

The Gobarau Mosque and its Role as a Centre of Islamic Learning in Katsina

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Abstract

Gobarau mosque has a great historical significance in Katsina. It was built through the efforts of Sarkin Katsina Muhammad bin Abdulkarim Al-Maghili. Attempt is made in this write up to trace its establishment and how it turned into a centre of Islamic learning which could be rated as a university going by its standards. Some of its graduates later became Islamic luminaries of international repute, such as Shaykh Danmasani, Shaykh Darmarna, Shaykh al-Kashnawi and host of others we hope to examine also the decline of the Gobarau, and its present status.

Key words: Gobarau mosque, role, Islamic, learning, Katsina.

Introduction:

It is widely believed that Gobarau mosque, built some five hundred years ago, was the first Friday central mosque in Katsina. The building was structurally designed as a replica of the famous Sankore mosque in Timbuktu. Gobarau flourished after its establishment not only as a place of worship but also as academic centre of Islamic learning. Some of its lecturers were mainly North

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African scholars who visited Katsina on their way back from pilgrimage in Makkah. The centre attracted students from within and even beyond Hausaland.

Islam in Katsina:

Islam over the centuries of its evolution an gradual spread in North Africa has emerged as a firmly established religion in Hausaland by the 4th century.¹The Islamisation process in Hausaland was facilitated by the conversion to Islam some of the notable Hausa rulers such as Muhammad Korau in Katsina, Muhammad Rumfa in Kano and Muhammad Rabo in Zazzau. The coming to power of Muhammad Korau during this period was regarded by some historians as representing the climax of Islamisation of Katsina up to that point in time².Islam became wide spread among the people of Katsina. Islamic rulers who tried to encourage the establishment of Islamic centers of learning in their areas domain.

The Establishment of Gobarau Mosque

The Gobarau Mosque was constructed during the reign of Muhammad Korau around 1393³. It was originally located between Gidan Korau (present Emir's palace) and the main city centre (cikin Birni) but later it was built at its present site at the present Gobarau quarters in Katsina. According to lugga⁴the famous North African scholar Shaykh Muhammad bin Abdulkarim al-Maghili supervised the building of the mosque after his return from pilgrimage in Makkah around 1493. What might be the factors that prompted the relocation of the mosque from its former place to its present location and whether their structural design are similar needs to be investigated.

The Building of Gobarau Mosque:

The name of the head builder (SarkinMagina) the number of labourers who worked at the site and the amount of money spent is also yet to be known. The building was however extremely high and peculiar in view of this, it was called Gobarau. It could be seen from a very long distance. It has a minaret which symbolizes a mosque. The minaret served as a watch-tower used for sighting the arrival of enemies who might attack the city in those days.

The building was made up of sections and floors, it has about five floors, five doors, 48 up stair steps and 12 windows.⁵The building was generally, supported by local wood known as 'azara'. Local burnt bricks (tubali) and Mud mixed with blood and flesh of animals was used in the construction. This made it very strong and durable such that it can withstand the vagaries of the weather conditions.

At the ground floor, there was a place meant for setting fire with the aim of having smoke flared upwards in the sky, a strategy indicating to Katsina people to prepare for the advancement of enemy.⁶

The mosque was designed and built to reflect Timbuktu type of architecture.⁷It became an important centre for both spiritual and intellectual activities in Katsina.

Gobarau Mosque as a Centre of Learning:

Apart from observing the daily Salat and Juma'at prayers, part of the mosque was used for teaching purposes, which later became an established centre of learning like a university. It is common phenomena in Islam that mosques often serve as centers of learning. When the prophet (SAW) migrated to Madinah he

established a mosque which was also a centre of learning⁸. In the contemporary period mosques are still being used as centers of Islamic learning in many Muslim countries. In fact, the tradition of a mosque serving as a praying ground as well as a school is not new in Islam. The oldest university in the world the al-Azhar university in Cairo started as a mosque and later it metamorphosed into a university which remains a source of pride not only to the Egyptians but the Muslim world at large.

We also have to acknowledge the growth of the Sankore mosque in Timbuctu from its simple Masjid foundation to a full fledge university of international repute in the tenth century. This boosted learning generally in North Africa and its influence penetrated to the West African region.⁹Some of the graduates of the Sankore University moved to many places in West Africa where they served as teachers. C.N Ubah upheld that:

Like the Sankore Mosque at Timbuctu Gobarau developed into a major centre of advanced Islamic scholarship which served the interests of the students and scholars of Hausaland, Borno and beyond.¹⁰

There is every likelihood that the Gobarau University was affiliated to the Sankore university¹¹ because many reputable scholars from Timbuctu visited Katsina and taught at Gobarau, on their way to or from pilgrimage to Makkah. Again the structural design of the Gobarau was a typical prototype of the Sankore structure. Some writers argued that the intellectual activities of the Gobarau university could compare favorably with those existing North African university such as Sankore and Fez. Lugga said:

Katsina has always had a considerable reputation for learning, taking its place after Timbuctu in this respect. For centuries, people have come from all over West Africa to sit at the feet of learned Mallams (scholars) of Katsina to improve their learning and enlarge their experience.¹²

The Gobarau University was one of the oldest universities that operated in Hausaland during the pre-colonial era.¹³ The University functioned very effectively as a famous centre of multi-disciplinary learning. It attracted many visiting scholars especially from Timbuktu, Jenne, Gao, Agades and other North African cities as well as many students in the sub-Saharan region.

Some of the North African scholars who taught at the Gobarau University included Shaykh Abdulkarim al-Maghili who served as the first chief Imam of the Friday Mosque¹⁴. It was widely believed that Shaykh Al-Maghili was directly instrumental to the building of the Gobarau mosque in the same fashion as the Sankore Mosque in Timbuktu.

Shaykh Umar bin Muhammad Aqit al-Timbukti (died 1495 A.D) also came to Katsina around 1487-1493¹⁵. He attracted many students who took lesson from him before he left Katsina.

Shaykh Qadi Muhammad Aida bin Ahmad al-Tazakhti popularly known as Dantakum was among the Timbuktu scholars who came to Katsina. He was reputed to be the first “Vice Chancellor” of the Gobarau University. He also served as a Qadi (judge) in Katsina for about fifteen years before his death in 1529 A.D¹⁶. He was buried some few meters away from Gobarau in one of the oldest Muslim graveyards in Katsina. The graveyard was later named after him – “*MakabartaDantakum*”.

Other scholars who taught at the Gobarau University include Shaykh Makhluf al-Bilbali, Shaykh Ahmad Baba al-Timbucti, Shaykh Aqib al-Ansumani, Shaykh Najib al-Ansumani al-Marakushi¹⁷ and many others whose names and intellectual activities in Katsina are yet to be fully accounted for.

The Curriculum Content at Gobarau University:

In view of the fact that most of the teachers came from the Timbuctu intellectual zone, the teaching learning process and content of the curriculum was very similar to that of the Sankore University. The curriculum included memorization of the Qur'an¹⁸ and its exegesis, Hadith and its Commentaries, Islamic history (Tarikh) logic (mantiq) philosophy, Medicine, astronomy, Arabic grammar¹⁹ and others.

The language of instruction at the Gobarau University was mainly Arabic. The graduates of Gobarau like their counterparts at the Sankore University were given written certificates (Ijaaza)²⁰ which contains the Silsilah (names and chains of teachers and subjects studied). This Ijaza signifies a kind of license to teach others and also to preach.

The Emergence of Al-Kashnawi Scholars:

Graduates of Gobarau emerged as a class of intelligentsia known as al-Kashnawi Scholars who could match the standard of other luminaries in other parts of the world²¹. The Gobarau university produced a number of distinguished itinerant scholars who excelled in various fields of Islamic learning such as tafsir, hadith, Islamic jurisprudence, astrology, philosophy and other branches of knowledge. In fact the Kashnawi scholars flourished

long before the Sokoto Jihad, and they became very famous not only in Hausaland but even beyond.

The works of these renowned scholars were eloquent testimony to the position of Katsina as the home of scholarship and intellectuals. It is not therefore surprising that more than half of the great teachers referred to by Sultan Muhammad Bello in *Infaq al-Maysur*, that veritable compendium on the Jihad, all came from areas which make up Katsina State today²².

The Kashnawi scholars no doubt have impacted positively on the development of Islamic learning and the spread of Islam not only in the nooks and crannies of Hausaland alone, but also Africa generally. It has to be emphatically stressed that the Katsina scholars had made land mark contributions in various aspects of African intellectual history hundreds of years before the arrival of the colonialists on the African soil.

From about the end of the sixteenth Century or the beginning of the seventeenth Century Katsina started to produce prominent indigenous Islamic scholars. such scholars include Shaykh Muhammad bn Masani known popularly as Wali Danmasani, Shaykh Muhammad bn al-Sabbagh known as Wali Danmarna, Shaykh Muhammad bn Muhammad al-Kashnawi al-Fulani al-Danrankawi among others²³.

Shaykh Dan-Masani

Shaykh Abu Abdullah Muhammad bn Masani bn Gamihi b. Muhammad al-Barnawi (1595-1667) popularly called Wali Dan Masani was a distinguished indigenous Katsina Islamic scholar to be reckoned with for his outstanding Islamic literary

contributions²⁴. He lived a very simple life. He was noted for his righteousness. In fact he was a prolific writer and teacher. Many students came from far and near to take lessons from him at his residence. According to Lawal (2010)²⁵ he was credited to have authored nine different works written in classical Arabic. He was also one of the indigenous Islamic scholars who pioneered the evolution of the Ajami script. He wrote a poem in Ajami titled *Wakar Yakin Badar* (a poem on the battle of Badar). He was probably one of the Islamic missionaries who spearheaded the spread of Islam in Yorubaland. He also wrote some works on the history and people of Yorubaland, but unfortunately these works are yet to be recovered.

Shaykh Dan-Marina

Shaykh Muhammad b. Muhammad b. Ibrahim al-Sabbagh al-Kashnawi was popularly known as WaliDanmarna (d.1655). Lawal (2009)²⁶ pointed out that little is known his biography. He was a student of Shaykh Danmasani. He became a famous scholar in the Seventeenth Century. He was described by Sultan Muhammad Bello in his infaq al-Maysur as “the corridor of knowledge”. He established a school at Katsina where he taught many students. He also wrote a number of works. It is widely believed that he did not had any child²⁷.

Shaykh Muhammad al-Kashnawi

Shaykh Muhammad b. Muhammad al-Kashnawi al-Fulani al-Danrankawi, al-Maliki (1660-1743) was one of the Islamic scholars of international repute, produced by the Katsina Gobarau University. He made considerable intellectual impact within and outside Hausaland. Tsiga (1997) tells us how he was described by the Egyptian scholar Shaykh al-Jabarti as:

The cynosure, the theologium, the ocean of learning, the sea of knowlwdge, the un-paralleled, the garden of science and disciplines, the treasury of secret and mysticism²⁸.

Before his departure from Katsina on pilgrimage he was a famous teacher who attracted many students. After performing the pilgrimage at Makkah, on his return journey he stayed at Cairo where he had close association with his host Shaykh al-Jabarti who became one of his students. He died at Cairo in 1743²⁹.

Some of his works were listed in the catalogue of Khadival Library in Cairo. Some are preserved in Dar al-kutub in Egypt, and some archives in Morocco, Nigeria and London³⁰.

The Decline of Gobarau

By the end of the Seventeenth Century and the beginning of the Eighteenth Century there was a remarkable decline and absolute abandonment of Gobarau both as a Mosque as well as a learning centre. What might have prompted this sudden set back is yet to be discovered by this author. However Lugga (2005) is of the opinion that the decline of Gobarau might be connected to the lack of enthusiasm and general apathy toward Islam in the 17th and 18th centuries³¹. Perhaps this might be correct, because a number of writers on African history have described this era, as a period of decline of Islam in Hausaland. It was this general decline that triggered the Sokoto Jihad movement led by Shaykh Uthman b. Fodio.

Another hypothesis that could stand as a factor responsible for the decline of Gobarau could be the proliferation of mosques and other centres of learning in and around Katsina. This might affect the number of student enrolment at Gobarau negatively.

The decline of Gobarau might also be connected with strategic security motives. When Katsina was taken over by the Sokoto Jihadists, the jihad flag-bearer sent to Katsina Umarun Dallaje decided to build another central mosque nearer to his palace in 1807. This might be done for security reasons. Whatever be the case the new mosque built and patronized by the Emir continued to thrive while Gobarau continued to decline. The Gobarau centre could have also faced some sorts of financial constraints, because it was no longer enjoying the royal patronage of the Emir. This situation might have actually jeopardized the smooth running of the university. This might lower the morale of both the staff and students which made learning activities to continue to dwindle considerably with the passage of time it was abandoned entirely, and it no longer serves as a mosque nor a centre of learning.

The Present Edifice of Gobarau

In view of the fact, that the Gobarau mosque was abandoned as a place used for Salat and learning purposes, its building continued gradually to be dilapidated. What remains of it today is the reconstructed minaret just a portion of the mosque which was undertaken during the reign of Muhammad Dikko (1906-1944). Ironically, the reconstruction of the Gobarau minaret was sponsored by the government of the United States of America, in 1930.

Another effort to rehabilitate the existing Gobarau minaret was undertaken by the late Emir of Katsina Alhaji Muhammad KabirUsman in June 2004. This was meant to save the edifice from collapse. So far the minaret is the only remnant of the Gobarau University and all efforts should be put in place by relevant authorities to maintain it for posterity. At present the Gobarau

minaret is under the care of Katsina State History and Culture Bureau. It is only hoped that this important historical monument will continue to be maintained in good shape by the relevant authorities.

In recent years, it is observed that, some people are encroaching the area adjacent to the minaret building, due to over-population in Katsina metropolis, in view of this, all necessary efforts need to be put in place to curtail such activities.

Suggestions:

- The Katsina state government should provide enough funds for the up-keep of the existing Gobarau monument.
- The Katsina state History and Culture Bureau should try to organize a trip to Tumbuktu in order to visit some important sites such as the Sankore University.
- The Bureau also needs to organize an international seminar on Katsina Islamic monuments including Gobarau.
- The old intellectual link between Katsina and Tumbuktu need to be revitalized. The three universities we have in Katsina can establish strong mutual bilateral ties with universities in Mali which may involve development of both lecturers and students especially those in the departments of Arabic and Islamic studies.
- The department of Islamic studies Umaru Musa Yar'adua University Katsina needs to be financed to undertake the "Katsina Islamic Manuscript project" which is primarily aimed at collecting or and preserving all available Islamic and Arabic manuscripts produced by the Katsina Islamic scholars.

Conclusion

The existence of the Gobarau mosque as early as the 14th century is a clear testimony to the fact that Islam was firmly rooted in Katsina and its environs around that time. It is also evident that there was large influx of erudite North African Muslim scholars who visited and taught various Islamic disciplines at Katsina. Among such scholars was Al-maghili who was largely instrumental to the establishment of the Gobarau, with the official patronage of Sarkin Katsina Muhammadu Korau. The Gobarau mosque which served as a centre of Islamic learning has facilitated greatly to the development of Islam not only in Hausaland, but even beyond.

The remnants of the mosque which still exist in Katsina is a source of pride for the people of Katsina. It is hoped that all the authorities concerned will do well to keep this important monument in good shape for the future generations to come.

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