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

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2. Methodology

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2 Methodology

2.1 *Epistemological and methodological framework*

In this thesis I argue that ‘reality’ is not an objective fact to be ‘discovered’ by the researcher but inter-subjectively constructed by those participating in it (see Geertz 1973). From such an epistemological viewpoint, the *Almajiri* phenomenon cannot be understood unless approached from the perspective of those who are centrally involved in the construction, contestation, and transformation of its meaning—the students themselves. This epistemological position informed my research methodology. I chose an approach that combines semi-structured interviews with ethnographic and participatory methods, in order to gain as deep and contextualised an understanding as possible of the *Almajirai*’s life-worlds and to show respect to the young people by recognising them as agents and experts in their own lives (Sime 2008: 63-64). Finally, I reasoned that an in-depth small-scale study could well shed light on bigger issues as experienced locally.

In the following, I first give a summary of the data this thesis draws on and describe the context in which they were collected. I then review the methods I used, explaining my reasons for choosing them and discussing their limitations. Finally, I describe the two schools which formed the focus of my research and my forms of interaction with the students there, to convey a clearer picture of my data. I interject reflections on my own positionality within the research and on the ethical challenges that arose.

2.2 *Data*

This thesis builds on 11 weeks of fieldwork carried out in Kano State between July and September 2009. My work draws on data from the wider literature, from fieldwork observations, and from semi-structured interviews with 13 important opinion holders (NGO spokespersons, government officials, and university staff), 6 teachers of Qur’anic ‘boarding’ schools in both rural and urban areas, and with 14 fathers whose sons live as *Almajirai*. I spoke only to fathers, as they are perceived to be the main decision-takers behind the *Almajiri*

system and because to explore the views of mothers too would have required a more long-term engagement in the respective rural communities to build up trust.

Most importantly, this thesis relies on repeated semi-structured interviews, group conversations, and casual interactions with 35 *Almajirai* in two schools I worked with over an extended period of time. I also draw on translated and transcribed ‘radio interviews’ the young people conducted amongst each other with my tape recorder and on discussions of the photographs they took with disposable cameras. To ensure that I had captured the full range of *Almajiri* experiences I also conducted semi-structured interviews with 18 *Almajirai* from other schools, in particular with children begging for alms on the street.

For most of my conversations with students, teachers, and parents, I had to rely on a translator, as they took place in Hausa. After I had made initial contacts with schools through the Kano Ministry of Education, with which my research was associated, I worked with a masters’ student, herself Igala and Christian, but fluent in Hausa as she had grown up in Kano. Since access had already been negotiated, her ‘otherness’ was an asset rather than a liability, as in her contacts with the students she did not have to respect gender norms to the same extent as a young Muslim woman would have had to. To minimise the inevitable distortions involved in translation, I tape-recorded all conversations and translated and transcribed them word for word together with my research assistant so that I could enquire about potential ambiguities. I analysed my data through repeated reading of transcripts and field-notes, identifying salient themes and highlighting supporting data.

2.3 Location of the research

My choice of Kano was driven in part by practical considerations, as it enabled me to draw on the institutional support and the contacts of the Kano Ministry of Education. Its long tradition of and sustained high demand for religious education also make Kano a particularly interesting research site. Moreover, the quality of public schools in Kano—as in most of Nigeria’s northern states—is low (MoE 2008), which partly accounts for the choice of *Almajirai* as an educational strategy. Kano is considered to be host to the largest number of *Almajirai* of all northern Nigerian states (Daily Trust, 21 November 2010).

I conducted my research in an urban setting (metropolitan Kano), as it is urban *Almajirai* that have attracted most controversy and anxiety. To gain in-depth insights while simultaneously getting a feeling for how different circumstances may shape the *Almajirai*’s

experiences differently, I focussed my research on two schools, the choice of which was mainly determined by the conditions of access (see below). To capture the experience of children begging on the street for money, I approached *Almajirai* at two notorious ‘begging-spots’ in Kano: a bakery frequented mainly by expatriates and well-to-do Nigerians (See Sweet Bakery) and a motor park (Mallam Kato).

It was impossible for me to ‘match’ children and parents, as teachers, fearing for their reputation, were reluctant to put me in contact with their students’ parents. I thus explored the conditions and motivations on the ‘sending side’ by visiting villages and interviewing fathers whose sons live as *Almajirai*, in Kunchi, a Local Government Area (LGA) in the northwest of Kano State. Kunchi, largely dependent on agriculture, is one of the poorest LGAs in Kano State whose public schools are severely underfunded, indicating their poor quality even relative to the—already low—Kano average (MoE 2008). All the fathers I spoke to were farmers, and some of them were Qur’anic teachers in addition.

2.4 Methods

Ethnographic fieldwork, participant and non-participant observation, and semi-structured interviews

I chose to make both participant and non-participant observation a central part of my methodology, to gain insights into the daily circumstances of the *Almajirai*’s lives, to understand their embodied practices (e.g. the habitual movements involved in learning Qur’anic recitation) and attitudes they may not be able to express verbally, and, most importantly, to build up the trust necessary to make research with young people possible. Yet, to be admitted as a participant observer posed challenges. Given the negative image of *Almajirai* in much public discourse, insiders are often suspicious towards outside inquirers—particularly if these are white, modern-educated, non-Muslim, and female, like me. Accordingly, access was one of the main challenges in my research, as teachers functioned as powerful gatekeepers to the children entrusted to them.

As Qur’anic education is highly gendered and several activities and spaces (e.g. mosques where the teaching often takes place) are considered inappropriate for women, I could not easily participate in the children’s everyday activities, even when teachers were open towards my research. Also, to visit schools on a regular basis to build up trust and observe daily routines proved difficult. Teachers feared that my continued presence might arouse suspicion

in the neighbourhood. Activities that would have given me a reason to spend time in the schools were difficult to come up with. Despite these hurdles, I was able to gain valuable insights into and ethnographic data on the functioning of the two schools that became the focus of my study (see below).

As the nature of my research required rich, contextually-situated data, I chose semi-structured interviews with children, youth, and adults to complement ethnographic and participatory methods, which permitted flexibility in conducting interviews, remaining open to unexpected turns while following a set of clearly laid-down research interests.

Participatory methods

‘Participatory’ research methods have become fashionable, particularly in research with children, as a tool by which power differentials between researcher and researched can potentially be overcome (see Chambers 1997). Yet, it has been pointed out that it is not enough to pick a method from the ‘participatory menu’. In order for research to be ‘truly participatory’ and a positive experience for all parties involved, the methods used have to be constantly reviewed and adjusted, and ideally children are involved not only in the creation of data but also in its interpretation and in the formulation of research goals (e.g. Clark & Moss 2001; Cooke & Kothari 2001).

In order to come as close as possible to this ideal, given the temporal and logistical constraints on my research, I used a flexible, multi-method approach that helped me sustain the young people’s interest in the research and gave me room to adjust to their preferred forms of communication so as to reduce inevitable power differentials (Barker & Weller 2003). However, although I recognised that power imbalances are particularly pronounced at the analysis stage (e.g. Hastrup et al. 1990), it was not possible for me to involve my research participants in the interpretation of data and representation of the researched ‘realities’. Writing as an agnostic adult mainly about children whose actions and positions, in addition, were often underpinned by religious beliefs, I tried my best to tread a difficult path between taking seriously what my research participants told me and recognising how cultural and socio-economic power relations constrained the ways in which they could imagine themselves and conceive of the world around them.

Photography: I chose to use photography in my research with the *Almajirai*, as the use of cameras has been shown to be a potentially enabling tool for young people with poor oral/written literacy (Morrow 2001; Young & Barrett 2001a; Punch 2002; Einarsdottir 2005).

Given the spatial constraints I was subjected to—I could neither follow the children to their income-generating activities nor participate in lessons taking place inside the mosque—the pictures the young people took allowed me to gain access to spheres of their lives that would otherwise have eluded me. In addition, the photographs were a good starting point for conversations about their ideas of moral behaviour and also educational ideals, as I had asked them to take pictures of what they thought was good/bad behaviour and treatment of children. Finally and importantly, the young people enjoyed taking pictures.

The older students used the cameras largely at their own discretion, snapping mainly their friends and workplaces. While their pictures therefore provided less of an access point for conversations about notions of morality, they were useful to talk about daily activities and future plans. Also, as the young people valued the opportunity to get pictures of themselves and their friends, they felt sufficiently compensated for the time they spent with me.

Group conversations: While many researchers have found group discussions to be a useful means to put children at ease who might feel uncomfortable speaking alone with an adult (e.g. Boyden & Ennew 1997; Ennew & Plateau 2004), in the context of my research this was only partially true. While the young people felt more at ease in the presence of a peer, they were reluctant to voice their opinions in bigger groups. By virtue of seniority, the eldest in the group would put forward his view, after which nobody ventured a contradiction (cf. Gabhainn & Sixsmith 2006). Also, a strict code of conduct seemed to restrict them in what they could say in bigger groups, for they feared being censured as immoral by their peers.

Radio interviews: As I used to tape-record our conversations and to demonstrate how the recorder worked when asking the children for their consent, they started taking pleasure in recording and re-playing their own voices. Eventually, they started playing ‘radio’, and when I encouraged them to ‘broadcast’ a radio programme about *Almajirai*’s views on their education system, they began enthusiastically interviewing each other, delivering very eloquent and passionate ‘radio speeches’ and even visiting other schools to interview the students there. Being able to take the recorder with them to conduct their interviews outside the view of adults put them at ease, and the playful form encouraged otherwise timid children to speak out (see Young & Barrett 2001b; Veale 2005; Frankel 2007).

While their recordings provided exciting data and valuable insights into some of the boys’ most pressing concerns, the recordings raised a number of practical and ethical issues.

It was, for instance, sometimes difficult to tell whether the students were talking about the real-life situation in their school, or, following the logic of the play, ‘improvising’? Through casual conversation it was possible to clarify some of these issues. In some instances, the children—absorbed in the dynamics of their play—clearly forgot that their recordings formed part of my research or even that I would listen to them (and translate and transcribe them). It is therefore difficult to decide whether the children’s consent to participate in my research covers all these recordings.

2.5 The two case study schools

Both schools were residential (as opposed to peripatetic) and located in comparatively wealthy neighbourhoods inside the Old City, which are almost entirely Muslim Hausa. The teachers in both schools were relatively liberal, evidenced by the fact that they consented to my research and sent their own children to modern school. They did not rely exclusively on their students’ contributions for their livelihood but had additional sources of income. If the students contributed financially, their payments were small and voluntary. Most younger students had secured employment—paid in cash—as household helps in the neighbourhood, and only a few had begging (mostly for food at houses) as the sole source of income. Older students in both schools engaged in the petty economy. As I conducted my research during the rainy season, a significant number of students had returned home to farm. The conditions described here may set the experiences of the *Almajirai* I conducted my research with apart from those of other *Almajirai*.¹⁰ Further research should therefore complement this work.

Mallam Hamza’s school

Mallam Hamza’s school is situated in a lively quarter close to the Emir’s palace inside the Old City. In addition to the approximately 60 students enrolled as ‘boarding’ *Almajirai*, approximately 120 day-students come to the school for Qur’anic lessons. The youngest *Almajiri* is eight years old while the oldest are in their late twenties. The majority of students come from either Gezawa or Kabo LGAs (both in Kano State). The school has a proper

¹⁰ Students of peripatetic or rural schools and students under more pressure to contribute financially to their teacher’s livelihood, or without access to employment paid in cash—and thus likely to beg on the street for money—may, for instance, have fairly different experiences.

physical structure, with washing facilities and several classrooms in which the *Almajirai* sleep.

Fourteen teachers altogether work at the school, though not all of them teach the *Almajirai*. None of them lives on the school premises, but the head-teacher, who took the school over from his father, lives close by. Beyond the students' contributions and other donations, all teachers have additional sources of income from either farmland or further teaching engagements.

To win the trust of the younger students in particular was a challenge in this school, as it was difficult to find a reason for casually spending time with them. The teachers did not want me to teach English, as they feared their students' parents might oppose this. I eventually began teaching the students to make bracelets, but gave this up after a while as spending time with me conflicted with their responsibilities to earn income. Also, in many instances, the younger students withdrew as soon as older students entered our interactions. As a consequence of these constraints, I focussed mainly on the older students with whom familiarity was less of an issue.

I relied primarily on the use of disposable cameras. The conversations with the older students about the pictures they had snapped often covered a broad range of topics, not necessarily related to the photographs, and on several occasions evolved into an informal exchange which other students joined. While the ease with which other students participated was fruitful on the one hand, it proved problematic with respect to the younger *Almajirai*. The classrooms in which our conversations took place did not provide a truly private space, as other students and also teachers stopped to watch and listen and it was difficult to insist on privacy without arousing suspicion. Consequently, the children were reluctant to speak out, and I was careful not to make them talk about topics that might have put them at risk.

As the teaching and studying takes place inside the classrooms, I could observe it on the occasions that I visited the schools either to teach making bracelets or for group conversations with the students.

Mallam Gali's school

The conditions for research regarding Mallam Gali's school, located just inside the Old City wall near *Sabuwar Kofa* (New Gate), were probably as favourable as they could get, as I was living right next to the *Mallam*. Even though the teaching and most of the studying took place in the nearby mosque, which I could not enter, there were plenty of opportunities for informal interaction owing to the physical proximity.

Mallam Gali teaches only *Almajirai* (and his own children). The youngest of the approximately 25 *Almajirai* is ten years old, while the eldest are in their early twenties. Mallam Gali does not accept students younger than around ten years, arguing they are too young to fend for themselves and thus a liability. The majority of students come from either Dambatta (Kano State) or Magaria (Niger Republic). Mallam Gali is the main teacher (of two) and a former student of the previous teacher. Like his predecessor, he became Imam in the nearby mosque. He earns his income mainly from commissioned prayers, Qur'an recitations, and other spiritual services.

The school does not have its own buildings but 'cohabits' other spaces. The younger students sleep in the *zaure/soro* (entrance room) of their teacher's house, or, if the weather is dry, on a patch of concrete in front of it. While the older students also used to sleep there during the dry season, for the rainy season they had moved to the nearby mosque. Some of the students sleep in the *zaure/soro* of neighbours' houses or of the houses where they work. There is an ablution space in the mosque, but owing to high demand many students have to rely on rubbish dumps and public baths for personal hygiene.

Both the younger students and their *Mallam* often sat on a little bench in front of the door, where I could join them exchanging greetings or practising my Hausa. I could also invite the children into our courtyard for private conversations and playing (which would have been inappropriate for me in public). The older students, too old to enter my or even their teacher's house without an explicit invitation, mainly stayed clear of these spaces. This made interactions with them more difficult. Yet, it improved my rapport with the younger students, as older students did not 'take over' our interactions. Thus, while in Mallam Hamza's school older students were more accessible than younger ones, in Mallam Gali's school the reverse was the case, which balanced my sample.

The house I lived in had been rented by Europeans for over 20 years by the time I moved in. The students and their teacher were therefore well familiar with foreigners and trusted me easily. One of the students worked in the house, which allowed us to develop quite a close relationship. As I was aware that the dependence relationship associated with his employment might be ethically problematic, I was careful to always stress he could opt out of the research at any time. Yet, I felt he sincerely valued the opportunity to make his opinion heard.

I began my research with photography and group conversations about the pictures taken and involved both younger and older students in this. Particularly the younger students found the research entertaining, volunteered for further research activities, and eventually conducted numerous interviews with my tape-recorder. Owing to the physical proximity, I

could complement the participatory material with informal chats and gain quite deep insights into the children's daily routines.