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Table Of Contents:

ENCOURAGING RELUCTANT READERS TO READ	1
Basmah Issa Ahmad Al-Saleem	
APPRAISAL OF TABSIRATUL-ANAM FĪ ANAL ‘ILMA HUWAL-IMAM (MIRROR TO THE WORLD: THAT KNOWLEDGE IS THE LEADER)	9
Sulayman Adeniran Shittu	
RESISTING SLAVERY AND RACIAL SEGREGATION IN LIGHT IN AUGUST AND BELOVED	21
Turki S. Althubaiti	
BOKO HARAM: A 21st CENTURY CHALLENGE IN NIGERIA	46
A. F. Ahokegh	
SPELLING ISSUES IN EFL GRAFFITI: ANALYSIS AND IMPLICATIONS	56
Hanna AbuJaber Sane M Yagi Asad Al-Ghalith	
INHIBITING FACTORS TO FEMALE PARTICIPATION IN SPORT IN NIGERIAN UNIVERSITIES	76
Isaac Olusola Akindutire Pat. Oyeniya	
GLOBAL TRENDS AND LOCAL NEEDS – THE TROUBLE WITH SPORT ‘GLOBALIZATION’	83
Majid AL-Busafi Abdulmalek Mohammed Ali Banafa	
YOUTH AND PHYSICAL ACTIVITIES: PROMOTIONS AND BENEFITS	98
Adesina, ModupeOlutayo	
GREEN HOME WITH ENERGY SAVING DESIGN - ECO HOMES IN JORDAN	107
Mahmoud Itewi Qais Alsafasfeh	

SUITABILITY OF SOME WHEAT CULTIVARS FROM THE REGION TO THE AGRO CLIMATIC CONDITIONS OF KOSOVO FOR PRODUCTION OF BREAD118

Ibrahim Hoxha
Gafur Xhabiri
Alush Musa
Abdyl Sinani

INDEXED RANDOM INTERLEAVING TECHNIQUE FOR IDMA SYSTEMS126

Jayshri Silmana
P. S. Sharma

IDENTIFICATION OF CONTRACTORS' NEEDS IN THE SELECTION OF CONSTRUCTION SUBCONTRACTORS IN NIGERIA137

Olabosipo Ishola Fagbenle
Julianah Olawanle Adeosun

THE LEADERSHIP OF MUSTAFA KEMAL ATATATURK: TURKISH INDEPENDENCE WAR151

A. Baran Dural

UNIDIMENSIONAL AND MULTIDIMENSIONAL BREATHLESSNESS SPECIFIC INSTRUMENTS FOR ADULT POPULATION: LITERATURE REVIEW169

Suhair Husni Al-Ghabeesh
Muayyad Mustafa Ahmad

UNIVERSITY OF IBADAN LIBRARY

APPRAISAL OF TABSIRATUL-ANAM FĪ ANAL 'ILMA HUWAL-IMAM (MIRROR TO THE WORLD: THAT KNOWLEDGE IS THE LEADER)

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Abstract

Researchers have made efforts to overcome the problems of mass failure and lack of seriousness in students at different levels of education in Nigeria and West Africa at large. It eventually turns to low standard, incompetence of the teachers handling the students which collectively have a negative impact on the capacity development of the youth. Different books of Muslim scholars and philosophers such as Shaykh Sharnūji's *Ta'limul-Muta'lim* and Imām al-Ghazālī categorised knowledge into three degrees in their ascending scale of certitude: Knowledge by inference, knowledge by perception or observation and knowledge by personal experience or intuition which its acquisition found difficult by contemporary West African students due to some problems which *Tabstratul 'anām fī 'annal 'ilma Huwal-'Imām* addressed. A book written by a prolific writer – Shaykh Ibrahim al-Senegālī in which he propounded some theoretical views on the ways knowledge could be acquired, what can lead to forgetfulness, ethics of students and illegitimate succession of a leader among West Africa Sufi group. The work also embedded with wise sayings of early scholars that enrich intellectual ability of Arabic scholar.

Keywords: Appraisal, Tabsiratul-'Anām, 'ilm, Huwal-'Imām

Introduction:

Efforts have been made by researchers to overcome the problems of mass failure and lack of seriousness in students at different levels of education in Nigeria. This eventually contributes to low standard of our products and incompetence of the teachers handling the students which collectively have a negative impact on the capacity development of our youth.

Knowledge, a catalyst in capacity development had been categorised by Muslim philosophers such as Imam al-Ghazalī into three degrees¹ in their ascending scale of certitude:

- i) Knowledge by inference *'ilm al-Yaqin*
- ii) Knowledge by perception and reported perception or observation *'ayn al-Yaqin*
- iii) Knowledge by personal experience or intuition *haqq al-Yaqin*

The first type of knowledge depends either on the truth of its presupposition as in deduction or it is only probable as in induction. For instance: Fire always burn

The second type of knowledge is either scientific knowledge based on experience (observation and experience) or historical knowledge based on reports and description of actual reports. For instance: Fire has burn Aisha's finger. Aishat has experienced fire burning and she is in the best position to warn or admonish people on such matter that relates to fire. There is greater certitude about our knowledge based on actual experience, observation or experiment of phenomenon. Therefore, not all reports are trustworthy; therefore, special attention needs to be paid to the character of the reporter.

The third type of knowledge, knowledge of the phenomenal world which the senses yield, is not an illusion but a blessing for which we must be thankful. Those natural phenomena are the signs of God that happens to individual which made it easy to explain being a participant. For instance: Fire burnt fingers.

Having read different books of Muslim philosophers and Islamic scholars such as Imam Ghazali and Shaykh Sharnūji's *Ta'limul-Muta'allim* which propounded some theoretical views on the ways knowledge could be acquired; what can lead to forgetfulness and discusses ethics of students. But, The book, *Tabsiratul 'anām fī annal 'ilma Huwal-Imām*, seems to have proffered solution to the problems facing West Africa students and teachers in the field of education. It was written by a prolific writer who possessed the aforementioned three degrees of knowledge.

Justification for the work

The third chapter of *Tabsiratul 'anām fī annal 'ilma Huwal-Imām* where the ethics of the students and the teachers were discussed is fascinating and led to the entire translation of the whole Arabic text into English. It is this section that researchers at all levels of education in Nigeria and West Africa will benefit from, since they are clamouring for a measure to curb indiscipline which leads to moral decadence and inadequate levels of seriousness, concentration and dedication towards learning and teaching. I am also aware of the rampant immorality among students as well as teachers that affect smooth impartation of knowledge

as gathered from the results of the empirical studies carried out by researchers at the Faculty of Education, University of Ibadan, Nigeria.

The book became more pertinent for research when I visited Arabic Training Centre, Lokoja, Kogi State and the College of Arabic Studies, Kano, Nigeria where competency in Arabic studies and moral uprightness of the teachers and students are found worthy— in depth and quality. With the interviews I conducted among the students and Principals of the two schools², I observed that the book was incorporated into their educational syllabi as a code of conduct for teachers and students alike. Strong disciplinary actions were instituted for whoever contravenes the recommended ethics therein.

The University of Ibadan in 2002 awarded me Senate Research Grant which gave me an opportunity to travel to Madinat Kawlakh, Senegal, the home town of the author to seek for official permission to translate the book. The opportunity assisted me in laying hands on detailed information about the book, its author, and other works by the author as well as those written by contemporary scholars who were students of the author.

Besides the appraisal and translation of the book into English, a collaborative research with ethicist will be carried out on the ethics of the teachers and the students in order to harmonize it as a code of conduct for schools' educational policy and interested nations at large.

Appraisal of the book

The book, written in Arabic language and consisting of 80 pages excluding the title page, was published by Shaykh Sanni Ya'qub in Kano, Nigeria. It contains an introductory chapter after the preface, three distinct chapters and ended with a concluding chapter.

Biographical account of the author - Shaykh Ibrahim Nyass Al-Kawlakhī *His birth:*

Shaykh Ibrahim b. Abdullāhi Nyass bn Muhammad bn Madamba bn Bakri bn Muhammad al-Amīn bn Samba bn Ridā was born in the evening of Thursday after 'Asr prayer at a village called Taybah Nyasse in the middle of the month of Rajab 1320 A.H corresponding to the year 1900 C.E³. He was taken to his father Shaykh Abdullahi Nyass in Karma Samba, Gambia. He was named after his uncle Ibrahim Kalil (Khalīl) who was a gifted, generous and erudite scholar. He was breast fed for two years by his mother— 'Aishat Janka bint Ibrahim.

His educational career

He was known right from his youth as a scholar among his peers because he displayed an endearing enthusiasm to study. He begins Quranic School under the tutelage of his father. Afterward, he was taken to a renowned teacher– Mukhtar Anjor in order to revise his studies. He was taught the science of Qur’ān recitation (*Warsh* style) by his father. Due to his flair for knowledge, it was reported that whenever he is on errand he recites his studies loudly⁴.

It was narrated that one day a Shepherd who was passing by a tree in the morning heard a loud voice coming from the top of the tree. The same thing happened when he was returning in the evening which led the Shepherd to exclaim: “Oh boy, why have you been talking for so long? I passed you by in the morning and here you are again at sunset on the same spot, keep your mouth shut, Oh! You talkative”⁵.

Shaykh Ibrahim was asked to focus more on Arabic studies by his father. However due to his quest for knowledge, he extended his passion into learning French from his friend Jahbti who lived in Kawlakh. When his father got wind of this new found passion, he was sternly rebuked for drifting after which, he discontinued the study. However, on a fateful day, his father received a mail in French language and Shaykh was called to read the letter; he did it successfully to his father’s amazement. Thereafter, he was given the permission to continue his studies in French language but surprisingly, he politely declined saying: “I will rather stick to your first instruction”⁶.

Shaykh Ibrahim was a versatile scholar and a prolific writer. As many as seventy works have been attributed to him on various subjects including jurisprudence (fiqh), Arabic language and literature, Sufism (tasawwuf), the life history of the prophet (*sīrah*), and so on. He was a poet of high repute who produced many anthologies. His motives for writing were multifarious. As a Tijāniyyah leader, he wrote to explain the basic tenets of the Tarīqah (Religious fraternity) and to defend them. He also wrote to answer questions which were put to him by antagonists on these tenets or to defend his own views as evidenced in his *Raf’ul-malām amman rafa’a wa qabada iqtidāi’bi sayiddil ‘anām* which he wrote to defend his views on Qabd (folding of arms in prayer) and raising hands in different postures in the prayer⁸.

He delivered speeches in many international and local conference⁹. One of his disciples, Ahmad Barnāwī, a native of Maiduguri in Nigeria, has compiled many of his speeches and epistles under the book titled: *Jawāhirul Rasā’il* (Precious Epistles).

His first literary work is *Rūhul-'Adab*, a poetic work written in 1920/1922 when he was twenty years old.¹⁰ Therein he states the expected ethics for a novice, Tarīqah aspirants and leaders with their spiritual training. In 1931, he produced his first extensive work titled *Kāshifu al-ba's 'an faydatil-khatimi 'Abil-'Abāss* where he demonstrated that he possessed a thorough knowledge of Tasāwuf (Mysticism) especially that of the Tijāniyyah order.

Content of *Tabsiratul 'Anām fī 'annal 'ilma Huwal-'Imām*

The preface of the book contains the objectives of the author in writing this laudable work. He claimed that it is an admonition and warning for the old and young of this generation. The introductory chapter focuses on those whose grandfathers were men of letters, eminent personalities or highly placed in the society but failed to possess qualities that elevated their forefather through sound knowledge and hard work. They claim the eminent position of their fathers with ignorance. The author made it clear that offspring of these personalities could only deserve honour and retain the honour if they work towards their forefathers' honour. The honour of their grandfathers could not cover their ignorance. The children of the clerics are supposed to be well versed than their grandfathers in order to retain the honour and glory of their family in the community. The author condemned children who occupied the position of their forefathers be it religious or societal, without having adequate knowledge and qualities that extolled their fathers and placed them in high esteem in the society. Therefore, the children of the clerics or high placed people in the society should assiduously strive on their plight to acquire adequate knowledge in order to retain the glory of their forefathers. The author condemned discrimination against race and status among some nations. He narrated a story of an Arab who was a descendant of the prophet (*Sharīf*) and a black man who was an eminent scholar. The Sharīf challenged the black scholar with foul utterance due to the immeasurable honour given to this black scholar. The scholar replied the Sharīf in a soft manner which made the Sharīf realized his follies.

Another instance is that of the second caliph of the prophet (May the peace and blessing of Allah be on him) when he verbally queried one of his governors- 'Abdul Harith Al-khuẓa'ī on why a former house boy, Ibn Abzā, was made an acting governor in Makkah. He responded by saying: "he is aware of Ibn Abzā being a house boy but he is well grounded in the knowledge of the Qur'ān and the laws of inheritance". It is there Sayyidina 'Umar recollected the prophetic saying: "Allah indeed will raise some groups with this book (*al-Qur'ān*) and by it, He degrades others".

The author unveiled the current happenings in the society whereby a novice claims to be a great leader, and by his self-acclaimed authority misleads the ignorant one, all for the purpose of fame and followership. For this action, they turn the enviable position to a child's play and devil's laughs. He cited many similar examples such as a situation when a scholar died and would be quickly replaced with his eldest son who neither possessed the knowledge nor the qualities that the position required. The person would be clad in rags so as to be regarded as an ascetic person and expect people to seek blessing through him.

With the subtitle of this chapter, seeking knowledge before counselling or practice, the author encouraged people on the acquisition of knowledge before imparting it unto others and putting what someone know into practice crowns the honour of the scholar. He made a very sharp contrast between human being and animal in about five areas such as physical capability, hugeness, brevity, eating ability, cohabitation, but concluded that man remains superior due to his knowledge and virtue. He also likened knowledge and wisdom to food for the heart and body; if the body did not consume food for many days the person may collapse. Likewise a heart that does not receive knowledge and wisdom will die. He also made a contrast between knowledge and money or wealth. He said: knowledge increases through impartation to others while money decreases when spent. A lot of questions concerning wisdom were also raised by him for scholars. For instance, Imam Mālik was once asked: when is it proper to discourage a search for knowledge? He replied: whenever ignorance is considered desirable. He buttressed all his claims with Qur'ānic verses and views of Qur'ānic exegetes on each matter discussed, Prophetic and wise sayings of companions of the Prophet. Mystics and scholars with authentic stories were also used to validate the author's argument in the chapter.

The first distinct chapter, consisting of forty one pages, is titled "the Eminence Position of the Learned and Learners". He opened his discussion with various Quranic references that explained the dignity accorded the scholars. He gave a comprehensive explanation on the synonyms of knowledge as applied in the Qur'ān, that is wisdom and prophethood. He also gave the opinion of exegetes on these synonyms.

The first similarities he made in this chapter was a comparison between the durability of the knowledge in a person and other worldly materials. He also pointed out how Allah in His glorious book distinguished seven (7) objects such as: good/ bad, lawful/unlawful, darkness/light, learned/ ignorant one, and so on. He gave another name to a righteous scholar – free men from the torment of Hell fire. He mentioned thirteen (13) rewards reserved for a

learner in his process of acquisition of knowledge. For instance, whoever acquired knowledge for Allah's sake will be rewarded as a person who observed fasting in the day time and kept vigil in prayer at night. And he who sought for knowledge in order to preserve the religion and bring peace into the society will be raised in an honoured position along with the prophets in the day of judgement. Whoever sought for knowledge with the intention of correcting anomalies in the society will gain the reward of a person who worshipped Allah righteously for forty years and so on. He buttressed each of these claims with the prophetic saying.

He stated that the sharp difference between the parents and the teachers is that the parent breast fed the child, fed him with good nutrition, cloth him and even impart some wisdom to him in order to behave well in the society. The teacher on the other hand, teaches him what will make his stay in this life comfortable and also guides him to what can give him a blissful stay in the hereafter. He mentioned three (3) periods of sleeping and laughter that incurred Allah's wrath: sleeping after the Subhi prayer that is, at sunrise, sleeping in the places of worship during a religious service and before Ishāi' prayer. Likewise, laughter is unwarranted at the place of worship while the service is going on, while carrying a corpse into his grave and at the grave yards.

He gave five (5) similes defining the functions of a knowledgeable person. For instance, he likened the scholar to the rain. Just as the plants cannot grow without rainfall (water); likewise a person cannot claim to be a righteous worshipper of Allah without acquiring a functional knowledge and so on. The author further outlined five (5) yardsticks for the self-assessment of a scholar with regard to whether he benefitted or not from the knowledge he acquired. These derive from such question like: Is he contented with the little provision he has for his livelihood? Does he love to be increased in wisdom to recharge his focus and direction? and so on. He also highlight that five (5) things can be derived in five (5) things in order to live peacefully in this world; To seek reputation in humility, richness in satisfaction not in abundance, safety only in paradise not in this world, comfort in miniature and proceed of knowledge in making use of it not in being grounded in it.

He mentioned nine (9) things awaiting students who set out in search of knowledge either it materializes or not. These include: the honour of being a student, will be excused of recording any evil deed committed before Allah, blessing of Allah will be showered on him when he is in the midst of his classmates, and so, even if the student feels sad for the fact that he was unable to achieve his aim, yet that will lead him to received the pleasure of Allah

because Allah said in Hadīth Qudsī¹¹ “ I will compensate the person who felt sad because of me (that is he could not achieve his aim in following my commandments) with my pleasure. He highlighted that sitting with eight (8) kinds of people can enhance eight (8) things such as; sitting always with wealthy men enhances a strong desire for worldly materials, sitting among the poor enhances a strong gratitude to Allah and contentment’s with the little someone possessed, sitting with kings and men in authority enhances pride and strong heartedness, and so on.

Among the pre-eminence given to knowledge and teaching profession is what Allah taught seven different people on this earth; Allah taught Prophet Yusuf interpretation of dream, taught Prophet Dāūd blacksmithing, taught Prophet Sulayman to comprehend utterances of animals and birds, and so on.

He also explained four things that must be derived in four (4) places (and if some could not derive them in each place, it is then better to live in isolation): peace in gathering, respect and honour from a friend, rest of mind from the wealth and usefulness from knowledge acquired in this life.

A comprehensive analysis of the exegetes and his opinion on the verse of the Qur’ān that relates to the pre-eminence of scholar were also given. For instance, Allah said; “only servants that fear Allah are the scholars”. In one of his analysis; he argued affirmatively that scholars are the people of paradise in the hereafter. He also explained that the sleeping of a scholar will be regarded as an act of worship, his revision or reading books will be regarded as a glorification, imparting knowledge unto others is a charitable act and every drop of sweat from his body during the process will be converted into pool of water that extinguishes fire that would have burnt him in the hereafter. He also said whoever relegates a scholar, relegates knowledge and whoever relegates knowledge relegates the prophets; whoever relegates the prophets relegates Allah who will in turn relegate him in the day of judgement. He also analysed the blessing of Allah upon the scholars and listener at an intellectual gathering or where increment in knowledge and wisdom flourishes. He gave another pre-eminence of knowledge in the analysis of the prophetic saying which divided all mankind into three; scholars, students and the rest. He compared the first two groups to gold and silver while the third group are just savages or rusted iron, good for nothing. Similarly, he categorised man in to five (5) as scholars, students, listeners, lovers of scholars or knowledge and none of the above, he then urged people to be one of the first four and not to be the fifth category which lead to self-destruction.

The author stated the reason why dignity should be accorded to knowledge; students acquired knowledge with hardship and humiliation unlike other crafts when the apprentice learnt it to a stage he gained freedom. A student may become a scholar but continue to increase his knowledge through further research he makes. In concluding this section, he buttressed all his claims with prophetic sayings, wise sayings of scholar both in prose and poetry and to crown it all he quoted a prophetic saying which enjoins man to be sympathetic with three groups of people; a powerful ruler that fall, a rich person that became poor and a scholar whose senses failed.

In the second distinct chapter, consisting of seven pages, he discussed the blameworthiness of ignorance. He opened the section with the Quranic verses that related to the subject. He explained the verses that regarded the ignorant ones as the worst creatures and even compared them to animals that could not differentiate what befits and degrades. He quoted the prophetic sayings and laid emphasis on popular statement of the scholars: "There is no poverty that is regarded worse than ignorance". He further explained the view of the scholars on how much ignorance is detested such as; every disease has a medication that cures it except foolishness, the disease of ignorance has no cure.

The author explained why an ignoramus will continue to be an enemy of intellects. He buttressed this claim with many proverbial sayings which described the enjoyment of an ignorant person as a garden situated on garbage. An ignorant person is compared to a tattered cloth that tears on one side and when sewn tears on another side. He quoted and analysed the opinion of scholars on an ignorant person who ran away from study due to the challenges therein. For instance "Whoever tastes not the travail of study for an hour, such person would take cups of travail for the rest of his life". Imām 'Ali (the fourth caliph of the prophet S.A.W) said, "Make not an ignorant a friend beware of each other, because one is adjudged to be pearls and the other as savage". The author explained why scholars must be accorded with due respect even if we notice the scholar did not make use of his knowledge. He quoted a prophetic saying which was regarded as a covenant taken by the companions of the prophets. Scholars are the representatives of God on earth, vanguards of His teachings and instructions. He concluded this chapter with many narrations such as a narration related by Imām an-Nawāwī: One day a master invited one of his students to have dinner with him in the same bowl. The student declined on three occasions. When he was asked why, he replied; I fear that my master's eyes might have set on a certain piece of meal which I unknowingly might have taken before him. And the same person used to say whenever he set out to receive

knowledge from his teacher he usually supplicates as: “Oh Allah, conceal my master’s error from me until my sight would not set on any of his faults and not to come from any to me”.

Chapter three of the work deals with the ethic of students towards the teacher. It comprises nine pages. The author stated the kind of journey that the students embark on when searching for knowledge such as; He/She must bear in mind that the beginning is bitter when tasted and the end is sweeter than honey when endured.

Knowledge could not be sought with arrogance or self esteem; the teacher must not be under rated because of his financial status, age or race. Knowledge requires humility, life patching servitude, isolation (to study), group discussion and so on. He also explained what a student must be mindful of such as level and nature of eating, keeping away from sort of food which might render the body sluggish and so on.

He charged students to find time daily as an obligation in revising lessons learnt in the day. Among the students’ etiquette that the author discussed are: student participation in intellectual debates or discourse to make his teacher happy for seeing his plant making progress; showcasing his talents in carrying out research, through publications or other means, among others. He also explained what knowledge required from a student; total commitment to study because if knowledge is left un-revised promptly it vanishes swiftly. It was likened to water flowing on a rock, when the source of the water is cut, the rock become dry. It also requires steadfastness, determination, patience and seriousness. On these, he quoted the Quranic verses in which Allah commanded His prophets like Yahya and others on the above mentioned requirement of knowledge acquisition. Among things that prevent students from achieving their aim are: being selective of a teacher to be under his tutelage, underrating brilliant colleagues who could assist him on some difficult aspects of his study, shying away from the inquisitiveness of young ones in asking for clarification on ambiguities which would have assisted the elders when studying together. The author made emphasis on this aspect as he buttressed his claim with different views of educationists such as Shaykh Sha’rānī, Imām al-Ghazalī, Abū Hanīfah, Suhunūn and others. The author also explained revision ethics such as reading or revising lesson at night, revision in the mosque (one is expected to observe two rakaats as *Tahiyatul-masjid*) before the commencement of the reading. He gave divergent opinions of scholar on the need to observe prayer at the place of worship before the revision.

He also stated the posture a student should assume before his teacher such as sitting in front and direct while in a classroom, sitting on kneels while on the floor assist quick

assimilation. He concluded this section by giving an example of a scholar who at the initial stage of his study used to understand barely half of the lesson taught in the class due to his wrong position while sitting in the lecture room.

The book ended with a conclusion which elucidated the needs for the establishment of modern Training Schools for the spread of knowledge, writing books for the preservation of knowledge, eating balanced diet for healthy being of the students and wearing of good and befitting dresses for good appearance and impression. It is on this basis that some scholars regarded the author's views of encouragement as an innovation (Bid'ah). The author explains in the conclusion the two kinds of innovation: permissible and impermissible. He then trashed all the five (5) points with the Quranic verses and prophetic saying to claim that the views on encouragements did not fall into the realm of innovation. He concluded this explanation with the argument that what could not be evidenced from the Qur'ān and the Hadīth, either good or bad is an innovation.

The concluding part ended with prayer and the year when the final draft was completed. The name of the person who neatly copied the work and in whose handwriting (calligraphy) the book was published was not left out.

Style

Language:- The language of the work is simple and clear, the author vocalized some difficult words which help the readers to avoid grammatical and etymological flaws in understanding these words. Some names of Muslim philosophers, scholars and places were also vocalized to assist readers in grasping correct pronunciation. His styles of driving his point home is superb because he justified all his claims with convincing evidence from the Qur'ān and Hadīth as well as wise sayings of the companions and scholars in both prose and poem. His rhetorical applications such as simile, metonymy and beautification of words added to the linguistic value of the book.

The title of the book fits its contents but it would have been better to divide the chapters into five chapters besides the preface:

- i. The pre-eminence of scholars
- ii. The pre-eminence of students
- iii. Merit of knowledge
- iv. Demerits of ignorance
- v. Conclusion

The above suggested chapters will reduce the unjustified disproportion of the chapters (with chapter one and two consisting of twenty one and forty pages respectively while chapter three and conclusion were seven and nine pages respectively despite an elaborate introductory chapter).

Conclusion

The author was a teacher, an Islamic scholar of note and an ascetic and mystic, the work is commendable for the benefits and wisdom which the reader will gain for the betterment of this life in knowledge acquisition and its application as well as preparation for the life hereafter.

References:

M.M Sherif (1963): A history of Muslim Philosophy, Wiesbaden, Otto Harrassowitz Vol 1, p.62

(a) Shaykh Yusuf Lokoja, Proprietor Arabic Training Centre, Lokoja interview conducted on 17/8/2006 at his residence in Lokoja

(b) Mallam Umar Muhammad Gambo, Principal College of Arabic Studies, Kano interviewed conducted on 5/9/2006 at the college premises

This date was regarded as the most authentic date as in:

(a) Nadhīr b. Ibrahim Nyass (1992): *Mudhakiratu Kadūniyyah*, Nigeria:Kaduna p.5

(b) Muhammad Tāhir Maigheri (1975): *Shaykh Ibrahim Nyass al-Senegāli: Hayatun wa Ara'uhu wa ta'limuhu*, Beirut, Darul Arabiyyah p.8

Unlike the submission of D.A.A Tijani (1991) in his "Sufism in the Arabic poems of Shaykh Ibrahim Niass al-Kawlakhi." A Ph.D thesis in the Department of Arabic and Islamic Studies, University of Ibadan, Ibadan p. 73. In addition, Shaykh Ibrahim died at the age of 75 in 1975 as narrated in many write ups.

Mudhakiratu Kadūniyyah, p.7

Mudhakiratu Kadūniyyah, p.8

Mudhakiratu Kadūniyyah, p. 8

D.A.A Tijani (1991) Sufism in the Arabic poems of Shaykh Ibrahim Niass al-Kawlakhi. A PhD thesis in the Department of Arabic and Islamic Studies, University of Ibadan, Ibadan p. 77

Sufism in the Arabic poems of Shaykh Ibrahim Niass al-Kawlakhi. P.77