > *wurit-thin ḡalan*, where the adverbial function of the noun phrase *wurit-thin ḡalan* (snatching) is encoded by ‘*ṭalan*, an extinct morpheme occurred in archaic Kanembu only. Also, cf. Table 3, commentary).

All these changes notwithstanding, the LG of ShK and YM and Tarjumo have a lot of shared lexical and morphosyntactic features which allow us to postulate that these diachronic varieties represent a language distinct from modern Kanuri and Kanembu.

2. The Origin of Qur’anic Commentaries in Kanembu

The origin of Qur’anic commentaries in Kanembu goes back to the Kanem-Borno period, if not earlier. This conclusion is based on linguistic, palaeographic, and historical evidence discussed below:

a) The Borno Qur’anic manuscripts were written between the 10th/16th to the early 12th/18th centuries. It is unlikely that the LG used in the manuscripts was contemporaneous with Kanuri/Kanembu as spoken at that time in Borno, as is
confirmed by a Kanuri dialect of Gazar, documented by S.W. Koelle in the late 12th/18th century.26 LG and Gazar are very different. Linguistically, Gazar is much closer to Kanuri/Kanembu than to LG, and several centuries would be needed for a hypothetical change from LG to Gazar to be realistic. A plausible explanation of the considerable difference between LG and Gazar is that by the Borno period LG was already a written language, probably as incomprehensible to the people of ancient Borno as Tarjumo is to speakers of modern Kanuri/Kanembu. If this is the case, the variant of the language represented in LG should have originated from an earlier period. Also, taking into consideration the degree of unintelligibility of LG to modern Kanuri speakers, we may assume that the chronological span between them is up to 1000 years and that LG goes back to the Kanem period.

b) The manuscripts, including the earliest, ShK, represent a high level of orthographic standardisation, indirectly attesting to a protographic tradition in early Borno (the 9th/15th century) or Kanem-Borno (the 7th/13th–8th/14th centuries).27

c) The calligrapher of the only dated manuscript (1080/1669), traces his descent to the famous scholarly family of Masbarma, also of the early Borno period.28
d) The language of Tarjumo has a secondary name, Kanembu, which reveals its linguistic and historical origin from Kanem. Sometimes Tarjumo is said to originate from Bulala.29 Linguistically irrelevant (Bulala, or Bilala, is a language of the Sara-Bagirmi family while Kanuri/Kanembu is of the Saharan family), this oral tradition gives a precise benchmark for the time when the language of Kanem was brought to Borno. It points to the so called ‘Bulala wars’, which forced the Sayfuwa dynasty and their subjects to leave Kanem for Borno in the 8th/14th to 9th/15th centuries.30

Given these arguments, the language of Kanem in its pre-Borno stage may be considered as the basis for the early tradition of the Qur’anic commentaries, this tradition originating long before the Borno era. One may reasonably speculate that LG is close to the language of Kanem as spoken by Abu ʿUbayda in the 3rd/9th century or by al-ʿKānemī in the 9th/13th century.

3. The Sociolinguistic Function of Tarjumo

It is sometimes believed that Tarjumo, as a language intended for Qur’anic translation, ‘allows easy comprehension of the Qur’an for the ʿilm student as well as for the interested Muslim public’, and that the duty of such a student is ‘to render the meaning of the exegete’s work into vernacular so that people can understand the message of the Qur’an’ (both my emphasis).31 As pointed out earlier, Tarjumo is, however, unintelligible to the speakers of Kanuri and Kanembu and can only be understood by people who have received special education. Hence its restricted group of users which comprises the ‘ulamā’ and students of ʿilm. The Muslim public, for which Tarjumo is a venerated sacred language, may hear it in open
Fig. 3: Translation of *muʿallaqāt* into Tarjumo, made by Prof. Tijani El-Miskin in the 1980s.
recitation together with the Qur’an, or, for example, Kitāb al-shifā, or qaṣīda poetry written in Arabic. The written form of Tarjumo is also used for educational purposes, and for the translation of various religious and even secular Arabic texts (see Fig. 3).

The most peculiar characteristic of Tarjumo is that it is uniquely used for translation from Arabic. Never used for independent composition, Tarjumo is always linked to and recited from a particular Arabic source. Therefore, the Borno ‘ulamā’ deal with a multilayered system. For example, when a recitation of the Qur’an is performed together with recitation in Tarjumo, the latter is not based on the Qur’anic text but rather on a Tafsīr al-Jalālayn. In practice it means that the reciter works with three texts simultaneously (the Qur’an, the Tafsīr, and the Tarjumo translation), delivering to the audience only the Qur’an and Tarjumo. With such a strict adherence to Arabic it is not surprising that Tarjumo has no communicative function, even between the most educated scholars.

In summary, Tarjumo, which developed from archaic Kanembu into a highly technical translation tool, exhibits features of a ‘classical language’ typical of diglossia, and is functionally restricted to use only with the source language (Arabic): it is this combination which makes Tarjumo unique among the languages written in Arabic script.

DMITRY BONDAREV

NOTES

* Data incorporated in this paper were collected as part of the research project ‘Early Nigerian Qur’anic Manuscripts: An Interdisciplinary Study of the Kanuri Glosses and Arabic Commentaries’, AHRC/ SOAS, 2005–8, supported by the Arts and Humanities Research Council. On behalf of the research team I express sincere gratitude to the AHRC and SOAS for their generous support.


10. For the same reason the term ‘Kanem-Borno’ is commonly used in literature when describing both this particular historical period and the entire history of this kingdom from early Kanem (the 7th/13th century) to the late Borno phase (1223/1808). Cf. http://countrystudies.us/chad/6.htm; http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kanem-Bornu_Empire.

11. Bobboyi, The ‘Ulamā’ of Borno, p. 12. The term bilād al-ʿSūdān, ‘the land of the black people’ was applied by early Muslim writers to the territories of sub-Saharan Africa which are now known as West Africa (from the Atlantic coast to Lake Chad).


13. A.D.H. Bivar, ‘A Dated Kuran from Bornu’, Nigeria Magazine 65 (1960), pp. 199–205, p. 199; Hunwick, Arabic Literature of Africa, p. 3; I have also been shown a relatively small copy of the Qur’an, written, according to the colophon, in Birni Gazargamu. I am grateful for this opportunity to Alhaji Bukar Kulloma of Maiduguri, Nigeria.


18 Kanuri/Kanembu is a major Nilo-Saharan language of the Saharan linguistic family, spoken in north-east Nigeria, south-east Niger, north-west Chad, and north Cameroon.

19 See Bondarev, ‘Archaic Kanembu in the Borno Qur’anic Manuscripts’.

20 Tarjumo is also called ‘Turjiman’ or ‘Turjiman Kanembu’. These terms, which bear the concept of ‘interpretation’, reflect the function of this specific language as an explanatory medium applied to the Qur’an and exegetic literature. The Kanuri word turjumân (interpreting) originates from the Arabic turjum (to translate, interpret).


22 I would like to use this opportunity to express my sincere gratitude for his invaluable assistance.

23 Key to the tables: row a = Qur’anic text; b = Arabic morphological gloss; c = English equivalent; d = archaic Kanembu gloss; e = Kanembu morphological gloss; f = English translation, I = ShK, II = YM, III = Tarjumo. Abbreviations used: ADV – adverbial marker; DEP – dependent clause marker; DO – direct object; IMPF – imperfective; INSTR – instrumental marker; IO – indirect object; PERF – perfective; SJ – subject marker; VN – verb noun. All English translations of the Qur’anic text are from M.A.S. Abdel Haleem, The Qur’an (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

24 So far the two ta∫sir were identified in YM: al-Wajíz ði ta∫sir al-Qur’√¬n al-’azîz of al-Wâ¿idî and al-Jalâlayn.

25 At the same time, the redundancy compensates for the possible ambiguity of grammatical relations between the arguments of the transitive verbs. Such clarifications of arguments’ relations are very frequent in both YM and Tarjumo. For the reason of space though, they are not shown in this article.

26 S.W. Koelle, Grammar of the Bornu or Kanuri Language (London: Church Missionary House, 1854).

27 See Bondarev, ‘The Language of the Glosses in the Bornu Quranic Manuscripts’, p. 139; Bondarev ‘Archaic Kanembu in the Borno Qur’anic Manuscripts’. One of the striking orthographic features is a spelling convention for high tone vowels, the earliest known case of high tone encoding in the Arabic script languages.


29 Chief Imam of Borno, personal communication.
