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

IFRA-Nigeria

4. Exploring the context of *Almajirci*

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4 Exploring the context of *Almajirci*

4.1 Introduction

This chapter aims to situate the *Almajiri* practice in time and space. First, it explores the historical dimension of the system. How have changes in the political landscape, the economy and demography, the rise of Islamic reform movements, and the introduction of modern education affected the ways in which the *Almajiri* system functions and the ways in which the *Almajirai* can imagine and situate themselves within society? I maintain that whereas in the past the *Almajiri* system forged a scholarly class or *ulama* (Arabic, sg. *al-alim*) that enjoyed considerable prestige and power, it has increasingly become economically, socially, and politically marginalised. The second part of the chapter explores two factors that are particularly relevant for the cultural productions described in the following chapters, namely the relationship of the *Almajirai* to the contemporary local economy, and the crisis rhetoric about the *Almajirai*.

4.2 The changing role of Qur'anic scholars in Hausaland

Islam was introduced in Hausaland via the trans-Saharan trade as early as the eleventh century and became the religion of the ruling elites in the fifteenth century. The Fulani-led *jihād* of Usman dan Fodio, 1804–08, launched against what were perceived as syncretistic practices, and the ensuing establishment of the Sokoto Caliphate strengthened the hold of Islam among the population at large (Last 1967; Paden 1973). Given the scarcity of scholars in the early days of Islam in the region, religious knowledge was acquired by moving away from home to live with a renowned scholar in one of the emerging centres of learning (Okoye & Yau 1999: 15).

Initially restricted to scholarly families, religious knowledge has been a political asset since the inception of Islam in the Western Sudan, as the rulers, by submitting to the restraints of a written code, exposed themselves to the checks of intellectuals educated in that code (Last 1993: 119-120). As the main literate class prior to colonialism, religious scholars

became particularly influential in the Sokoto Caliphate not least because they were the only ones eligible for certain government positions (Umar 2001: 130). Peripatetic Qur'anic schools spanning the entire Caliphate with their migration routes and networks "were integral to the expansion, reproduction and ideological integration" of the Islamic state (Lubeck 1985: 372). Several scholars attribute the rise of widespread demand for religious education, and thus the proliferation of *Almajirci*, to the importance the reformist government of Usman dan Fodio attached to the religious education of the population and the substantial support Qur'anic schools received from both the community and the state (Lubeck 1985; Khalid 1997; NCWD 2001).¹⁴

Last (2000: 381) offers a slightly different reading of history, situating the sudden increase of demand for Islamic schooling in the early twentieth century. The gradual ending of slavery, induced by colonialism (see Lovejoy & Hogendorn 1993), Last asserts, created both new economic pressures and novel opportunities for social mobility, which fuelled demand for and supply of religious education as an avenue to high status in a very status-conscious society. At the same time, former slaves often struggled to secure their livelihood, which made Islamic teaching an attractive option and itinerant Qur'anic schools a welcome opportunity for households to reduce their subsistence burden. Lubeck, albeit possibly neglecting the importance of non-material factors, attributes the Qur'anic schools' movements to urban areas to the ecology and economy of the region, arguing that "[s]ituated in a harsh environment where rainfall was uncertain ... the peripatetic tradition related harmoniously to the needs and risks of the peasant household economy" as children and youth could be dispatched to urban areas during dry-season-induced times of scarcity (1985: 372). Migrant Qur'anic students, he argues, were a readily available labour pool for the urban handicraft industry.

During colonialism and subsequent decades, religious education experienced little competition from modern education, which contributed to high enrolment rates. Early modern schooling was provided mainly by Christian missionaries and thus engendered resistance amongst Muslims. As a consequence of its unpopularity, the colonial authorities thought it politically unwise to establish modern schooling on a mass scale in the indirectly ruled North, and even after independence it was expanded only slowly. The need of the colonial administration for modern-educated officials was met instead by employing modern-

¹⁴ Dr Wakili, 24 July 2009

educated southerners (Igbo/Yoruba) and by offering modern education to only a small section of society (Schildkrout 1978/2002: 363).¹⁵

Despite its narrow base, the introduction of modern education had a substantial impact on the traditional *ulama*, as it gradually undermined their “monopoly over literacy” and thus their access to prestige, positions, and resources (Paden 1973: 58). By making English and Hausa written in Roman script the language of the administration, the skills of the traditional *ulama*—their knowledge of Arabic and *ajami*¹⁶—were devalued (Wakili 2007: 67).

Upon independence in 1960, it was the first generation of modern-educated Muslims who inherited power from the British (Umar 2001: 130). Socio-economic change added momentum to the political transformation. The 1970s witnessed an enormous expansion of the Nigerian economy, owing to the oil boom. While the oil sector thrived, the agricultural sector, however, became increasingly marginalised (Lubeck 1985: 377; Khalid 1997: 29). The immense and often illegitimate financial returns from oil, accruing to some while bypassing many others, triggered “rugged individualism”. Meanwhile, the new affluence and gross corruption put the moral fabric of society under strain (Umar 1993: 176). Massive rural-to-urban migration exacerbated inequalities in the cities as the newcomers were excluded from the new wealth. The structural adjustment programme, implemented from 1986 to deal with the economic crisis ensuing after the oil price collapsed, accentuated income inequality, reduced employment opportunities, and impoverished the population further (Jega 2000; Ya’u 2000; Mohammed 2001).

The societal transformation affected the traditional religious education system and *ulama* first of all in economic ways. During the 1970s the income of students and teachers declined, as more affluent Muslims increasingly ceased to support the *Almajiri* system through alms and accommodation and as those segments of society still endorsing it were hit by the economic downturn in the aftermath of the oil boom and by structural adjustment (Winters 1987: 180-181; Ya’u 2000). New capital-intensive innovations such as modern cement rather than labour-intensive mud-construction undermined the *Almajirai*’s traditional income activities, while the erosion of the rural economy simultaneously encouraged more and more students, lured into city life, to ‘stay on’ rather than to return to their villages. The push of the Northern Muslim elites in the late 1970s and 1980s to extend modern education to larger parts of the population—a result of the new oil wealth and increased competition for influence at the national level—strained the *Almajirai* competing for jobs in the urban

¹⁵ The neglect of modern education in Northern Nigeria can be felt to the present day (see below).

¹⁶ Hausa written in Arabic script.

economy (Lubeck 1985). Meanwhile, those sources of income that are the preserve of traditional religious scholars—e.g. commissioned prayers and potions to strengthen one’s charisma (see Last 1988)—while providing a profitable livelihood to some, cannot sustain the bulk of the *Almajirai* and particularly not those only beginning to acquire the requisite knowledge.

Secondly, the landscape of legitimacy was reconfigured as the societal crisis triggered new religious movements and discourses. For centuries, the main current of religious thought in Northern Nigeria had been Sufism. The second half of the twentieth century, however, saw the rise of religious reform movements that challenged the customary dominance of the two major Sufi orders, *Qadiriyya* and *Tijaniyya*. Islamic ideologies of reform—most prominently epitomised by the *Izala* movement¹⁷—provided an anti-establishment ideology that could be embraced by those disaffected with the traditional social, economic, and moral order. The religious egalitarianism of *Izala* challenged both the more elitist vision of religion and society underpinning Sufism, in which only few persons are entitled to a special relationship with God, and the strict status hierarchies within Hausa society that vest supreme authority and wealth in the senior man of the household (Loimeier 1997: 297; Kane 2003: 305; Last 2004: 2).

Winters asserts that ‘traditional Islam’ in Northern Nigeria, including the *Almajiri* system, builds on the ideal of religion as a communal endeavour (expressed through mutual support in the form of alms) in which the individual is expected to “help his fellow man to find a place in the hereafter” (1987: 182-183). The individualistic mode of religiousness promoted by the reformists has been described as “more in tune with the rugged individualism of capitalist social relations” (Umar 1993: 178) and therefore appealing to newly modern-educated groups that want to take advantage of opportunities for social mobility offered by the new capitalist order (Loimeier 1997: 296). *Izala*’s commitment to public enlightenment, carried into effect through the establishment of a modern system of Islamic education (*Islamiyya* schools), not only put *Tijaniyya* and *Qadiriyya* increasingly under pressure to adopt similar policies (Loimeier 1997: 294) but also marginalised the *Almajiri* system further.

¹⁷ *Izala*, the ‘Society for the Removal of Innovation and Reestablishment of the Sunna’, though probably the most influential innovation in the Northern Nigerian religious landscape, was not the only one and has since its foundation experienced several splits. The ‘Yan Shia, a radical Islamist movement sympathising with the Shiite Islamist regime in Iran and the mujahidin struggle in Afghanistan, commands a considerable following (see Hunwick 1992: 152; Kane 2003: 95). Another movement with large repercussions was the Maitatsine sect (see literature review).

The impact of reformism can be felt not only in the ubiquity of *Islamiyya* schools in Northern Nigeria. In a context of increased anxieties about the religious integrity of the *jama'a* (Muslim community) and the Day of Judgement expected to arrive any moment, attempts to ensure the piety of the community¹⁸ and to 'purify' Islam by removing unlawful innovation (*bidi'a*) assume a new urgency (Casey 2008; Last 2008). The *Almajiri* system has attracted criticism in this environment as a Hausa cultural accretion to Islam considered to be problematic. Several of my interviewees objected to the *Almajirai's* practice of begging, which in their view Islam permits only in acute emergencies (see Bambale n.d.; Sunday Triumph, 16 November 2008).¹⁹

In 1985 Lubeck wrote that by the end of the 1970s, the new wealthy classes brought forth by the oil boom had already redefined migrant Qur'anic students as "an embarrassing, dangerous and immoral set of people" rather than a "social category that had reproduced the ideology of the Islamic state and provided an opportunity for Muslims to gain religious merit by giving alms" (380). In the early twenty-first century, reformist discourses have heightened struggles for legitimacy by insiders of the *Almajiri* system.

4.3 *Almajirci today: marginal but sustainable?*

Who nowadays opts for *Almajirci*, given that it promises neither access to political power nor to high social status, that its former economic viability has largely been undermined, and that even its religious merit has come under attack? Several structural factors combine to provide the background against which families formulate their educational strategies and decide to send their children on *Almajirci* in urban areas.

The socio-economic situation particularly in rural Northern Nigeria became increasingly precarious in the second half of the twentieth century. The decline of the rural economy, owing to oil boom and structural adjustment, combined with the onset of massive demographic growth, with population more than quadrupling since 1950. As a consequence, Nigerians are extremely young, with over 40% falling into the age group 0–14 years (UN 2008). Kano State has one of the highest population growth rates (3.5%) among the Nigerian states. This has contributed to perpetuating both poverty and educational disadvantage.

¹⁸ As evidenced by the fervour with which *shari'a* law has been implemented in Nigeria's northern states since 2000, not only by reformists but also other Muslims, including Sufists (see O'Brien 2007).

¹⁹ e.g. Mallam Murtala, 17 July 2009; Mallam Kiyawa, 27 August 2009

Approximately 60% of the population of Kano State live on less than US\$1.25 per day PPP (MoE 2008). The most reliable estimate assumes that 47% of all primary school-aged children are enrolled in primary school—compared with 65% nationwide (World Bank 2008)—while secondary school net enrolment is only 27%. Enrolment is significantly lower in rural than in urban LGAs. Its poor quality,²⁰ its costs (a heavy burden particularly on poor families), and its low returns in terms of employment account for the low demand for modern education (MoE 2008).

What is the situation at the ‘receiving end’? To account for the Maitatsine crisis, several authors argued in the 1980s that the moral and economic foundations of the *Almajirai*’s livelihoods in the cities became increasingly undermined. While this trend is likely to have continued, the impression I gained from my research is that as a consequence of the “prolonged institutionalization of children in schools” (Schildkrout 1978/2002: 346) in a context where most women practise *purdah*, new employment niches may have been opened up in urban Kano, at least for younger *Almajirai*.

Almost all *Almajirai* I met during my fieldwork who had not yet surpassed the age threshold that would exclude them from such employment worked as household help. I presume that *Almajirai* are employed not only by better-off households but also by poorer segments of society as, for want of alternatives, they often accept nonmonetary offerings—a place to sleep in the *zaure/soro* or a meal—as payment. This was apparent in my interviews with children begging on the street for money, who, albeit mostly also working as household help, begged for money as their employment earned them no cash income but only meals.

One of the boys in Mallam Gali’s school explained to me why the labour of the children in their employers’ households was not available:

- *In some houses, the children are not old enough to work, while sometimes the children have gone to school, and we, that’s the time we are free.*
- *Which school?*
- *Boko school, they also go to Islamiyya school.*²¹

While I did not investigate this systematically, from the *Almajirai*’s statements I gained the impression that most of the children in the employers’ households attended both modern and *Islamiyya* school. Although more research is needed to strengthen such a conclusion, it seems likely that the *Almajirai* attenuate the “far-reaching effects” that ‘universal’ primary

²⁰ Attributable to low levels of education spending, high pupil/classroom ratios, and low teacher qualification (MoE 2008).

²¹ Ibrahim, 23 August 2009

education might have—through the pressure it puts on *purdah*-practising households—on the “whole structure of the Hausa family” (Schildkroun 1978/2002: 349).

4.4 Representations of the *Almajiri* system: a rhetoric of crisis

While evidently a considerable part of the population either supports or at least tolerates the *Almajiri* system (e.g. by sending sons on *Almajirci*, by supporting *Almajirai* and their teachers through alms-giving, or by employing *Almajirai* as household help), I also came across a wealth of opinions on it that were overwhelmingly negative and presented the phenomenon as an expression of acute crisis. As I did not systematically elicit opinions on the *Almajiri* system and was moreover restricted in my access to representations of it by my inability to speak Hausa, the picture I will present in the following is necessarily partial, requiring further research to complement it.²²

As public opinions are, however, a crucial factor in the cultural production of ‘educated persons’ in the *Almajiri* system (see Chapter Seven), I still present this partial picture here, particularly as its relevance is to some extent confirmed by the painful awareness of the *Almajirai* of such negative discourses about them. Statements such as Nasiru’s quoted at the beginning of this thesis that “some people think it’s because you don’t have food in your house, that’s why you come out to beg”²³ or Habibu’s explanation that “people bring their children to Qur’anic school not because they hate them, but because they want them to have the knowledge”²⁴ convey that the students *are* indeed aware of such crisis rhetoric.

In the following, I present the patterns of reasoning about the *Almajirai* that I found to be salient in my review of national and international English-language news, internet sources (blogs and online forums), publications of local and international children’s rights organisations, and local academic production. In the empirical part of this thesis (Chapters Five to Seven) I investigate how much truth the discourses I present in this chapter actually

²² I presume that negative attitudes prevail more amongst urban, modern-educated, better-to-do Nigerians than amongst *Almajirci*-educated, rural poor and that supporters of Islamic reform movements and Christians are more likely to participate in negative discourses. This is, however, little more than an informed guess and requires more research. The *Almajirai* did not point to any single social group from whom they experienced more rejection than from others.

Attitudes towards youth probably differ from attitudes towards younger children, and begging children attract more negative attention than children working in houses (even though my interviews with children begging on the street suggest that the two categories cannot be separated neatly, as many children engage in both activities).

²³ 21 August 2009

²⁴ 9 September 2009

contain. Here, I only outline some of their recurrent themes, suggesting that they may be problematic as judgments of the system in general: statements about why children become *Almajirai* and what they learn by living as *Almajirai* are often based on normative assumptions rather than empirical investigations.

As the *Almajirai* do not live inside nuclear families, they are often considered to grow up outside appropriate adult care and control (see Sahara Reporters, 25 September 2009; COCFOCAN n.d.). Alternative upbringing arrangements are considered as being, *per se*, unable to provide sufficient support. The National Council for the Welfare of the Destitute, for instance, states that the “lack of parental participation in the moral up-bringing of the *Almajiri* pupils” predisposes them to become delinquents (NCWD 2001: 95). It seems unthinkable that a concern for their children’s moral formation may inform parents’ decisions to send them on *Almajirci*.

The fact that students often farm with their teacher and, if earning an income through other means, contribute financially to his livelihood has been equated with abuse. Ahmed Bello of the Nigerian National Agency for the Prohibition of Traffic in Persons is quoted as saying the *Almajirai*’s provision of free labour on their teachers’ farms amounts to “sheer exploitation” (Daily Trust, 21 November 2009; see Afrik, 25 December 2008).

The *Almajirai*’s income-generating activities have been portrayed as putting them in danger of becoming forever ‘damaged’ adults. Their work has been described as out of tune with the “exigencies of modern times”, given that “sociologists and psychologists have noted that when a child is exposed to labour at a tender age... such a child normally develops a habit of loneliness, leading to schizophrenia” (The Nation, 11 January 2010). Begging in particular has been criticised for being “harmful to both [the *Almajirai*’s] physical and mental health with attendant physical and psychological consequences” (Okoye & Yau: 45; see Bambale n.d.).

Their deprived living conditions are considered a reliable predictor of future failure. Okoye and Yau write that “these children toil daily in scrounging for a living... [T]he consequences may have far reaching negative physical and psychological impact on youth development” (1999: 3). “It is not wise for one to use poverty and deprivation in moral upbringing” (*ibid.* 45), they claim, and they warn that the experiences of the *Almajirai* present a “waste of human resources as the future of many of them is permanently ruined” (*ibid.* 3).

As the *Almajiri* system is equated with exploitation and severe harm to a child’s healthy development, all potential explanations for it that fall short of ‘extreme crisis’ are eliminated.

No parent in his right mind would send his child on *Almajirci* as long as he has an alternative option, nor would a child aspire to becoming an *Almajiri*. Attempts to explain the system consequently mostly resort to a crisis rhetoric that identifies acute poverty and parental neglect and ignorance as the main ‘culprits’ for the system, leaving no room for more subtle accounts or agency on the sending side.

Bala Muhammad, head of a Kano State directorate created to promote morals and good behaviour, for instance, chides “parents who have more children than they can afford and see Koranic schools as a means to rid themselves of the extra burden” (Daily Trust, 21 November 2009). Sule-Kano, academic at Usmanu Danfodiyo University Sokoto, writes that under conditions of poverty, “*Almajirci*... became a perfect excuse to some parents to reduce the burden of rearing children” (2008: 6).

Nigeria’s Minister of State for Education, Aishatu Jibrin Dukku, claims that the *Almajirai*’s parents are “so insensitive to the welfare of their children that they dispatch them to unknown places to take care of themselves” (allAfrica, 22 November 2009). In internet forums, it has been argued that “most of the parents of *Almajirai* just don’t want to take care of their children, that is why they send them to these schools” (Nigerian Village Square, 26 September 2009).

Another widespread claim is that the links between children, parents, and teachers are fragile and easily severed: CNN quotes an UNICEF researcher estimating that 60% of the *Almajirai* never return home (CNN World, 8 January 2010). It is claimed that parents barely know the teacher to whom they entrust their children (e.g. Weekly Trust, 5 December 2009). Teachers are depicted as being neither aware of who their students are nor willing to incur costs or trouble to take proper care of them (e.g. Sahara Reporters, 25 September 2009).

The circumstances of the *Almajirai*’s upbringing are often presented as sufficient conditions to make them inherently dangerous. Merely by living supposedly unchildlike lives, the *Almajirai* are thought to acquire problematic behaviours and attitudes. Dukku, for instance, declares that “[m]ost of these children, because of the harsh realities they found themselves in, end up becoming juvenile delinquents and, subsequently, adult criminals” (allAfrica, 22 November 2009). Saudatu Sani, a federal legislator from Kano State, claims about the *Almajirai* that “[t]he pathetic life they live... breeds heartless criminals” (Daily Trust, 21 November 2009).

It has been asserted that, “[h]ungry and angry”, the *Almajirai* can easily be mobilised to engage in looting and killings during ethno-religious clashes so as to pay back society (Daily Trust, 21 November 2009; see The Nation, 13 November 2009; Business Day, 13 January

2010). The “terrorist potential of having about one million hungry and gullible children roaming aimlessly in Nigeria’s northern cities, from whom any fanatic, religious or otherwise, could readily recruit disciples for antisocial purposes,” Awofeso et al. write, “is immense” (2003: 320).

To my knowledge, the claim that the *Almajirai* participate in violence, whether inter-religious or sectarian, has been investigated systematically only on one occasion, namely in the aftermath of the Maitatsine crisis. A federal government-constituted Tribunal of Inquiry established that children aged 10–14 years, unaccompanied by their parents, were amongst Maitatsine’s followers.²⁵ Despite the near-absence of systematic evidence, in accounts such as those presented above the circumstances of the *Almajirai*’s upbringing are translated into a predisposition towards, if not predestination for, violence and delinquency with astonishing ease. There is no room, it seems, for the *Almajirai* to exercise agency or to benefit from the positive aspects of their education. Kurfi, for instance, writes about the *Almajirai* that they “are innocently used in most of the crises in Nigerian societies, by interest groups” (Kurfi 2000: 4). Such perspectives suggest that the *Almajirai* are passive tools that, owing to the circumstances of their upbringing, can easily be manipulated. At its extreme, this means that the *Almajirai* are virtually written off as a “generation lost” (Daily Trust, 21 November 2009), with “no future whatsoever”, who will inevitably “end up being criminals and victims” (BBC, 23 December 2008).

4.5 Conclusion

This chapter aimed to locate the *Almajiri* practice in its geographical and historical context. From being a highly regarded and influential social category, the Qur’anic scholars have slid into political, social, and economic marginality. It is against the background of a declining rural economy, massive population growth, and poor-quality modern education that families opting for *Almajirci* today formulate their educational strategies and produce a specific educational ideal. The chapter emphasised two features of the urban context in which the *Almajirai* grow up, which, I contend, assume importance as factors in the cultural production of ‘educated persons’ in the *Almajiri* system: first, the *Almajirai*’s employment in households that embrace modern and *Islamiyya* education for their own offspring; and

²⁵ Federal Republic of Nigeria (1981): *Report of Tribunal of Inquiry on Kano Disturbances (Maitatsine)* (cited in Awofeso et al. 2003: 318).

second, the crisis rhetoric prevailing in some segments of Nigerian society. Such rhetoric, I asserted, reduces complex realities and processes to simple cause–effect chains: children become *Almajirai* because their parents do not care about them, whilst *Almajirai* become terrorists because they are hungry and grow up outside nuclear families. Such reasoning does not help us understand why families opt for *Almajirai* and what actually happens throughout the *Almajirai*'s education. The next chapters provide an alternative account.