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Search for Knowledge and Recognition Traditional Qur'anic Students in Kano, Nigeria

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1. Introduction

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1 Introduction

1.1 Introduction

Some people, especially now that there is boko [modern school], if you come for Almajirci, some people think it's because you don't have food in your house; that's why you come out to beg. But it's not like that; it's because you're searching for knowledge. (Nasiru,¹ 15 years old, 21 August 2009)

Since the proclamation of the Millennium Development Goals in 2000 and its commitment to universal basic education, 'education' has become firmly established within development discourse as the development intervention par excellence. It has been promoted as a human right and thus goal in itself (e.g. UNESCO n.d.), as an avenue to and expression of personal autonomy (e.g. Sen 1999), and as a means for individuals to achieve better health (e.g. Cowell 2006) and higher incomes (e.g. Tilak 1989). Often such discourse is underpinned by the tacit assumption that education is the same as formal schooling (Jeffery & Jeffery 1998). Then, to lack the latter becomes equivalent to lacking the former. According to the equation of education with schooling, children who are like Nasiru (*Almajirai*²) go uneducated.

The *Almajirai* are boys and young men from primary-school age to their early twenties, mostly from poor rural families, who live—beyond the state's purview and regulatory interventions—in traditional Qur'anic 'boarding' schools in Nigeria's Muslim North.³ For part of the day they learn to read, write, and recite the Qur'an. For much of the remaining time, they engage in a plethora of different activities to secure their livelihoods. While students of rural schools mainly farm with their teachers, students in urban areas beg for

¹ All names have been changed to protect the identity of informants.

² The Hausa term *Almajiri* (pl. *Almajirai*) derives from Arabic *Al-Muhajir* (migrant). The term *Almajirci* refers to the practice of living as *Almajiri*.

³ Many schools lack physical infrastructure, beyond a canopied forecourt where the teaching takes place. The students do not necessarily sleep, eat, and bath on the actual school 'premises' but often inhabit other spaces (see Chapter Two). Qur'anic 'boarding' schools are referred to as either *Makarantar Allo* or *Tsangaya*. *Makarantar Allo* is also used to describe non-'boarding' Qur'anic schools. *Tsangaya* refers more specifically to schools in remote areas hosting mainly older students.

food/money in the neighbourhood or on the streets, work as household helps,⁴ or, when older, wash clothes, carry loads, and engage in petty trading. The *Almajiri* practice is highly gendered in that neither female students nor teachers form part of it.

The children are handed over to the teacher (*Mallam*), who receives no salary but lives off the support given by the local community, the contributions of his students, and supplementary income-generating activities. Most teachers are not formally certified but products of the *Almajiri* system themselves. While many students return home at least once a year (for the major holidays or to help their parents farm), others do not see their parents for years. Some teachers migrate with their schools following seasonal agricultural patterns. Formerly to be found mainly in remote rural locales, today full-time traditional Qur'anic students increasingly populate the urban centres of the region—a development that has been accompanied by a steep decline in respect for the system.

Enrolment in Qur'anic schools all over Nigeria is estimated to exceed 9.5 million, with more than 8.5 million in the northern part of the country (UBEC 2010).⁵ The most reliable estimate for Kano suggests that some 300,000 boys and young men—more than 12.5% of all 6–21 year-olds—live as *Almajirai* in that state (MoE 2008). Qur'anic 'boarding' schools exist in both Nigeria and most of Muslim West Africa.

Modern/secular or Islamic subjects other than the Qur'an do not form part of the *Almajirai*'s curriculum. The conclusion that they are therefore 'uneducated', however, stands in stark contrast to their self-conception. Nasiru, for example, considers himself to be somebody "searching for knowledge".

Anthropologists and sociologists have pinpointed the epistemological limitations of equating education with schooling. They argue that education occurs in multiple spaces and pursues various goals rather than preparing merely for future employment (e.g. Dore 1976; Levinson et al. 1996). According to Levinson and Holland, all societies and also the microcultures within them provide "some kind of training and some set of criteria by which members can be identified as more, or less, knowledgeable" (1996: 2). A failure to recognise that notions of the 'educated person' vary—not only across cultures and time but also within

⁴ In Northern Nigerian Hausa society, where many women practice *purdah* (seclusion) and are thus largely confined to their compounds, children make the daily productive activities of the household possible, as they are sent to buy foodstuffs, fetch water, or run errands (Schildkrout 1978/2002: 349; Robson 2004). Young *Almajirai* are often employed for such tasks.

⁵ How many of these students are *Almajirai* is, however, subject to speculation, as the existing statistics do not differentiate between day-students (who stay with their parents, potentially attend modern school in addition to Qur'anic school, and include females) and 'boarding' students.

societies along lines of class, religion, etc.—reduces our comprehension of people’s educational choices and the politics involved in education.

Firstly, it precludes a real understanding of what motivates the decisions families make about their children’s education, particularly if they resist endeavours to universalise basic education. The knowledge and skills defining the ‘educated’ person in a specific context may, for instance, not be transmitted adequately through formal schooling. Importantly, alternative child-rearing practices may equally be sustained by explicitly *educational* aspirations. A narrow vision of education as formal schooling may give rise and even credibility to discourses that portray those opting for non-mainstream ways of bringing up their children as in a state of ‘crisis’, without paying much attention to either the educational aspirations sustaining such practices or the processes through which such aspirations are formed.

Secondly, a failure to recognise that there is no universally valid, ideal, ‘educated person’ obscures the political dimension of education. Socialising the young into a particular educational ideal may serve the interests of certain powerful groups. Yet, educational institutions have been shown to be “a contradictory resource for those who would fit the young to a particular vision of society” (*ibid.* 1) as within them even hegemonic definitions of the ‘knowledgeable person’ can be challenged. Also, the pursuit of certain educational practices may have unintended side-effects. For instance, inadvertently exposing students to new streams of thought may trigger a re-negotiation of the ideal ‘educated person’.

This thesis looks at the *Almajiri* system through the lens of the anthropology and sociology of education, enquiring how certain educational ideals and ‘educated persons’ are culturally produced. Doing so, I contend, helps to answer two important questions that have so far been answered only somewhat partially: why families opt for *Almajirci* and what the *Almajirai* learn through their enrolment in the system.

As regards the first question, in the Nigerian context the increased presence of destitute-looking *Almajirai* in the towns and cities of the region has been discussed, in both public and academic discourse, as an expression of crisis. On a societal level, it has been attributed to poverty and dry-season-induced food shortages in rural areas, without much attention being paid to the ways in which those opting for *Almajirci* make sense of the constraints they are subjected to. On a personal level, parents who send their children on *Almajirci* have been criticised as ignorant or neglectful. With little regard to the avowedly educational purposes of their sojourns in the urban centres, the *Almajirai* have been pigeonholed as “street children”

(CONSS n.d.) and quasi-orphans (see COCFOCAN n.d.), “forsaken by their parents” (Weekly Trust, 1 January 2010), and “totally neglected” (VOA News, 28 November 2007).

As regards the second question, traditional Qur’anic ‘boarding’ schools, particularly those in urban areas, have become an accessible scapegoat in Nigeria on which inter-religious hatred and Muslim militancy can be blamed.⁶ Despite the general recognition, at least within anthropology, that educational institutions can become sites of intense ‘identity politics’, where students contest their parents’ and teachers’ views of what is good and just (e.g. Skinner & Holland 1996), surprisingly few researchers have explored the views of children and youth enrolled as *Almajirai*. Nevertheless, many—academics included—unhesitatingly put forward conjectures about what they think the *Almajirai* learn in terms of behaviours and values. Their deprived living conditions and the values presumably taught at traditional Qur’anic ‘boarding’ schools have been used to explain—and predict—violent and criminal conduct. The *Almajirai* have been described as “a social time bomb” (Daily Trust, 21 November 2009) and accused of being “experts in political rampage, looting of houses and shops, burning of properties, [and] slaughtering of innocent souls” (The Vanguard, 16 December 2002, in Adamu n.d.). They have been said to “[lack] the practical skills required ... to contribute meaningfully to modern society, or even to earn a livelihood” and to therefore become “burdens” on society (Sahara Reporters, 25 September 2009).

On an empirical level, it is important to address the questions of why families opt for *Almajirai* and what the *Almajirai* learn through their enrolment, before the popular answers provided so far (which, I suggest, are largely based on speculation rather than empirical evidence) craft new realities. Firstly, as overly negative representations trigger resistance, particularly amongst the students, they become a factor in the very process of “cultural production of educated persons” (Levinson & Holland 1996) taking place within the *Almajiri* system. Secondly, framing the *Almajiri* system as “exploitation” (e.g. Daily Trust 21 November 2009) may give rise—and legitimacy—to certain government policies not necessarily in the interest of the *Almajirai*. At the time of my research, for instance, a law designed to outlaw begging by children was in its second reading in the Nigerian parliament.⁷

While modern schools have been the focus of in-depth studies paying due attention to the politics involved in education (e.g. Poluha 2004; Jeffrey 2005; Ball 2006; Froerer 2007), very

⁶ Traditional Qur’anic ‘boarding’ schools are by far not the only institutions imparting religious knowledge in Northern Nigeria (see below), but they are the ones sparking most controversy.

⁷ Dr Galadanchi, 7 September 2009

little is known about the ‘cultural production’ (Willis 1977) taking place within Islamic education systems. This ignorance is paradoxically increased by anxieties about them as putative centres of Islamic terrorism, or, in the West African context, Muslim militancy. Despite an increase in in-depth studies of Islamic education systems (e.g. Boyle 2004; Bano 2007), still very little is known about the views of children and youth enrolled in or graduated from these. On a practical level, this thesis aims to contribute to filling this gap.

On a theoretical level, the answers I provide in this thesis may help us understand the role educational institutions play in inter-generational transfers of poverty and life chances. The mechanisms behind such transfers are highly relevant for development studies, and ‘education’ occupies a central place within the current paradigm as a supposed asset for people to improve their lives. Yet, the most prominent approach offered within the discipline with respect to education—human capital theory—fails to capture adequately the complexity of the processes involved. Even though some authors have transcended narrow visions of education as formal schooling (e.g. Carneiro & Heckman 2003), the insights of this body of literature are limited as both ‘inputs’ (what counts as education) and ‘outputs’ (what counts as achievement—mainly enhanced income opportunities) are narrowly defined and linked in a mechanistic way (Johnston 1985). While livelihood frameworks (e.g. Chambers & Conway 1992; Chambers 1995; Scoones 1998, 2009) have recognised the importance not only of human but also of other forms of capital for people to lead successful lives, they do not explore the process through which such capital is transferred between generations.

I propose an analytical framework that integrates a broad view regarding both educational ‘inputs’ and ‘outputs’ with an analysis of wider power structures and students’ opportunities to exercise agency within them. My research thus contributes to a growing body of literature on inter-generational transfers of poverty, spearheaded by the Chronic Poverty Research Centre (Hulme et al. 2001; Yacub 2002; Moore 2005; Moncrieffe 2009), which sets out to study not only the implications of the diverse forms of capital for the transfer of poverty but also the role of larger power structures and people’s power to exercise agency within these (Bird 2007: 35).

1.2 Structure of the thesis

The second half of this introduction provides some background information and clarifications and reviews the literature on Qur’anic ‘boarding’ schools in West Africa. I then move on to elaborate the methodology used to conduct the ethnographic and child/youth-

focussed study of *Almajirai* in Kano State, Nigeria, on which this thesis builds (Chapter Two). In the third chapter I develop the analytical framework of this work. I propose to explore the *Almajiri* system in terms of the “cultural production of educated persons” (Levinson & Holland 1996), combining this anthropological approach with Bourdieu’s field theory (1986/2004) and de Certeau’s conceptualisation of resistance (1984). In Chapter Four I investigate the context of the current formation of the *Almajiri* system. The integration of the *Almajirai* into the local urban economy and popular discourses that frame the *Almajiri* system in terms of crisis will receive particular attention, as these are important factors in the ‘cultural productions’ addressed in the following chapters.

In Chapters Five and Six I explore why families opt for *Almajirci*. I first address the salient themes of the crisis rhetoric presented in Chapter Four, challenging the assumption that *Almajirci* can be understood merely in terms of poverty, parental neglect, and ignorance. I offer an alternative account of how children become *Almajirai*, paying particular attention to the mechanisms that hold teachers accountable (Chapter Five). In Chapter Six I then explore how socio-economic deprivation meshes with context-specific constructions of childhood, high religiousness, and particular conceptions of an accomplished social life to produce the educational ideal sustaining the practice. I argue that the *Almajiri* system is the result of the “dispersed, tactical, and make-shift creativity” (*ibid.* xiv/xv) of economically marginalised families struggling to grapple with structural constraints, rather than a direct product of poverty or parental neglect and ignorance.

Finally, Chapter Seven investigates what ‘educated persons’ the system actually produces. I claim that owing to the very set-up of the *Almajiri* system, which emphasises learning by ‘doing’ and ‘being’ rather than merely by ‘being taught’, what the *Almajirai* learn is the product of both intentional instruction and their ‘tactical creativity’ (*ibid.*) in engaging with their social environment. This defies mechanistic equations and opens up room for agency and uncertainty. While their accumulation of spiritual capital is mainly the result of intentional instruction, the *Almajirai* acquire moral/social capital—knowledge of how to be ‘well-behaved’—particularly as a consequence of their ‘tactics’ in dealing with disapproval and rejection. What the *Almajirai* learn in terms of economic capital (some basic ‘survival skills’ in Kano’s urban economy) and in terms of aspirations for such capital (the wish to acquire modern education)—they learn outside school. The Conclusion draws together the arguments made and suggests directions for further enquiry.

1.3 Context of the research

The geographical setting: Nigeria's population, estimated at more than 150 million, is split relatively equally between Christians and Muslims (UN 2008; Pew Forum n.d.). While Muslims live in all parts of the country, their concentration is highest in the northern states. According to the census of 2006, Kano State is the most populous state in Nigeria with over nine million inhabitants, most of whom are Hausa Muslims. The city of Kano, an important commercial hub and centre of Islamic learning, is Nigeria's second-largest city after Lagos, with more than 3.6 million inhabitants. Three-quarters of Kano State's population live in rural areas, most of them depending on small-holding, rain-fed subsistence agriculture for their livelihood. Rural-to-urban migration, both seasonal and permanent, is a frequent strategy to seize employment opportunities in the manufacturing and service sectors of Kano and to escape hardship in the countryside (DFID n.d.).

The landscape of religious education: Over 80% of all children and youth aged 6–21 years in Kano State are estimated to attend some form of Islamic education, either in addition to attendance in a secular school or as their only educational experience (MoE 2008). Qur'anic 'boarding' schools exist alongside Qur'anic day-schools following largely the same curriculum as the 'boarding' schools and *ilimi* schools for senior students eager to further their knowledge. Modernised *Islamiyya* schools teach not only the Qur'an but also other Islamic and in some instances modern/secular subjects. In contrast to the traditional schools, where students and teachers sit on prayer mats on the floor writing the Qur'an with quill and ink on wooden slates, the *Islamiyya* schools use modern teaching materials. Some *Islamiyya* and Qur'anic day-schools have registered with the state government and receive support from it.

Children, youth, and young people: I argue in this work that 'children' and 'youth' (0–14 and 15–24 year-olds respectively, according to UN definitions) are not merely biological categories, but situational concepts that vary across time, space, cultures, social groups, and other markers of difference (see James & Prout 1997). Hausa society is broadly divided into the young (*yara*) and the elders (*dattijai*), with the very old and very young falling outside these categories. A boy's transition into the category of *yara* is marked by his circumcision (carried out at around age seven), after which he is considered old enough to be sent away

from home. Adulthood begins for both women and men with their first ‘dependant’—for women their first child, for men their first wife (Last 2000: 366).

There is a further stage related to puberty, when gender norms governing adult behaviour begin to apply fully. Whereas girls are supposed to stay predominantly at home from the onset of puberty, boys decide for themselves towards the end of puberty that they are too old to enter a house other than their own, thereby renouncing forms of employment that involve entering houses.

All the young people identifying as *Almajirai* that I engaged with during my research fell into the category of *yara*. Furthermore, they all positioned themselves unambiguously as either ‘older’ or ‘younger’ students, depending on whether they considered adult gender norms fully applicable to themselves. Many of them did not know their exact biological age, which complicates the application of strictly age-based categories. In this work, I therefore use the term ‘children’ or ‘younger students’ to refer to those who considered adult gender norms not yet fully applicable to themselves, and the terms ‘youth’ or ‘older students’ to refer to those who considered them fully applicable. I use the term ‘young people’ to refer to both categories simultaneously. I also use the term ‘children’ when I refer to parents’ statements about their offspring.

1.4 Literature review

A number of sociologists and anthropologists have investigated rural-based Qur’anic ‘boarding’ schools in West Africa (Wilks 1968; Cruise O’Brien 1971; Kaba 1976; Sanankoua 1985), arguing that the system is based on the exchange of students’ farm labour for ‘cultural capital’ (Saul 1984; Bledsoe & Robey 1986), or on cultural and religious norms, including specific ideas about the proper upbringing of children (Sanneh 1975; D’Hondt & Vandewiele 1984; Last 2000; van Santen 2001). The extent of the continuity between this rural tradition and the more recent phenomenon of urban-based schools is, however, subject to debate. Most authors, including those writing about Nigeria, attribute the increased presence of destitute-looking, begging religious scholars in the towns and cities of the region to structural factors, such as dry-season-induced food shortages (Lubeck 1985; Winters 1987; Reichmuth 1989; Last 1993; Khalid 1997) and mounting economic pressures on scarce resources, particularly in rural areas, exacerbated by structural adjustment and rapid population growth (Ojanuga

1990; Hunt 1993; Killen & Nigisti 1995). These are seen to undermine both the ability of the Sahelian peasant household to provide adequately for the young and the capacity of the community to offer support (Winters 1987; Last 1993; Mohammed 2001; Sule-Kano 2008; Bambale n. d.). Increased individualism and growing mistrust⁸ have also been amongst the reasons put forward to explain dwindling support structures (Lubeck 1985; Winters 1987).

Few authors explore in any depth the role of cultural values in sustaining the system or the attempts of sending communities to deal with the constraints they are subjected to. Those who do explore these factors perceive much continuity between rural and urban practice and explain the children's physical deprivation in the urban schools as a consciously chosen child-rearing strategy aimed at their moral and spiritual maturation and the acquisition of life skills (Last 2000; Perry 2004).

For the Nigerian context, the overwhelming consensus is that Qur'anic 'boarding' schools were highly revered institutions of religious learning throughout the past (Paden 1973; Fafunwa 1974; Last 1993; Khalid 1997; Shehu 2004; CDRT 2005; Sule-Kano 2008). The so-called Maitatsine riots in Kano in the 1980s mark a break in writing about them. During the riots, members of an Islamic sect, condemning the corruption of the existing elites and particularly the enjoyment of Western consumer goods (Lubeck 1985: 370), rose against the police, resulting in hundreds of deaths. The insurgents were believed to be mainly peripatetic Qur'anic 'boarding' students. Since then, several authors have been arguing that the *Almajiri* system is capable of producing extremists ready to commit atrocities (Lubeck 1985; Isichei 1987; Winters 1987), or even international terrorists (Awofeso et al. 2003). More frequently, *Almajirai* have been linked to inter-religious violence and petty delinquency and street crime (e.g. Mohammed 2001; Casey 2007, 2008; Bambale n.d.).

Most authors converge on the position that the gradual erosion of the moral and economic bases of their livelihoods, owing to the unequal effects of capitalism and the introduction of modern education upsetting traditional knowledge economies, caused the *Almajirai*'s violent potential (Lubeck 1985; Isichei 1987; Winters 1987; Watts 1996; Awofeso 2003; Sule-Kano 2008). Winters (though not going into any more depth) claims that militancy arises from the "values taught at [traditional] Koranic schools, values which stress unity between Muslims, alms-giving and communal living" and which are incompatible with lifestyles perceived or constructed as un-Islamic (Winters 1987: 183).

⁸ More and more people are reluctant to take *Almajirai* into their household or to shelter them in their entrance halls (*zaure/soro*), Lubeck argues (1985: 380).

Several authors assert, however, that blaming crime and violence on the *Almajirai* alone simplifies matters by obscuring their origin in the local political economy. Hiskett claims that most Maitatsine insurgents were not Qur'anic students but seasonal economic migrants (1987: 215). Adamu attributes responsibility for many of the crimes imputed to the *Almajirai* to *yan daba*, “street corner ‘dudes’”, or vigilantes, with little or no schooling and “not bothering to attend Qur'anic schools” (n.d.: 3-4). His analysis is supported by Casey, who argues that through “‘*yan daba* caretaking” *Almajirai* are drawn towards the lifestyle of the former (2007: 112). Unfortunately, Casey does not pursue her analysis of these processes any further. Thus, the conditions under which *Almajirai* may come to learn values and behaviours considered to be problematic remain unexplored.

More recently the *Almajirai* have been approached from a social policy angle, in the context of increasing attempts to achieve universal primary education (Bano 2008a, 2008b; USAID 2009) and heightened anxieties about the well-being of children considered to be “trafficked” (Olujuwon 2008) or otherwise in need of support (Arewa House 1997; Okoye & Yau 1999; Kurfi 2000; NCWD 2001; Onolemhemen & Pugh 2002; Usman 2008). However, these studies have narrow research agendas and rarely include the perspectives of children.⁹

In conclusion, the existing literature enables only an incomplete understanding of the *Almajiri* system. Whereas many authors outline clearly the structural factors supporting it, hardly anyone explores how those opting for *Almajirci* deal with these factors and how they translate them into educational strategies. Most importantly, the views of the main actors of the system—the students—are virtually absent in the literature, despite anxieties about the values and attitudes they presumably learn. That the existing literature does not contribute to a better understanding of the processes through which children become *Almajirai* and through which they learn certain behaviours and attitudes considered problematic is a particularly severe shortcoming, given the enthusiasm with which speculative narratives are constructed in some media (see Chapter Four).

⁹ The researchers of the National Council for the Welfare of the Destitute, for instance, interviewing *Almajirai* about their income-generating activities, take the fact that 97.2% of the children were either begging or working to mean that the system is “very much unwholesome” (NCWD 2001: 115), without asking how the children experience their activities.