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CONTENTS	PAGE
Magajiya System and Human Trafficking in Nigeria <i>Ibrahim Umaru, Theophilus D. Lagi, Sam B.A Tende and Helen O. Njoku</i>	1 – 18
Youthquake and Migration: One More Population Problem in Nigeria <i>Bilyaminu Suleiman Muhammed</i>	19 – 32
Pragmatic Factors in Ideological Development Strategies of Nigeria <i>Salisu Mohammed Raj</i>	33 – 43
Public Finances and Economic Growth in Nigeria <i>Aruwa, Suleiman A. Salihu</i>	44 – 59
Reassessing the Definition and Practice of Popular Theatre in Nigeria <i>Omotayo Oloruntoba-Oju</i>	60 – 70
The Pragma-Semantics of Bassa Proverbs <i>Imoh, Philip Manda</i>	71 – 79
Revisiting the Power Probe in the Sixth Legislature and the Missed Opportunity for Reinventing Governance <i>Adoyi Onoja</i>	80 – 107
The Nature, Characteristics and relevance of International Organizations <i>S.C.C. Okoronkwo</i>	108 – 115
Description of Dormant Nature in the Poems of Al-Wazir Junaid: His Poem on “Kofar Kuri” as a Case Study <i>Moshood Mahmood M. Jimba and Abubakar Idris Wakawa</i>	116 – 122

Their Gain Our Pain: Global Warming and its
implication for African indigenous religion
George Tasie 123 – 135

Girl- Child Education in Northern Nigeria: Problems
and Prospects
K.H. Abubakar 136 – 144

Language Endangerment or Language Development:
A Case of Language Use among Yoruba Touts in
Nigerian Motor Parks
Adewole A. Alagbe and Abraham A. David 145 – 155

The Global financial Crisis and Financial Innovation
in Nigeria *Blessing Adada Gaiya* 156 – 166

State – Local Government Relations in Nigeria:
An Assessment of the Fourth Republic Experience
Usman, Abu Tom and Erunke Canice Esidene 167 – 182

The Future of Nigerian Insurance Industry in a
Globalized Economy'
Y. Isa 183 – 196

Entrenching Corruption in the Developing World:
The Role of the African Leaders,
the West and Multinationals
AKUBOR Emmanuel Osewe 197 – 219

Wa 'asi in Ilorin: A Manipulation of Religious Discourse
Ahmad Shehu Abdussalam and Abdulganiy A. Abdussalam 220 – 231

The History of the Constitutional Developments in Nigeria
M.Y. Zakari 232 – 246

Book Review

Bamikole M. Aduloju, *E tal* Fundamentals of
Chieftaincy Laws in Nigeria
Maxwell M. Gidado 247 – 251

Wa`asi in Ilorin: A Manipulation of Religious Discourse

By

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Abstract

Religious discourse addresses people's mind and feeling in order to effect changes in their behaviour and way of life. Islamic discourse is not in an exception, and various types of discourse are adopted for the purpose of admonition among which is Wa`asi which usually manipulates aspects of texts and facts to admonish on various issues among Muslim communities. Wa`asi among Yoruba Muslims manipulates aspects of discourse, so as to influence members of audience in order to ensure their followership, gain some material benefits, effect changes in their socio-political positions or effect moral changes in them. Wa`asi is utilized as a means of communication on ethical, political and cultural issues that can be influenced through manipulation of wa`asi discourse. This paper aims to critically investigate how the Muslim admonishers, *oni-wa`asi* in Ilorin manipulate wa`asi to achieve the desired benefits or changes in their audience. It attempts to uncover the likely underlying ideologies of social life that form admonishers' assumption and dictate strategies of wa`asi to persuade and manipulate. The paper therefore analyses samples of wa`asi by focusing on strategies and units of manipulation and utilization of quotations.

Keywords: Wa`asi, Religious Discourse, Manipulation, CDA, Ilorin

Introduction

Islamic discourse of admonition among Yoruba Muslim communities, popularly known as *Wa`asi*, is a distinctive mode of Yoruba Islamic discourse that communicates religious injunctions and delivers general and specific messages to Muslim audience during religious or general social occasions. The admonisher, *oni-wa`asi* not only communicates the message of Islam, but he also wants to convince the audience with this message and as such manipulates aspects of *wa`asi* discourse in order to effect the intended changes and make gains. Some attempts to manipulate are very interesting and as such deserve academic research.

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Wa`asi in Yoruba-land is a prominent component of Muslim culture, and its study is essential in the city of Ilorin, capital of Kwara State, Nigeria, which was the administrative centre of Ilorin Emirate under the Sokoto Caliphate. Ilorin is a centre for Islamic knowledge that has impacted many other Yoruba towns and cities through the contributions of its native scholars, (*ulama'*), who served as teachers, admonishers and spiritual healers (Al-Ilory 1986). The authors therefore seek to investigate how do the Muslim admonishers, *oni-wa`asi*, in Ilorin manipulate aspects of wa`asi discourse to project their ideologies of social life by attempting to effect some changes in the audience and make some gains from them. With this attempt, the study is introducing Yoruba wa`asi discourse as a paramount component of Islamic heritage that deserves serious academic research.

The authors view wa`asi as reflecting the views of *oni-Wa`asi* of social life and his attempts to impose these views on the audience. They therefore adopt a critical approach to uncover these views, highlight strategies of manipulating texts and facts, discover possible misrepresentation of the message embodied in the quotations and uncover ways in which discourse and ideology are intertwined.

However, identification of points of manipulation in Wa`asi requires analysis of units of Wa`asi discourse that are manipulated, such as lexicon, phrases, contents or facts, identification of trends of interpretation (correct interpretation, misinterpretation and over-interpretation), utilization of quotations and specific strategies of Wa`asi.

Critical Analysis of Wa`asi

Wa'asi or '*waasi*' meaning in Yoruba; admonition or Islamic religious critical advice, is an Arabic loan word '*wa'zh*' which has undergone some phonological changes that conform with Yoruba phonological system from its origin in Arabic. The word maintains its morphological category of noun, and the term '*oni-wa`asi*' was derived from it by affixing the Yoruba word '*oni*', lit. owner, to mean 'the provider of wa`asi', i.e. the admonisher. While Yoruba Muslims adopt wa`asi / waasi for religious admonition, Yoruba Christians use '*waasu*' for admonition in Christian context. The word '*wa'asi*' may be used as well among Yoruba Muslims for a critical advice that aims at convincing parties in social conflicts to change their positions and reconcile.

Wa`asi serves both religious and social functions. The admonishers, *oni-Wa'asis*, attempt to exercise power on their audience through the manipulation of texts and facts in order to convince them with their ideology of socio-cultural life. To produce a critical investigation of manipulation in wa`asi

discourse, Critical Discourse Analysis studies the relationship between discourse events and socio-political and cultural factors (Crystal, 2008:148) as it attempts to uncover ways in which discourse and ideology are interacted (Johnstone 2008:10).

CDA assists in highlighting connections between the use of language and strategies of power exercise. It is concerned with the use and abuse of language for the exercise of socio-political power and it sets to discover traces of ideological bias in texts (Widdowson 2011:70-71). Van Dijk (2005) was of the opinion that manipulation is usually discursive and it involves abuse of power, and as such, it should be studied by Critical Discourse Analysis. This study however investigates manipulation of texts and facts in wa'asi discourse by the admonishers in order to exercise power on the audience.

Wa'asi as a Religious Discourse

In Islam wa'asi is a practice of providing the needed guidance for Muslim populace in their worldly and religious affairs by encouraging the acceptable acts and discouraging the abominable acts (Zaydan 1981: 171-3). The essence of admonition in Islam is to deliver the message of Islam through explanation of facts related directly or indirectly to the texts or quotations which are mainly in Arabic. While Arabic is the original language of main sources of texts and facts utilized in wa'asi, the admonition itself can be in any language because its function is to explain, warn and remind.

Wa'asi in Yoruba-land is a form of organized *hisbah* (commanding what is religiously acceptable and forbidding what is religiously abominable) by individuals who take on themselves to admonish fellow Muslims. (Zaydan 1981: 165-166) In order to engage in wa'asi, individuals need not to get permission from any authority, except for courtesy to use some places or utilize some occasions. To achieve the objectives of wa'asi, the admonisher, oni-wa'asi, employs various strategies to persuade, convince and admonish the audience so as to ensure the desired changes or gain benefits.

Wa'asi is a means of Islamic propagation that plays dual roles; it is normally addressed to Muslim audience as a form of *hisbah*. It may also be addressed to non-Muslims through the Muslim audience in issues that affects Muslims because Yoruba communities in Nigeria are generally multi-religious.

Oni-wa'asi serves as an agent of reformation by providing guidance, spiritual purification, correction of misconceptions, and wrong attitudes or pursuing a mission. It is through these functions that oni-wa'asi commands the trust and

respect of the audience and he is expected to be a model in his characters. The reason is that the function of wa`asi delivery is normally assumed by a scholar of Islam who is competent to face the public with every challenges that it entails. However wa`asi discourse is been misused recently by few incompetent admonishers and those whose mission is entertainment or exploitation through the manipulation of texts and facts.

As an essential component of Islamic heritage, wa`asi has become a forum for public Islamic enlightenment for Yoruba Muslims, most especially for those who are not opportune to attend Qur`anic and Ilmi traditional schools (Ile-kewu). Wa`asi also represents a medium of free expression for Muslim scholars who are competent and interested in the delivery of message of Islam to their students or the general public who might gather to listen.

In traditional life of Yoruba Muslims, wa`asi is occasional as it requires gathering of audience who will listen to oni-wa`asi and lend him moral support, while modern media has availed wider opportunity for the recorded wa`asi as well opportunity to have virtual audience. Conventional wa`asi is the one given in traditional setting of wa`asi in occasions such as: *Ramadan* nights, *Mawlid al- Rasul* (Maoludi), *Walimah Khatm al-Qur'an* (Wolima), weekly wa`asi, monthly wa`asi, regular or occasional wa`asi in mosques and mobile wa`asi (by some scholars).

However, occasions of conventional wa`asi have witnessed development in modern times by individuals and societies to include; marriage/ *nikah*, `aqiqah (giving name to the newly born baby), thanks giving for *nikah*, new appointments and retirements. Other occasions are imamate or chieftaincy turban, confirmation of religious or traditional titles, launching of projects, collection of donations, burial prayer, school graduation, award of certificates and graduation in technical skills. Non-conventional Wa`asi is the type given on modern media devices which could be occasional as it could be regular and pre-recorded to be aired on radio, television channels, satellite television, CD, mobile phone devices and internet.

Meanwhile, a wa`asi may come in form of a discourse initiation when it focuses on topics initiated by oni-wa`asi such as the legacy of Ilorin `ulama' (Sannu Shehu, 2010) or on topics chosen by groups or societies that invite the scholar, oni-wa`asi, such as wa`asi for *laylatul qadr* celebration. Wa`asi can equally be presented as a discourse of exegesis which rallies round certain texts, as some occasions of *tafsir* during Ramadan are turned to occasions of wa`asi. (Al-Ilory 1984)

Wa'asi Settings

Conventional wa'asi setting represents the original form of wa'asi among Yoruba Muslim communities. In this setting, certain actors perform specific functions as follows:

- a) **Oni-wa'asi (admonisher);** is a scholar who plans and presides over the wa'asi session. After the preliminary session of praises of Allah and blessing for the Prophet of Islam, oni-wa'asi pronounces the topical issue and gives proper wa'asi. He also signifies the suspension of wa'asi. During the course of wa'asi, oni-wa'asi initiates relevant opening quotations to be followed with others text, facts, and stories related to the chosen topic. This role was clearly demonstrated in a wa'asi session by Sheikh Onikijipa (2008).
- b) **Aja-nasi (reader of the texts);** he repeats the texts after oni-wa'asi and initiates some others depending on the orientation and trend of wa'asi. He also reminds the admonisher of the text that he is explaining in order not to lose focus or sequence. Aja-nasi contributes to inter-textuality by reciting from his records or memory similar quotations that support a particular fact in wa'asi discourse. This was noticed in a wa'asi of Shaykh Adam Abullahi al-Ilory titled "Oku sise ninu Islam" (Al-Ilory n.d.)
- c) **Aro-wa'asi (The decoder of wa'asi);** his role is mainly to summarise segments of Wa'asi and emphasize vital points that deserve the attention of audience. In doing so, he adds some examples to corroborate with what the admonisher has presented and he elaborates some interesting points that may be of interest and excitement to both the admonisher and the audience. Such role is noticeable in wa'asi sessions of Shaykh Muhammad Kamaldeen al-Adaby as well as in that of Alfa Sannu Shehu (2010).
- d) **The jama'ah (The audience);** they are the group that receives the wa'asi message. Members of the audience are to be physically present at the place of wa'asi according to its original conventional setting. The audience feel the effects of wa'asi discourse and the admonisher can assess the level of his success in message delivery through their reactions, as he can measure the extent of the effects of his message. However, in our modern age of communication, the audience might be virtually present when wa'asi is delivered on television, radio or online communication means in which case oni-wa'asi assumes the presence of some unspecific members of audience.

The order in performing the expected functions in wa'asi presentation is that; a) Aro-wa'asi leads the opening glorification and supplication, b) Oni-wa'asi signifies the beginning of wa'asi by initiating the recitation of topical quotation, c) Aja-nasi will then resume his function. Wa'asi presentation will then continue with alternate functions. Meanwhile, the normal procedures of wa'asi dictate that it opens with an opening in form of beautiful repetition of the praising of Allah, seeking blessings for the prophet, glorifying Allah and a short supplication (Aremoh 2011). However students of some oni-wa'asi may add songs in his commendation. Among possible openings usually repeated is; (*Subhanallah, wa-l-hamdu-lillah, wa la'ilaha illallah, wa-l-lahu akbar, wa-l-lahu akbar, wala hawla wala quwwata illa bi-llahi-l-alyyi-l-azhim*), meaning, Glory be to Allah and thank be to Him and there is no god but Allah, Allah is greatest and there is no wisdom or power except that of Allah the most Highest and the most Greatest; and (*Alaa lailaha 'ilallah – 'illallah ... Muhammadun rasulullah – rasulullah ...*), meaning ; Of course no god but Allah, Muhammad is His messenger. The opening is usually followed by recitation of topical quotations to be initiated by oni-wa'asi (Onikijipa 2008), or by the announcement of the topic and recitation of related quotations. Then, the wa'asi will proceed on with the expected performance of each actor. The wa'asi is to be suspended with the supplication and glorification of Allah, as it may be suspended with a group glorification of Allah.

Manipulation Strategies in Wa'asi

In his quest to exercise power and manipulate, oni-wa'asi may choose to focus on a topic that is directly related to the meaning of a quotation when the topic of wa'asi can be easily supported with a verse of Qur'an, a saying of the Prophet, a wise saying or a line of poem. This strategy is commonly adopted in occasions such as marriage, funeral and naming of newborn babies.

A Wa'asi may equally focus on a concept indirectly derived from the connotation or the implied meanings of some texts, or from similarity of an event to the context of a quotation or a prophetic text. In a wa'asi discourse, Onikijipa (2010) effortlessly advised the native scholars of Ilorin to be careful in their daily dealings and that they should minimize their outing in order to increase supplications to Allah. He found no Qur'anic verse to support this advice except the one addressed to the wives of the Prophet (p.b.u.h) that they stay indoors (Q33:33). He perfectly and correctly related this verse to another one on the avoidance of acrimony (Q8:25).

Wa'asi may also be based on an ideology of life that oni-wa'asi wants to convince his audience with. In order to achieve this, he will purposely

interpret some quotations in a way to convince the audience with his argument. This attempt may lead in some instances to heavy manipulation of quotations or even misinterpretation. Aduagba (2011) correctly manipulated the intended message of the Qur'anic verse (7:128) "And the end is best for the righteous" to admonish Senator Olusola Saraki, the Waziri of Ilorin to honourably retire from politics and allow his son, Senator Bukola Saraki to succeed him.

The admonishers usually manipulate facts and interpret phrases of quotations in order to control people's mind through appeals and persuasion. As wa'asi depends heavily on quotations of Arabic texts and information contained in reference in Arabic, the admonishers take these Arabic quotations as focus of discussion, or as evidence to justify their own ideologies of life and to support facts relevant to chosen topics. Sannu Shehu (2010) manipulated the history of Ilorin and connected it with his ideology that a woman should not be elected a governor of Kwara State, a position that corroborates with the view of other Muslim scholars. Sannu Shehu described those who work on electing a female governor or supporting it as betrayers and he supported his view with Qur'anic verse 8:27 translating the phrase (*la takhunu*) into Yoruba as (*e ma da le*), meaning Don't betray. He claimed that whoever supports the candidacy of a woman for governorship has betrayed Allah and His messenger. However, translation of the phrase is correct but its manipulation by isolating it from its context was wrong.

The following units of discourse are usually manipulated in wa'asi :

- a) Lexicon; In order to convince his audience with his ideology of life and persuade them to shift to his own adopted position, oni-wa'asi may manipulate conventional or metaphoric meanings of words, emphasize connotation of words, focus on markers or modality, or isolate words from contexts. Many members of audience may not realize points of manipulation due to little or lack of knowledge of Arabic. The others who might realize this manipulation may not pay attention to it as far as oni-wa'asi is not presenting controversial issues. Such a manipulation in wa'asi discourse requires no referencing in order to assume acceptability of oni-wa'asi's view by the audience. Al-Ilory (1982) in a wa'asi on some common social phenomena, wanted to justify his ideology of these phenomena by defining wa'asi as nothing but saying the truth and declaration of bitter facts. He proceeded to criticize some social phenomena. Aduagba (2011) extended the meaning of *ma'ruf* (commonly accepted) in Qur'an 4:19 to cover virtually every good courtship between couples including outing to fast

food restaurants, such as Mr Bigg's and Chicken Republic. While one may agree that wa'asi includes saying the truth and declaration of better facts, it is not restricted to this as claimed by Al-Ilory as it covers as well encouraging the good deeds. An extension of *ma'ruf* to include outings of couples to common open restaurants is a manipulation that aims at convincing the audience of acquaintance with modern practices among a society that does not classify such practice as essential in social life.

- b) Phrases and structures: Oni-wa'asi may result to manipulate specific phrases or sentences, syntactic meaning or connotation of word order. In his attack on Rotary Clubs, Al-Ilory (1982) classified it as not being the path of believers in Allah, the *mu'minin* (*ghayr sabil al-mu'minina*), a path that is not belongs to the believers, as in the Qur'an 4:115. He added as well the mafias and specified the Kaduna Mafia of the 80's. He out rightly condemned the Rotary Club and Mafia as the work of Americans and Jews in order to exploit Muslims. Al-Ilory manipulated the phrase to exploit his audience's sentiment, and he grouped associations of different interests together in order to condemn them, as Muslims believe that any group that does not belong to Islam should not be identified with the believers.
- c) Context; Oni-wa'asi may find it supportive of his views to relate surface meaning of a text to current events which he aims to discuss and as such disregarding the correct meaning of the text. Al-Ilory (1984) found it easy to classify as indiscipline behaviour the acts of some journalists in manipulating news to cause rancour among Nigerians. He supported his ideology with a Qur'anic verse (17:36) that reads: "*Wa la taqfu ma laysa laka bihi 'ilm*", (And pursue not that which you have no knowledge). While the call by Al-Ilory was right, the verse discourages idle curiosity that leads one to nose into evil, which amount to using human faculty for evil purposes. (Ali 1992:684)
- d) On the other hand the oni-wa'asi might have adopted a position on a burning issue that he wants the audience to shift their own positions to, and as such he will manipulate texts to support his position either by selecting relevant texts that support this position or by ignoring others. He might as well do this by reinterpreting the selected texts to suit his purpose. As a Sufist who believes in the influential power of giving blessings and prayers form 'Ulama, most especially the sufi scholars, Onikijipa (2011) compared the love and admiration for 'Ulama' with the love for Prophet Muhammad, and he quoted the Qur'anic verse (4:64) to support his view. His intention was to encourage visiting the Ulama' in their life and after their death, but the correct context of this

verse is about repentance, purification of soul and sincerity in religious application.

- e) Facts: In order to support his ideology, oni-wa'asi may intentionally select supportive facts and ignore others that negate him. Onikijipa (2008) manipulated historical facts surrounding the two hills of *al-Safa* and *al-Marwah* in Makkah (Q2:158) to praise two great scholars of Ilorin, Shaykh Muhammad Kamaluddin al-Adaby and Shaykh Adam Abdullahi al-Ilory. He intentionally turned the referent of Ibrahim in Qur'an (4:54) to mean the current Emir of Ilorin, Alhaji Ibrahim Zul-Qarnayn Gambari and compared the history of Ilorin Royal family with several historical facts. Onikijipa has clearly misinterpreted the verse in order to glorify the Emir and Royal family of Ilorin. The facts about Prophet Ibrahim and the two hills of *al-Safa* and *al-Marwah* cannot be correctly manipulated to serve the purpose intended by Onikijipa.

However manipulation in wa'asi may result in different trends of translation, correct translation, misinterpretation and over-interpretation. Examples of correct translation have been mentioned in paragraphs a, b, c & d. An example of misinterpretation can be seen in Onikijipa's translation of Qur'anic verse, (33:33) "*Wa qarna fi buyuti kunna*" that address the wife of the Prophet Muhammad as being an advice to the Islamic scholars of Ilorin to stay indoors. He then advised them to remain calm and hold regular dua' individually and collectively "*Egba tesuba mu*", i.e. 'hold on to *sibhah* that usually functions for counting in supplication. An over-interpretation is in Al-Ilory's interpretation of the Prophetic hadith on the importance of good deeds which cherished the prayers of children for their parents after death. '*aw waladun yad'u lahu*', i.e. (or a child that could be praying for him). Al-Ilory (n.d.) extended the meaning to include organising prayer for the deceased which is tagged among Yoruba Muslims as '*adua fun oku*' (prayer for the dead one).

Effects of Manipulation in Wa'asi

Manipulation of units of wa'asi discourse has varied degrees of effects on the original intended message of a text, as well as on the audience. Its effects on the original intended message of a text might be an affirmation of the whole or parts of it. It might as well be a distortion or alteration of the original message. While doing manipulation, the admonisher may be misrepresenting the original message of a text/quotation intentionally or unintentionally in order to convince the audience with his own ideology.

Onikijipa (2008) wanted the people of Ilorin Emirate to strengthen their allegiance to the Royal Family and he manipulated Qur'an 4:54 by interpreting 'Ala-Ibrahim (the people of Ibrahim) that were given the book of revelation from Allah, wisdom and great dynasty to be the family of Emir Ibrahim Gambari (Ile Alfa Alimi). He repeatedly requested his audience to utter their agreement to his appeal to them. His wa`asi was clear example of heavy manipulation of texts. Despite that his manipulation was justified by what was obtainable in Emir Ibrahim Gambari and Alimi royal dynasty, the fact remain that Ibrahim mentioned in the Glorious Qur'an is Prophet Ibrahim (Peace and blessing be upon him).

Effects on the audience can be measured through immediate reactions of some members in support of the view of oni-wa`asi by uttering the *takbir* (Allahu 'Akbar) or joining in concluding parts of recitation of quotation, or by laughing at a condemned behaviour or incident. Effects could also be noticed through public reception of wa`asi by playing, buying or exchanging its audio CD or cassette and referring to manipulated segments of wa`asi in public or private discussion at homes or in local gatherings. This was also done in adopting prominent segments of a wa`asi as ring tones.

Effects on the audience may also result in supportive moral or socio-political actions. This paper believes that wa`asi sessions of Alfa Sannu Shehu, Alfa Buhari Omo-Muse and Alfa Aduagba months before 2011 elections, have affected shift in position of their audience in rejecting the candidature of Madam Gbemisola Saraki, the daughter of Senator Olusola Saraki, for governorship position in Kwara State. Meanwhile, wa`asi is normally coloured with varied traditional tones of Qur'anic recitation that represent schools of wa`asi in Ilorin. The effect of tone of recitation is reflected in the audience response to wa`asi in form of joining in recitation or shouting of *takbir*, Allahu 'Akbar. Such a response may indicate acceptability of facts presented by oni-wa`asi through manipulation of the recited quotation.

Conclusion

This paper focused on aspects of manipulation in wa'asi in Ilorin as a religious discourse that is an essential part of Yoruba Muslim socio-cultural elements. The admonishers, oni-wa'asis are seen as exercising power to convince their audience in selected manipulated units of wa'asi to project underlying ideologies of their social life.

These admonishers were able to convince their audience with the intended meanings through textual quotations which were cleverly manipulated and

successfully delivered to a large extent. However, some samples of manipulation may raise questions on the correctness of some meanings such as in equating the Prophets of Allah with Emirs and Muslim scholars, and in re-interpreting popular texts to suit pre-conceived ideologies.

Manipulation of facts was also done for possible personal gains as in connecting historical events in Ilorin with the rejection of governorship candidature of a woman. While manipulation of wa'asi discourse was possibly achieved through lexicon, phrases, structures, contexts and facts, oni-wa'asi may also exploit tone of Qur'anic recitation to grasp the attention of his audience and measure the level of acceptance of the message for which he is manipulating aspects of wa'asi discourse.

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