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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

ASSESSMENT ON THE CONTRIBUTION OF ILIMI CIRCLE IN PROMOTING SUSTAINABLE RELIGIOUS AND SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT IN NASARAWA STATE, NIGERIA

Isa Bilyamin Kaigama

Department of Islam and Development Studies,
Faculty of Arts, Nasarawa State University, Keffi, Nigeria.

isakaigamab@gmail.com

Abdullahi Adamu Sulaiman

Department of Islam and Development Studies,
Faculty of Arts, Nasarawa State University, Keffi, Nigeria.

aburugayyah@nsuk.edu.ng

Aminu Mu'allimu Kambari

Department of Islam and Development Studies,
Faculty of Arts, Nasarawa State University, Keffi, Nigeria.

muallimu1@nsuk.edu.ng

Abstract

This study assesses the contribution of Ilimi Circle, an informal Islamic educational initiative, to socio-religious and community development in Nasarawa State, Nigeria. Ilimi Circles, rooted in traditional Qur'anic and Hadith instruction, have become a critical platform for promoting moral education, literacy, spiritual consciousness, and social cohesion within Muslim communities. The research explores their impact on youth empowerment, adult education, conflict resolution, and value reorientation. Despite the growing recognition of the role of community-based initiatives in fostering development, there is limited empirical assessment of the contribution of Ilimi Circle a platform known for its focus on intellectual, religious, and social engagement in promoting sustainable religious and social development in Nasarawa State. Utilizing qualitative methods including interviews, focus group discussions, and field observations across selected Local Government states in the region, the study reveals that Ilimi Circles play a pivotal role in complementing formal education, especially in rural and underserved areas. Findings indicate that while the initiative contributes positively to community enlightenment and ethical conduct, challenges such as inadequate funding, lack of standardized curriculum, and limited government recognition hinder its broader impact. The study concludes by recommending increased support, structured integration with formal Islamic institutions, and policy attention to harness the full potential of Ilimi Circles in promoting sustainable religious and social development in Nasarawa State.

Keywords: Islamic Model Schools, North Central Nigeria, Islamic Education.



INTRODUCTION

Education has long been recognized as a vital instrument for personal and societal transformation. In the context of Islamic civilization, *‘Ilm*—an Arabic term for knowledge—holds profound spiritual and social value.¹ Throughout history, various forms of Islamic education have contributed to moral development, community leadership, and the preservation of religious values.² Among these, *Ilimi Circles* (*Halaqat al-‘Ilm*), commonly practiced in many parts of Northern Nigeria, represent informal learning platforms where Islamic scholars and community members engage in the teaching and discussion of Qur’an, Hadith, Fiqh, and ethical matters. In Nasarawa State, where cultural diversity and religious pluralism intersect, *Ilimi Circles* have become increasingly significant in nurturing religious identity and promoting peaceful coexistence.

Despite their informal structure, *Ilimi Circles* serve as important vehicles for grassroots education, especially in rural and marginalized communities where access to formal institutions is limited. They not only facilitate the transmission of Islamic knowledge but also address contemporary social issues through the lens of Islamic ethics.¹ However, the growing challenges of insecurity, urbanization, and the changing dynamics of education raise important questions about the relevance, impact, and sustainability of these traditional learning models in today’s society.

This study, therefore, seeks to assess the contribution of *Ilimi Circles* in Nasarawa State, Nigeria by examining their role in community development, moral instruction, literacy enhancement, and social integration. Through this assessment, the research aims to highlight both the strengths and limitations of *Ilimi Circles* and to propose strategies for enhancing their effectiveness in the evolving educational and social landscape of the State.

In Islamic education, an *Ilimi Circle* refers to a traditional and informal method of learning, where students gather around a knowledgeable teacher or scholar to acquire Islamic knowledge and guidance.³ An *Ilimi Circle* is a circular gathering of students seated on the floor around a teacher, who shares knowledge, insights, and wisdom on various Islamic subjects, such as Qur’anic recitation and interpretation (*tafsir*), Hadith (Prophetic traditions), Fiqh (Islamic jurisprudence), Arabic language and literature, Islamic history and biography, as well as spirituality and ethics.³

As part of its significance, the circular setup encourages active participation, questioning, and discussion among students, while the teacher provides individualized attention and mentorship to each learner. Furthermore, the Circles foster a sense of community, compassion, and spiritual connection among participants. This traditional method helps preserve Islamic knowledge and cultural heritage, and Circles can be held in various settings, including mosques, homes, and open spaces.⁴

Ilimi Circles facilitate the transmission of Islamic knowledge, values, and practices from one generation to another.⁵ This approach fosters a sense of belonging, unity, and mutual support among students and teachers. The circle format allows for tailored guidance and mentorship, catering to individual students’ needs. *Ilimi Circles* also provide a nurturing environment for spiritual development, self-reflection, and character building.⁶

Ilimi Circles play a vital role in the Islamic education system through promoting preservation of traditional knowledge, critical thinking, and intellectual discourse. They also support spiritual growth, self-development, and community building among scholars and learners.

In Nasarawa State, *Ilimi Circles* play a vital role in promoting Islamic education, community development, and personal growth, making them a valuable component of the State’s educational landscape.⁷

Despite the growing recognition of community-based initiatives in fostering development, there is limited empirical assessment of the contribution of *Ilimi Circles*—a platform known for intellectual, religious, and social engagement—in promoting sustainable

religious and social development in Nasarawa State. This State faces challenges including religious intolerance, moral decay, youth unrest, and declining communal values, which have hindered cohesive societal progress. While Ilimi Circles appear to offer interventions through education, dialogue, and moral reorientation, there is insufficient academic inquiry into how effectively these efforts translate into measurable outcomes in religious harmony, social cohesion, and value-based community development. This gap in knowledge makes it difficult for policymakers, religious leaders, and development practitioners to leverage the Circle's full potential. Therefore, this study seeks to assess the actual contributions of Ilimi Circles in fostering sustainable religious and social development in Nasarawa State, Nigeria, highlighting both its strengths and limitations.

A key study by Abdullahi Adamu Sulaiman explores selected Islamic Model Schools in Nasarawa State. It employs historical and descriptive methodology to detail their founding, organizational structure, facilities, and achievements—such as promotion of Islamic morality, adult education, female education, and regional manpower development. It also notes challenges like poor record keeping, limited parental and governmental support, and lack of formal recognition, which hamper their effectiveness.¹

Al-Iman School in Lafia is identified as a relative model among Nasarawa's Islamic schools. Unlike many deficient schools, Al-Iman integrates Islamic and Western subjects and is seen as a template for enhancing quality Islamic education in the state.²

A 2023 survey in Akwanga LGA (secondary schools) investigated the impact of Western education on Islamic education teaching. It found that most respondents (over 70%) believe Western-style education significantly contributes to the teaching of Islamic education. However, gaps persist, and recommendations include greater emphasis on early childhood education, adult literacy programs, and improved collaboration among government, scholars, and parents.³

Broader studies across northern Nigeria suggest that formal Islamic schools—particularly model schools blending secular and religious curricula—respond to public dissatisfaction with public education and help fill educational gaps left by state neglect. Evidence from Kaduna State's Islamiyyah schools shows reliance on repetition and demonstration methods, as well as absence of a regulatory coordinating body, raising concerns about curriculum quality and standardization.⁴

In Nasarawa State specifically, research on ICT integration in secondary schools reveals very low levels of digital infrastructure and digital literacy, indicating that model Islamic schools may also face challenges in adopting modern teaching tools and technologies.⁵

Nationwide assessments highlight recurring issues such as lack of qualified Islamic Studies teachers, insufficient instructional materials, and inadequate training and refresher programs—which likely affect model schools in Nasarawa as well.⁶

The literature portrays Islamic model schools in Nasarawa as socially valuable institutions striving to blend religious values with secular education. They appear to foster moral development and inclusive access, yet face persistent challenges in resources, pedagogy, infrastructure, and formal recognition. While notable models like Al-Iman demonstrate promise, broader research is needed to critically assess academic performance, governance frameworks, and impact on community development. However, existing literature largely fails to adequately address the role and activities of Ilimi Schools in Nasarawa State.

RESEARCH METHOD

There are many research designs, such as; historical, theoretical and empirical designs among others. This study employs historical, descriptive and interview research designs. The adoption of these designs is to review the existence, mode of operation, activities, problems, challenges, solution and prospects of the Islamic Model Schools in



Nasarawa state.

As a result of the practical impossibility to comprehensively study the population, and since it is not possible for the researcher to reach all the members of the population, the research was limited to a sample size of 9 Ilimi Schools in Nasarawa State out of the 91 identified within the State. These Schools will include Makarantan Malam Lukmanu, Malam Hassan Kukan Bisa and Malam Musa Maisunan Malam in Lafia to represent the Nasarawa west senatorial zone.

From the Nasarawa Northern zone the researcher Use Makarantaan Limamin Akwanga, Makarantan Malam Jibril of Nasarawa Eggon and that of Malam Anas from Wamba. While in the Western zone the Ilimi Schools of Malam Auwal of Makawalla, Malam Rufa'i and that of Malam Suraj were used.

The study used a non-probability sampling procedure in a form of purposive sampling technique. The method was applied in selecting respondents that were known to be in existence and in functioning in full. Thus, random selection through an observation in each of the senatorial zones used. For the study to be easy, the researcher selects from participating schools, parents, teachers, students, and community leaders randomly for interview.

The research is a qualitative one, which adopts empirical method of gathering data. Therefore, in this regard, two types of data (primary and secondary) were collected. The research collected primary data through unstructured oral interview that was conducted on the sampled population. These interviews were generated information on the contributions of Ilimi Schools through their activities within the Islamic Communities in Nasarawa State.

Unstructured type of interviews was allowed the interviewer to pose some open-ended questions that allow the interviewees to express their opinion freely. This required both the interviewer and interviewee to be at ease with one another as in discussing the topic of the research. Therefore, the direction of interview is determined by the interviewee and the interviewer, not predetermined. This researcher also used secondary data that was collected from both published and unpublished works written on the activities of Islamic Schools. Aside Qur'an and Hadith, which was served as the basic sources of fact in this research, other published and unpublished materials were consulted such as relevant books, journals articles, seminar papers, manuscripts, monographs, magazines, newspapers, research projects, dissertations, and theses.

In analyzing the data collected in this study, the researcher used qualitative technique specifically using descriptive and analytical methods of data analysis to describe the roles and activities and contributions of Ilimi Schools in Nasarawa State with particular reference to promotion of sustainable religious and social development. An important aspect of data analysis in qualitative research is the search for meaning through direct interpretation of what is observed by the researcher as well as what is experienced and reported by the subjects. The information and data collected in analytical and descriptive research were critically examined and corroborated before subjecting them to empirical treatment. This process was done through reporting, writing or recording what actually was seen and heard at the field.

From the foregoing discussion it is quite clear that, the research dealt with the assessment of the contribution of Ilimi circles in promoting sustainable religious and social development in Nasarawa State. This is why the study adopted qualitative research through descriptive and analytical method (of research) in collecting and analyzing data, and finally reported the findings and makes recommendations.

RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Assessment of the Activities of Ilimi Circles in Nasarawa State

In the heart of North Central Nigeria, Nasarawa State stands out as a significant centre of Islamic intellectual and spiritual activity. At the forefront of this religious vibrancy are the Ilimi Circles—traditional and contemporary platforms of Islamic scholarship that

continue to play a crucial role in nurturing religious knowledge, moral discipline, and communal harmony.¹ These circles, often anchored around respected scholars and learning centres, serve as vital spaces for the transmission of Qur'anic studies, Hadith, jurisprudence, theology, and ethical teachings. The presence and impact of these Ilimi Circles not only reflect the state's rich Islamic heritage but also its ongoing commitment to sustainable religious and social development.

In Lafia, for example, there is Makarantan Malam Lukmanu located in Unguwan Gayam, known for its commitment to classical Islamic sciences and Qur'anic memorization. It is led by respected scholars such as Malam Lukmanu, Malam Ketare, and Malam Gayam, with strong ties to Islamic schools within and outside the state.²

From the Nasarawa Northern zone, Ilimi Circles led by Limamin Akwanga, Malam Jibril of Nasarawa Eggon, and Malam Anas of Wamba were identified. In the Western zone, the Ilimi Circles of Malam Auwal of Makwalla, Malam Baban Indo of Nasarawa, and Malam Tijjani of Loko contributed immensely to community development. These centres attract students from neighboring states for Qur'anic recitation and memorization.³

These Ilimi Circles, led by well-known clerics and scholars, also engage in community dialogue and Islamic social reform discourse. They focus on Islamic jurisprudence (Maliki school), theology, and spiritual development (Tasawwuf), with a strong Sufi presence, especially among Tijjaniyya adherents. They are active in rural da'wah, community education, social justice advocacy, and ethical leadership training. Some circles have evolved into modern Islamic learning groups blending traditional and contemporary thought, organizing Tafsir sessions, public da'wah, and interfaith harmony initiatives.⁴

Contributions of Ilimi Circles in Nasarawa State

Ilimi Circles in Nasarawa State have made significant contributions to Islamic education and moral development. In an interview with Malam Ibrahim Muhammad Kawu of Sabon Pegi, Lafia, he noted that these circles have preserved and transmitted Islamic knowledge across generations.⁵ He further explained that participants develop literacy skills through Qur'anic recitation, Hadith studies, and Arabic language learning. He cited Makarantan Malam Lukmanu as an example, producing individuals of high moral and intellectual standing such as Prof. Muhammad Tanko Aliyu (Baitullah), Jibril Sulaiman Sabo, Dr. Yahaya Sulaiman (Marafa), and Alhaji Umaru Sarkin Store.

He also emphasized that Ilimi Circles promote critical thinking and problem-solving through interactive discussions, producing scholars who provide Islamic solutions to social and legal issues, including inheritance distribution according to Sharia.⁶

Other interviewees, including Umar Muhammad, Kasimu Waziri, and Bello Dan Ummah, affirmed that participants acquire moral values, ethics, and character development. They highlighted examples of vocationally skilled youths in Akwanga, such as Umar Adamu, trained in tailoring and carpentry through the influence of Ilimi Circles.⁷

Similarly, Darda'u Dalhatu and Aminu Iliyasu noted that Ilimi Circles foster community bonding and collective learning. Women also participate actively in Islamic education and community development initiatives.⁸

Community leaders from Lafia, including representatives from Moyin, Salanken, and Baraden Lafia, further confirmed that Ilimi Circles complement formal education and address social issues such as poverty and education gaps.⁹

Community Engagement

Ilimi Circles in Nasarawa State demonstrate strong community engagement through Qur'anic competitions, public lectures, and moral workshops.¹⁰ Scholars from various circles organize weekly preaching sessions and community service activities such as cleaning public spaces, assisting the needy, and supporting healthcare initiatives. They also conduct health awareness campaigns on malaria, HIV/AIDS, and polio.¹¹

Youth engagement programs, including sports, debates, and leadership training, are also part of their activities. These initiatives foster social cohesion and collaboration with NGOs, government agencies, and local organizations.¹²

Effectiveness in Disseminating Islamic Education in North Central Nigeria

The Ilimi Circle is an important pedagogical approach in Islamic education characterized by student-centered learning and interactive discussion. In interviews with Hassan Muhammad, Kamilu Dauda, Ibrahim Dauda, Ibrahim Sulaiman, Ya'u Sani, Sani Sulaiman, and Doma Abdullahi, respondents confirmed that students sit in circles with teachers, encouraging inclusive participation.¹³

The system accommodates both male and female students across primary and secondary levels in both urban and rural areas. It is estimated that over ninety-six Islamic schools in Nasarawa State employ Ilimi Circle methodology, reaching more than ten thousand learners.¹⁴

Relevance and Impact of Ilimi Circles in Promoting Sustainable Religious and Social Development

The Ilimi Circle remains a vital institution for religious and social development in Nasarawa State. It promotes Qur'anic learning, Hadith studies, and Fiqh, thereby strengthening Islamic identity and combating extremism through balanced scholarship.¹⁵

Socially, Ilimi Circles encourage justice, charity, and community support, particularly in rural areas. They also empower women and youth through inclusive participation.¹⁶

Culturally, they preserve Islamic traditions among ethnic groups such as Hausa, Kanuri, Gwandara, Alago, Eggon, and others, reinforcing identity in the face of modernization.¹⁷

Academically, Ilimi Circles integrate religious instruction with civic education, hygiene, leadership, and vocational skills, contributing to lifelong learning and human capital development.¹⁸

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study has shown that Ilimi Circles serve as a vital mechanism for promoting sustainable religious and social development in Nasarawa State. Rooted in traditional Islamic pedagogy, these circles continue to evolve as dynamic platforms for moral education, spiritual enlightenment, and community engagement. They have significantly contributed to literacy development, ethical reorientation, youth and women empowerment, and conflict mediation across diverse communities in states like Nasarawa State. Despite challenges such as inadequate funding, lack of curriculum standardization, and minimal policy support, Ilimi Circles remain instrumental in bridging the gap between formal education and grassroots religious instruction. Their adaptability and relevance in addressing contemporary socio-religious issues underscore their value as a complementary force to formal Islamic institutions. Therefore, to harness their full potential, there is a pressing need for strategic investment, institutional support, and curriculum integration. Doing so will not only preserve the cultural and religious heritage embedded in Ilimi Circles but will also strengthen their capacity to contribute meaningfully to the holistic development of Nasarawa State.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Base on the above findings, the paper recommends the followings aiming to sustain, strengthen, and scale up the influence of Ilimi Circles in fostering a more enlightened, cohesive, and morally responsible society across Nasarawa State.

Institutional Recognition and Integration, Government and Islamic educational



authorities should formally recognize Ilimi Circles as complementary educational institutions. Efforts should be made to integrate Ilimi Circles into the broader Islamic education framework, with oversight from state Islamic councils and ministries of education.

Curriculum Development and Standardization, develop a standardized but flexible curriculum that reflects both traditional Islamic sciences and contemporary issues (e.g., civic responsibility, health education, peace building) and include subjects that enhance literacy, numeracy, and life skills, making the circles more holistic and responsive to community needs.

Capacity Building for Facilitators there is need to provide continuous training and workshops for Ilimi Circle facilitators on effective teaching methods, learner engagement, and inclusive practices and also to encourage collaboration between local scholars and Islamic studies departments in universities to modernize pedagogy while preserving traditional values.

Enhanced Funding and Resource Support, the paper also recommends that there is need to mobilize financial and material support from government agencies, Islamic NGOs, philanthropists, and community-based organizations. Community should also establish community endowment schemes (waqf) to sustain circle activities by providing learning materials, and support facilitators.

Monitoring and Evaluation Systems, government should implement a community-based monitoring system to assess the impact and effectiveness of Ilimi Circles to develop performance indicators aligned with educational and social development goals (e.g., increase in literacy rates, reduced youth violence, civic engagement).

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Footnotes (Chicago Style Full Note Format)

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Table of Interviewees

S/N	NAMES	AGE	ADDRES	OCCUPATION	DATE	PLACE OF INTERVIEW
1	Ibrahim Muhammad Kawu	51	Sabon pegi lafia	Islamic Scholar	22/3/25	Lafia east primary school
2	Umar Muhammad	49	Ung. Dan Kanzo Akwanga	Islamic Student	28/3/25	Gidan Liman Akwanga
3	Kasimu Waziri	50	Ungwar Baba Arago	Community Leader	28/3/25	His house Ung. Baba Arago
4	Bello Dan Ummah	47	Sabuwar Ung	Ilimi Circle Student	28/3/25	Islamiyya Sch.

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						Sabuwar Ung.
5	Dar'dau dalhatu	48	Ung. Toni Lafia	Lecturer COE Akwanga	21/3/25	Kilema, Lafia
6	Aminu Iliyasu	46	Shinge, Lafia	LGEA Teacher	20-3-25	His house shinge, Lafia
7	Salihu Bako	52	Wadata, Lafia	Community leader	19/3/25	Tudun Kofa, Lafia
8	Safiyanu Uba	45	Ungwan Tiv, Lafia	Islamic scholar	19/3/25	Dunama Pri. School
9	Aliyu Gayam	65	Ungwar Gayam	Traditional Title holder	18/3/25	His house ung. Gayam
10	Hassan Muhammad	52	Ungwar yelwa keffi	Community leader	25/3/25	Tudun wada keffi
11	Kamilu Dauda	43	Yara Keffi	Tsangaya Student	25/3/25	Tsangayan Alaramma Mal. Musa T/Wada
12	Ibrahim Dauda	44	Ungwar Yelwa Keffi	Tsangaya Student	25/3/25	Tsangayan AlarammaM. Ya'u
13	Ibrahim Suleiman	55	Kofar Zanwa, Lafia	Community Leader	25/3/25	His House Kofar Zanwa
14	Ya'u Sani	56	GSS Maina Lafia	Civil Servant	20/3/25	Shagon goro, Lafia
15	Sani Suleiman	52	Ungwar Molina Lafia	Islamic scholar	20/3/25	Opposite Prison Yard, Lafia
16	Doma Abdullahi	60	Tudun Amba	Islamic Scholar	19/3/25	Kilema, Lafia
17	Alh. Sabiu	62	Ungwar Galadima	Community leader	18/3/25	Emir's palace Lafia
18	Ja'afar yakubu	59	Kofar Kaura	Islamic scholar	18/3/25	Emir's palace, Lafia
19	Is'haq Aliyu Wamba	51	Emir palace wamba	Civil servant	19/3/25	G.R.A

