

Evolution and the fall of the Almajiri Educational System in Northern Nigeria: A Critical Review

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ABSTRACT

Historical accounts of the Almajiri system show that it occupied a pre-eminent place in the development of the socio-economic pillars of modern Nigeria. In its blissful era, most of the graduates of the Almajiri system obtained good paying jobs; farming, fishing, construction, masonry, production, trade, tailoring, small businesses etc. They did not solely rely on the support of the society rendered. Many of them were the farmers of the northern Nigerian cotton and peanut farmlands. They formed the majority of the traders in the profit-making city of Kano state. They were the leather masters and leather accessory makers in the old Sokoto Empire. However, the coming of the British was the worse turning point for the Almajiri system. Emirs were killed and the system was destroyed completely to where it is today. This is the reason for its pitiable state in comparison to what it was and the esteem it once held. This paper reviews the evolution of the Almajiri system of education in northern Nigeria. It documents its fall and the current state of the ones popular educational system.

INTRODUCTION

The Almajiri system dates back to the 11th century as a result of Qur'anic literacy, originally called the Tsangaya was established under the Kanem-Borno Empire, one of the oldest ruling empires in the world extending from the frontiers of northern Nigeria across the Chadian region up to the borders of Libya. Over the course of seven hundred years the Sokoto Caliphate was founded on Islamic revolution through the inspirations and teaching of the Quran. Borno and Sokoto state both in the Northern Province of Nigeria would later come together and form what we now know as "The Almajiri System" (Idris, 2003). The system was funded by the state treasury and the state zakka funds, and was under the control of the Emirs of the traditional government system that existed before the coming of the British. Since Islam encourages charity to a welfarer and to a student of learning, the community as well readily supported these Almajiri most of whom came from faraway places to enroll in the Tsangaya schools. In return, the Almajiri's offered services such as laundry, cobbling, gardening, weaving, sewing etc. as charity to the community that contributed to their well being;

hence they gave the society what the society gave to them (Idris, 2003). It was a blissful era, most of the Almajiri students after their classes had paying jobs; farming, fishing, well construction, masonry, production, trade, tailoring, small businesses etc. They didn't solely rely on the support the society rendered. Many of them were the farmers of the northern Nigerian cotton and peanut farmlands. They formed the majority of the traders in the profit-making city of Kano state. They were the leather masters and leather accessory makers in the old Sokoto Empire. The scarf weavers and designers in Zaria city were said to be Almajiri's (Naijainfoman, 2012). Therefore, they produced the largest percentage of the society staff and made meaningful contribution to the economy of the culture before the introduction of white collar jobs. The system was said to have produced Judges, teachers and so many other highly outstanding position holders than any other organization at its time was generating. They provided staff for organizations on all frontiers and they were number one in whole of Northern Nigeria with an intricate system of management, until colonization. The coming of the British was the

worse turning point for the Almajiri system. Emirs were killed and the system was destroyed completely to where it is today; a pitiable state in comparison to what it was and the esteem it once held. In the course of this research the effects of the system on the Almajiri children, their education, health and all round challenges will be brought to light.

Thus in essence the Almajiri system was designed to give education to individuals willing to learn the Quran and also basic Islamic knowledge from the Malam (head of the school) in charge of the institution they find themselves. However, it has been depreciated, devalued and reduced to a begging institution where the students beg for alms after their study sessions and aren't being properly catered for including basic necessities (Prof. Idris A., 2003). The first few steps to being accepted into these institutions is not what it once was in all honesty which makes one wonder why they are allowed to still function in the society. A child is brought in and asked if he can or cannot cope with the living conditions and already he doesn't have a choice because the family that brought him there is not willing to take him back (Najib Kazaure, 2017). Most low earn family "poor families" who can barely put food on the table for their children, use institutions like these to ease the burden on the number of mouths to feed not necessarily the knowledge the child may or may not gain from being enrolled.

The Almajiri houses are inhabitable, lacking basic human hygiene to say the least. The bed wetter's sleep on the bare concrete floors while those that can hold it in sleep on hay mats on top of bricks or laid on the floor. The smell of urine is embedded to these walls and the visitation of rats is familiar. This is the living standard of the Almajiri (Najib Kazaure, 2017). In as much as these institutions still exist, the former system and the present system are in no ways comparable. It has been totally disgraced, butchered and bastardized in comparison to its former glory. Not only are living standards poor but they have also been reduced to beggars on the streets, this is no place for a child to grow up and religious gains should not be used as an excuse to promote such unhealthy, unnecessary suffering. This review explores the evolution of the Almajiri system of education in northern Nigeria. It documents its fall and the current state of the ones popular educational system

EVOLUTION OF THE ALMAJIRI SYSTEM

The word Almajiri is originated from the Arabic word "Almuhajirun", meaning an immigrant. In this context it describes an individual that leaves his home or country in pursuit of spiritual

knowledge, it is bent on the Islamic concept of migration (Najjainfoman, 2012). This dates back to the days of Prophet Mohammed whose followers which travelled with him were known as Al-Muhajirun which means emigrants and the journeyed with the prophet from Mecca to Medina. It was from here the tradition of the Almajiri was birthed (Kabiru, 2012). It was founded on the grounds of Islamic education and to also instill the values and principles into the hearts of its people as done in other Muslim countries like Pakistan, Egypt, Saudi Arabia etc. The Almajiri system was funded by the state funds and the state zakat funds, it was under the control of the Emirs and traditional rulers of the time like the Sultan of Sokoto because Islam encourages charity to students in learning (Najjainfoman, 2012).

Islam was brought to Northern Nigeria in the early fourteenth century by merchants and researchers as recorded by Fafunwa, who also stated that 'the best man among you is the one who studies the Quran and teaches it (Fafunwa, 1974). Therefore, the state contributed to the welfare of the Almajiri and in return the Almajiri rendered services to the community as tailors, cobblers, etc. Although the Almajiri system was funded by the state it was not totally dependent on the welfare of the state. Most of the students worked as farmers, fisher men, construction men, traders, business men, etc. The Almajiri were seen amongst the best traders in Kano, the best leader merchants, farmers and producers, Judges and clerks. They were the majority of the work force in the North and brought about substantial profit to the community at large, before white collar jobs came into play after colonialism by the British.

The precolonial era in Nigeria (before the invasion of the British) was the peak of the Almajiri system as a whole. The schools were funded by the state Zakkah, the community also contributed to the system, the Emirs were involved and the parents were in charge of their children for moral upbringing (Idris, 2003). It was a time of peace, organization and Qur'anic literacy in Northern Nigeria, the Borno rulers and Sokoto caliphate came together to grow Qur'anic literacy at that time as the states were ruled by traditional rulers. The Usman Dan-Fodio regime brought changes to the system whereby the matters of the schools were reported directly the Emir of the state, this was the height of Qur'anic literacy (Idris, 2003). In those days there were no governors like we have today or one general president for the entire country, instead there were local rulers of

individual lands and provinces. In the North it was the Emir who was in charge of the affairs of state. As the community helped with funds the Teachers and students paid back with; Islamic education, reading and writing the Quran, farming and other odd jobs in the society (Naijainfoman, 2012). The then Northern Nigeria had a complete way of life, the mode of dressing was different from the rest of Nigeria. Using veils to decorate and cover themselves with long flowing dresses underneath and scarfs for their heads for the women while the men wore long garments called a Kaftan and hats on their heads, this is still the way of dressing in Northern Nigeria even today (Idris, 2003). The governance, customs, traditional craft and trade were all based on the teachings of the Quran and were strictly followed by the citizens of the north also known as Arewa.

The Almajiri schools provided the British in the colonial era with its first group of workers and this continued for years. There were about six thousand Almajiri schools and each of them gave free Qur'anic education to the community in addition Ajami; the teaching of reading and writing in Arabic. The system was so outstanding and organized no other could stand to its height in that era (Naijainfoman, 2012). The Northern territory was well organized in every sphere of life, from dress codes to living standards and culture there wasn't a hair out of place for Northern Nigerian as it had not adapted to western culture at this time (Fafunwa, 1974). The system is also the only one to have achieved the ability of mastering the Quran such that it is written from scratch from the memory of the student without need of reference. Each portion, verse, chapter, vowel and consonant are memorized by the students to perfection in the course of the study (Naijainfoman, 2012). Although most famous authors of the Quran especially abroad in the far Middle East like famous calligrapher Usman Taha simply copy an already written copy of the Quran, whereas an Almajiri student writes from memory. This is how most of the copies of the Quran sold in the market places in Northern Nigerian Kano state are written by the Almajiri students (Naijainfoman, 2012).

THE FALL OF THE ALMAJIRI SYSTEM

Formally ruled by Kings in the different corners of Nigeria; the Igwe in the East, Oba in the south, Emir in the north and Obalumo in the west, Nigeria flourished in its different zones each with their way of life that suited the culture in that province. Nigeria was invaded by the British in 1851 and formally seized in 1861. The invasion

lasted till the year 1960 when Nigeria finally gained back her independence but in this time frame a lot of damage was done to the culture, way of life and governance of the former Nigeria. At the invasion of the British a lot of Kings and traditional leaders were killed and the ones that were left alive were used by the British as traditional rulers to communicate to the indigenes of their communities because of the language barrier and the people's loyalty to their rulers (Prof. Idris A., 2003). The British intentionally eliminated state funding to all systems they didn't support like traditional beliefs and introduced western education in place (AbdulQadir, 2003). This was the beginning of the end of the Almajiri system. State funding ceased, The Emirs were killed, the entire system crashed and with no funding in site the students and teachers resulted to begging for survival. In the initial stage due to the event that occurred there was an excuse to why they resulted to begging but letting the tradition continue for this long is unacceptable especially when you look at the fact that their religion also preaches against such actions generally no matter the cause. This goes against all preaching's of Islam as it is said that for one to beg is to reduce the self-esteem or dignity of oneself (Kabiru, 2012).

This should have been the end of the Almajiri system, seeing that it had been destroyed beyond repair or almost beyond repair if one were to be optimistic. With no funding or means of upkeep there should have been serious consideration in continuing this practice or at least there should have been a pause to reconstruct the system best suited for the Malam's and the students. Instead out of poverty many families still send their children to these institutes in the name of Qur'anic knowledge and relieving some stress from themselves in the sense of reduced mouths to feed in the home, to face the horrors of this harsh reality hanging on some faith that after this life something better awaits them in death (Kabiru, 2012).

THE CURRENT STATE OF THE ALMAJIRI SYSTEM

In Islam it is said that one has to acquire knowledge to understand their religion and one's purpose for existence "The search for knowledge is obligatory to every Muslim", "wisdom is the last lost property of a believer, where he sees it he picks it up" (Prophet Mohammed). This goes to show that Islam encourages education and knowledge seekers. The efforts to spread Islamic

education around the world gave birth to the Kuttab in Arab, North Africa and Asia. The Pandok in Malaysia, the Pesantren in Indonesia, the Tsangaya or Almajiri in Nigeria and many others in different parts of the world (Abdulazeez B.S., Musa A.O, 2015).

The NCWD (National Council for the Welfare of Destitute) states the current number of the Almajiri as at 2003 was about 7million, these are supposed to be the future of Nigeria; potential pilots, surgeons, business men, inventors, engineers, and the list goes on and on (Prof. Idris A., 2003). The numbers have double since that year till date. The system has outlived its usefulness and is destroying the lives of these children in the name of Qur'anic education without actually providing it. The schools are presently lead by semi-literate Malam's who use these systems as a means of livelihood. The pupils go out begging more than they study the Quran, in the end the alms they get is shared between themselves and the Malam (Sulaiman,1996).

Currently with the way the system is being run a lot of children don't live very long. Majority die on the streets in vehement offenses, some when caught stealing to survive and others through malnutrition and health crisis in the claim of Qur'anic education (Prof. Idris A., 2003). The ones that do make it and graduate from these Islamic schools become teachers, traders etc. which are in extremely rare cases, while those that don't pass from the schools become touts on the streets and market places remaining unqualified and a nuisance to society (Prof. Idris A., 2003). In as much as this has become the norm in the northern part of Nigeria, it is against the teachings of Islam which states that one must work to get a means of livelihood. This shows the scar left on the northern province of Nigeria.

From a survey conducted using questionnaires to gather information from the Almajiri's in Sabon Geri market one of the most populated places in Kaduna state northern Nigeria, it was discovered that most of them complained about the following; Hunger, Weakness, Lack of appropriate living conditions.

Hunger: The majority of the Almajiri confessed to having go beg for food and money shortly after the morning classes held with their Malam's at the Islamic schools. They go in groups mostly either resting at traffic lights to beg cars on the red light or hopping from house to house in the near by neighborhoods or miles away depending on the strength to go the distance and back to the school. Additional complains were made when they

confessed to having to give the Malam some of the food or money they were able to raise for themselves as this is some form of homage paid to the Malam for his services seeing that there is no salary he gets from the state or the children's parents (Sulaiman, 1996).

Weakness: Due to malnutrition and improper meal plans the children complained of always being so tired and unwell. Early mornings and late nights with little or nothing on most days to eat can live any adult feeling weak, talk less a child of barely ten years old. It was also taken into notice that they run errands for the Malam's, cutting fire wood, fetching water from the streams, washing clothes and tending to the environment of his house after which they go in search of food for the day (Sulaiman, 1996).

Lack of appropriate living conditions: Any child growing up should have the simple necessities of life; love, food, water, a bed, clothes and so on. These help in shaping a child while growing up into an adult. The living conditions of the Almajiri is extremely bad, the rooms made available to them to sleep in is one of really poor standards as a room fit for forty to sixty students accommodates about a hundred and more, a hundred and more sleeping on the floor or at most a mat. Water is scarcely available on the premises therefore bathing in streams is the only option of which a student confessed to them having to bath in stagnant streams at times which leads to so many diseases one cannot even imagine. Defecating in the bushes is another trend due to the resources made available, which causes harm to the environment for the residents in those arears (Kabir, 2002). Air borne diseases and a lot of other issues can come out of this type of living standard not just for the Almajiri but also for the entire eco system in the surrounding areas.

The United Nation Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) puts it so clearly and states that a child is human being or human person who has not reached the age of eighteen which is considered to be the age a person reaches adulthood. The rights to state a few relating to this paper are as follows;

- The right to have an education,
- The right to live with both parents,
- The right to proper health care,
- The right to be safeguarded form child labor,
- The right to be safeguarded from inhumane acts, torture, stress and degrading circumstances (Geneva, 1991).

In as much as Nigeria is one of the countries than signed and agreed to this law when it was commissioned in 1989, the reality in the country is

far from the laws stated in the Convention as clearly seen with the Almajiri system. The system is not free from child labor along with degrading and inhumane circumstances, they after all work for the Malam's and have to beg for food to have a meal all day everyday. The right to education is another broken rule, the children barely have time to learn the Quran and the western education is completely ignored by this Almajiri system and therefore no source of current events or new skills are being taught to make them relevant in society. They have no source of love and care because they live far away from families and don't get proper care at the facilities. Health care is a big problem with no adequate facilities in the schools and no money to go to the hospitals. The children suffer multiple defects; from kwashiorkor caused by malnutrition to ring worms and other skin diseases, sight defects and scabs on their bodies.

The UNCRC (United Nation Convention on the Rights of the Child) is the foundation of all UNICEF's (United Nations Children's Fund) work, it's the most comprehensive declaration of children's right ever written for children everywhere in every part of the world (UNICEF, 1989. Convention on the Rights of the child). What makes the UNCRC so special is that it comprises of over fifty-four articles that provides insurance for children in the various aspects of life, the social, economical and cultural regardless of race, religion and ethnicity (UNICEF, 1989. Convention on the Rights of the child). The foundation was birthed on November 20th 1989 and can be traced back to the Declaration of Geneva the first international law stating the importance of children and recognizing their entitlement to protection and all round well-being. This was the first step to protecting children world wide and it was said to have been inspired by Eglantyne Jebb, a young lady who put the lives of children first and sort to help them by creating a foundation called "Save the Children International Union" after World War 1 (UNICEF, 1989. Convention on the Rights of the child).

The United Nations officially recognized the rights of the child in 1959 when it adopted the Declaration of the Rights of the Child. Yearly meetings were conducted from 1979 to 1987 by the United Nations and other non-governmental institutes with the goal to birth the 1989 foundation UNCRC, which turned out to be a huge success (UNICEF, 1989. Convention on the Rights of the child). The negligence of some of the Nigerian government officials isn't helping the situation either, their thoughts aren't for the good of the people but instead for the good of their position in government. Think of it, the more the younger generation get

educated the higher the chances of liberation for the country and that is on fear the government has not only in Nigeria but most African countries, so instead of assisting the situation for the future of these children, they avoid what is considered a threat to them and lives and destroyed in the process (Abdullahi, 2012).

Even if this weren't the case its hard for one to think otherwise seeing that Nigeria is supposedly one of the countries to sign the law for the rights of children into act, yet this goes on behind the countries walls is just unacceptable and downright in human. What is the government doing about it, better still why hasn't the government shut it down? In recent news a law was passed to drive away beggars and hawkers found on the streets but this hardly solves the problem, where are they driven away to? It is time to be honest and drop the belief the system is clinging on to which is Islamic knowledge and get real with the facts, it is a failed system and needs to be shut down for the future of the children it holds captive.

CONCLUSIONS

The objective of this paper was to provide a detailed insight into the Almajiri system from the birth of the system to its fall and what now remains of it today in society. The paper points out the fact that the Almajiri system has evolved through many different phases from when it was blossoming to when it crumbled. The current dishonor and poor self worth of this traditional Islamic concept of education is seen it is debris of poverty and social deviation of many of its outturns in northern Nigeria and beyond. This is the truth of countless children suffering in the name of Islamic knowledge, a real insight into the Almajiri system.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors wishes to declare that there is no conflict of interest among them

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