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

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5. Challenging the crisis rhetoric

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5 Challenging the crisis rhetoric

5.1 Introduction

The following three empirical chapters propose that the—albeit limited—room for children and parents to exercise agency needs to be explored to bridge the gap between representations produced by outsiders and the meanings attached to their lived experiences by insiders of the *Almajiri* system. This chapter begins by challenging the main assumptions of the crisis rhetoric presented in the previous chapter and offering more nuanced explanations. While the practice mostly coincides with poverty, I assert that poverty influences decision-making less directly (than the crisis rhetoric suggests) by limiting educational choices. I then challenge the received wisdom that links between teachers and parents, parents and children, and children and teachers are fragile and easily severed. While in some instances this may be the case, there are mechanisms in place that ensure the continuance of such links and that secure particularly the teachers' accountability. Finally, I illustrate that young people can—and do—to some extent influence their schooling trajectories and thus are not the passive victims the crisis rhetoric portrays.

5.2 Poverty and seasonal migration

As I conducted my fieldwork during the rainy season, many of the students from peasant households had returned home to help their parents farm. The students I could work with therefore had a lower probability of coming from a peasant background, and indeed most of their fathers engaged in some kind of business²⁶ rather than being farmers. Some students' fathers also worked as Qur'anic teachers, some for the local government, and one was a primary-school teacher.

While the timing of my research obviously affected the nature of the data I could collect, it offered me insights into an often-overlooked dimension of the *Almajiri* phenomenon.

²⁶ e.g. as traders in clothes/phones/goats, provision-store operators, and bus drivers.

Almajirci is often equated to *ci-rani*, the dry-season migration of young men from rural to urban areas to find petty employment in an attempt to reduce the subsistence burden of the Sahelian peasant household during times of scarcity (Lubeck 1985; Winters 1987; Reichmuth 1989; Last 1993; Khalid 1997). While not necessarily invalidating these explanations, my research findings suggest that they do not tell the entire story. In fact, Mallam Gali explained the departure of his rural students as a response to his own constraints: as he had not enough space to shelter all during the rainy season, he sent part of them home and did not accept new enrolments until the rains had stopped.²⁷

My interactions with the students in the two schools my research focussed on thus brought to light that not only children from poor peasant households enrol as *Almajirai*. In my interviews with fathers, most of whom lived as subsistence farmers in Kunchi, I tried to explore the role poverty plays in families' decisions to send their children on *Almajirci*.

I found that it is not necessarily the poorest households in a community that send their children on *Almajirci* (though the very poor are probably amongst those sending their children). For instance, I spoke to two Qur'anic teachers (one of them amongst the wealthiest persons of the village, owning several horses and other animals) who themselves hosted several dozen *Almajirai*. They fed their students from what they farmed together, simultaneously sending their own sons to schools where they either begged or farmed for their livelihood.²⁸ The perception even of fathers who did not send their own sons on *Almajirci* was that a particularly strong commitment to religious knowledge rather than poverty—combined with the belief that this could best be acquired away from home—determined who opted for *Almajirci*.²⁹ One father, recognising that poverty did play a role in sustaining the system, explained the continued demand for *Almajiri* education in relation to population growth, albeit in a more indirect way than the crisis rhetoric suggests. He argued that if fathers have to provide for ever-larger households, they do not have the time to teach their sons and therefore prefer to send them to another teacher.³⁰ Rather than by directly coercing families to send away their children, poverty seems to operate by limiting the educational options available for families to choose from, making *Almajirci* a comparatively attractive alternative.

²⁷ Mallam Gali, 30 August 2009. Furthermore, none of the fathers I interviewed made his sons return during the rainy season to help farming. Children, I was told, only return if their parents are either not very committed to their studies or too poor to afford other helpers, and *Almajirai* migrating during the rainy season do so with their teachers on whose land they also farm.

²⁸ Mallam Hamza, Mallam Haruna, 16 September 2009

²⁹ Mallam Ibrahim, 9 September 2009; Mallam Sani-Umar, 16 September 2009

³⁰ Bystander in interview with Mallam Sani-Umar, 16 September 2009

5.3 Opting for *Almajirci* in a context of limited choice

Several of the fathers I spoke to in Kunchi sent their sons on *Almajirci* because of the poor quality of the modern education available to them, because children could not combine modern/secular and religious studies, and because modern education at a post-primary level was costly and not available locally.³¹ One father explained that even modern education would not enable his son to escape his economic condition, an argument reminiscent of Dore's (1976) warning against the 'diploma disease'.³²

Though this is likely to be changing, some parents still opt for *Almajirci* because they disapprove of the ideological content and colonial origins of modern education.³³ Habibu (15 years old), for instance, told me that his father, having himself attended only Qur'anic education, would not allow him to go to a modern school (let alone be interviewed by me) as he strongly disliked anything Western.³⁴ All the teachers I interacted with were opposed to the idea of me teaching their students English as they feared their parents' disapproval.

While my research showed that many families send all of their male children over a certain age on *Almajirci*, often the decision-making processes are more complex. In most cases, I found the conventional wisdom confirmed that children have little if any say in decisions over which school they are sent to (see Last 2004: 3). However, in some instances even young children seemed to exercise choice in decisions concerning themselves. Several young people asked their parents to take them to Qur'anic school, because they disliked modern education, felt a Qur'anic education would prepare them best for what they want to do in life (i.e. become a Qur'anic teacher or preacher), or feared they might miss the

³¹ Mallam Ali, 9 September 2009; Mallam Haruna 16 September 2009; Mallam Isa, Mallam Mahammadi-Difari, Mallam Isa, 17 September 2009. Despite its predominantly poor quality, modern education is increasingly perceived as a viable alternative. Several of the fathers I spoke to had sent even those sons who later became *Almajirai* to primary school for a brief period or had at least enrolled the children (including girls) still at home. Many of the students I worked with had attended modern school for some time. Some of the older students—like some of the fathers—told me that whereas older siblings had become *Almajirai*, younger siblings went exclusively to modern and *Islamiyya* school. They attributed the growing interest in modern education to its increased availability and (comparatively at least) improved quality and a general change of perspective by not only parents but also children.

³² Mallam Mahammadi-Difari, 17 September 2009. Dore suggests that in the 'developing world', where employment opportunities—and modern-sector jobs in particular—are scarce, the value of school certificates increases in inflationary fashion, resulting in a 'diploma disease' where education is pursued for the sake of certification rather than knowledge.

³³ My interviewees in government and academia emphasised this repeatedly, e.g. Mallam Murtala, 17 July 2009; Dr Galadanchi, 7 September 2009; see also Iguda n.d.: 13; CDRT 2005: 54.

³⁴ 23 August 2009; 9 September 2009

opportunity to learn the Qur'an well if they did not start young.³⁵ Whereas with respect to initial enrolment, it was quite likely that parents ignored their children's preferences (e.g. to continue modern education—see Chapter Seven), the students' scope to exercise agency increased substantially as they grew older (e.g. by initiating school changes—see below).

5.4 Links between children and parents

As I have argued already, several students in the two schools I focussed on had returned home during the dry season. Most of the remaining students went home at least once per year for either of the two big Muslim celebrations (*Eid al-Fitr/Kabir*). Some children's parents came to visit them regularly³⁶ as they had business to do in Kano and passed the school on their way. While most of the fathers I spoke to reported much longer intervals between their children's visits (they had spent up to three years without seeing them), they claimed to know where their sons were and how to get in touch with them if need be. One father claimed that as we are in the "chat age", he would just call his sons.³⁷ Intermediaries commuting between home villages and the places where the students are schooling also serve to exchange information and sometimes goods. I only recall one occasion when a boy in a school I visited said he had not seen his parents at all during the six years he had been enrolled as *Almajiri*.³⁸ From the regularity if not frequency of contact, I thus gained the impression that the link between parents and children was in the large majority of cases not permanently ruptured upon school enrolment.

5.5 School choices, school changes, and accountability mechanisms

My fieldwork suggests further that, through their school choices, parents aim to ensure that their children are in good hands. My informants reported consistently that most children are initially enrolled with teachers who are either a relative or a fairly close acquaintance of their fathers (e.g. someone who has lived in the same village or attended the same school

³⁵ Dahiru, 21 August 2009; Bashir, 23 August 2009; Yakubu, 26 August 2009; Bashir, 3 September 2009

³⁶ e.g. every fortnight. Ibrahim, 19 August 2009; Auwal, 19 August 2009; Mallam Gali, 2 September 2009

³⁷ Mallam Ali, 9 September 2009

³⁸ Mallam Usman, 6 August 2009

when young). Sons are frequently sent to the school their father attended himself (see Okoye and Yau 1999: 37).

Whereas I did not encounter this in my research, I was told several times that some parents also send their sons along with other children without necessarily knowing the teacher themselves, choosing a school based on its teacher's reputation rather than on personal acquaintance. The teachers' reputation also played a large role for many of the enrolments in the two schools I focussed on during my research. In both schools there were 'clusters' of students coming from the same area. When a boy visits home, the other people in the village see whether he has studied well and accordingly send their children to the same school or not.³⁹ Graduates spread the word about a particular school or teacher.⁴⁰ Some of the older students had enrolled *themselves* in a school based on its reputation, without being introduced by their parents.

It is typical for the *Almajiri* system that students enrol with several different teachers throughout their educational trajectories (for the reasons for this, see below). The teachers, who had successfully completed their Qur'anic education, for instance, had attended up to 14 different schools.⁴¹ Almost all of the older students who had lived as *Almajirai* since they were young children had changed schools at least once. At first sight, the frequency of school changes may be taken to imply that the teachers' accountability is weakened in the process as links between parents and teachers and also children and parents become increasingly stretched, with children moving on from school to school. I argue that, on the contrary, the practice of frequent school changes allows students to 'vote with their feet' and thus hold teachers accountable, teachers who depend—directly or indirectly—on their students for their livelihood.

Reichmuth argues that while, for his economic success, a *Mallam's* ability to provide spiritual guidance and help for adult clients is most important, it is through his teaching activities that he "gains respect and reverence" (1989: 51; see Paden 1973: 58). In addition to being 'living proof' of a teacher's aptitude and thus a means to attract donations, students make, albeit small and (according to the students) largely voluntary, financial contributions to their teachers' livelihoods. Most of the teachers I met during my research relied mainly on other income activities, including payment for their spiritual services. Yet, it is very likely that migratory teachers, and teachers settled in poorer neighbourhoods in particular, depend

³⁹ Mallam Gali, 17 August 2009

⁴⁰ Mallam Ni'imatullah-Rabiu, 5 August 2009

⁴¹ Mallam Hamiz, 12 September 2009

heavily on their students' contributions—and on the customary gifts (especially grain) made by parents upon enrolment and graduation—for their survival and thus have an interest in attracting and retaining students.

School changes are mainly determined by a student's progress in his Qur'anic studies. Parents check their sons' advancement on the occasions of their home visits and accordingly make school changes. Students themselves may also initiate a change if they feel they are not making productive use of their time. Bashir (18 years old), for instance, changed schools because he felt he did not progress satisfactorily in his studies, owing to the older, more advanced students' lack of engagement in the teaching activities.⁴² Abubakar (16) asked his parents to enrol him in a school in Maiduguri because he sensed he was not studying well at home (Potiskum in Yobe State) but 'playing around' too much. After two years in Maiduguri he decided to come to Kano to acquaint himself with the system of teaching there.⁴³

In addition to a concern with increases in Qur'anic learning, more practical considerations such as reducing the students' hardship may lead to school changes. One father told me that he made his son return from a rural school in Katsina as he was affected by food shortages there and fell ill. After his recovery, he enrolled him in a nearby school.⁴⁴ Shehu (ca. 15), enrolled in Mallam Hamza's school for two years at the time of our interview, quit schooling in Bichi owing to a lack of washing/bathing facilities there.⁴⁵ Yakubu (19) changed to Mallam Hamza's school as this was where his relatives studied, whereas he was 'alone' in the previous school.⁴⁶ Bashir (ca. 16), previously enrolled in a school in Katsina, told his father he wanted to enrol in a school closer to his home village Dambatta and thus changed to Mallam Gali's school.⁴⁷ As they were currently enrolled in the Qur'anic schooling system, older students seemed to have an information advantage over their parents that enabled them to effect school changes according to their wishes. If they approached their parents with a school suggestion based on their peers' recommendations, their parents tended to consent.⁴⁸

There are obvious limits to a teacher's accountability where there are large numbers of students or long periods elapsing between direct contact of children and parents. Yet, when evaluating the claim of the crisis rhetoric that teachers have little concern for their students,

⁴² Bashir, 23 August 2009

⁴³ Abubakar, 12 September 2009

⁴⁴ Mallam Haruna, 16 September 2009

⁴⁵ Shehu, 12 September 2009

⁴⁶ Yakubu, 26 August 2009

⁴⁷ Bashir, 3 September 2009

⁴⁸ Jamilu, 8 September 2009; Mallam Hamiz, 12 September 2009; Mallam Isa, 17 September 2009

one should bear in mind that the former enter a strong commitment to take good care of the latter as the duty to teach is first and foremost a religious one. The relationship between *Almajirai* and their *Mallam* cannot be conceptualised simply as the provision of educational services and the consumption thereof. A teacher who has been *entrusted* (*amana*) a child incurs responsibility not only towards the child's parents but also towards God, as, ultimately, it is to God that he renders his service (see CDRT 2005: 84). One student put it the following way:

*If you give other people's children knowledge, you will get blessing in the sight of God. And when you get to Heaven, God will cross you over [the narrow bridge over Hell].*⁴⁹

The *Mallam*'s commitment reaches beyond the confines of the classroom, as he is responsible not only for the young people's educational success but also their moral and religious upbringing. According to Habibu:

*It's the teacher who will take care of him [the student]. If the child becomes a bad person, it's because of the teacher. And if a child doesn't find food, it's the teacher who will be worried. They will blame the teacher, and no matter how many students are in school, the teacher has to sit down and teach them even if he's the only one. That is why they can't pay a teacher; it's only Allah who can pay a teacher.*⁵⁰

Mallam Gali told me that he could be held accountable for his students' behaviour. As students were *entrusted* to a teacher, it was considered the teacher's fault if an *Almajiri* did anything wrong.⁵¹ The question that imposes itself is how a teacher can realistically be expected to take care of the all-embracing education of often several dozen students? If one recognises Qur'anic teaching as ultimately a form of worship (which God will reward), it is easy to see why older and more advanced students are expected to take an active part in the instruction of the younger ones (not only with respect to Qur'anic recitation but also more generally) and often embrace this role willingly. Mallam Gali told me that whenever he was not around he would put older students in charge of the younger ones to maintain order.⁵² While younger students complain about the physical punishment they often have to endure from the older students in addition to that from the teacher,⁵³ this diffusion of control

⁴⁹ Nura, 'radio interview', 3 September 2009

⁵⁰ 'Radio interview', 9 September 2009

⁵¹ 23 September 2009

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ Shu'aibu, 'radio interview', 17-18 September 2009

certainly makes it more difficult for students to slip out of the ‘moral community’ of the Qur’anic school.

5.6 Conclusion

This chapter has offered an alternative reading of the *Almajiri* system to the one offered by the crisis rhetoric. While I found poverty to play a role for families’ decisions to send their children on *Almajirci*, it did so indirectly by reducing educational choices rather than directly through food-shortages. I observed that links between children and parents are not severed upon enrolment in the vast majority of cases and that parents act with circumspection when choosing schools for their sons. Whereas my insights are based on a relatively small sample, I surmise that they are valid more generally, particularly as far as the mechanisms holding teachers accountable are concerned. As school changes are a readily available option within the system and as teachers depend on their students for their livelihood, the latter may effectively ‘vote with their feet’. Teachers, furthermore, incur responsibility not only towards parents but also towards God. By challenging the main assumptions of the crisis rhetoric, this chapter has cleared the way to exploring the educational ideal *actually* sustaining the *Almajiri* practice, which is the subject of the next chapter.