

PROVISION OF FORMAL EDUCATION TO ALMAJIRIS: THE ROLE OF LIBRARIES

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Abstract

Provision of formal education to Almajiris has become a subject of national discourse in Nigeria today. This paper examines the concept and plight of the almajiris. It identifies parental influence, infrastructural decay of Qu’ranic schools, religious fanaticism and poverty as causes of lack of formal education of almajiris. The study advocates that public and school libraries must begin to play relevant roles and contribute to the provision of formal education to almajiris. It outlines the roles public and school libraries must play in order to enhance almajiri education. In order to effectively play their roles, the study suggests that libraries should source for funds from external agencies rather than depend only on their parent institutions/organizations.

Keywords: Almajiri, Education, School libraries, Public libraries, Nigeria

Introduction

Traditional Islamic education has a long history of existence in Nigeria. It started in the northern parts of the country, long before the advent of western education. It operated through the Qu’ranic schools, whose main objective was to familiarize pupils with the tenets of the Qu’ran and probably become Islamic scholars. The Qu’ran has been the core-curriculum of this system of education since its inception because it plays a central role in the life of a muslim spiritually, politically, socially, economically and otherwise.

Yahaya (2004) suggests that the problem of the Qu'ranic School started with the colonial invasion of the northern parts of Nigeria, which led to the relegation of Islamic education to the background. According to him, this led to the gradual eroding of the Islamic educational system. Curriculum contents, teaching methods, teachers' qualification, infrastructure and administration have been compromised, therefore the Qu'ranic School has remained archaic (Yahaya, 2004). Consequently, the Amajiri (Qu'ranic School pupil) is more of a social problem than a useful member of society. Almajiris are vulnerable to being used as political thugs by benefactors who take advantage of their lack of formal education. They are considered as great security risks as many of them have become miscreants who actively participate in ethnic, religious and political violence and terrorism (Christian, 2010)

However, in recent times, the Federal Government of Nigeria is making attempts to integrate western education with Islamic education so as to transform the almajiris to functional members of society. In order to improve enrolment of almajiris in schools, the government has built ultramodern schools as well as declared free education across states where almajiris exist. However, just a little measure of success has been achieved. It is therefore high time libraries got involved in provision of formal education to almajiris. This paper examines the various roles public and school libraries could play in increasing enrolment of almajiris in schools as well as attaining their educational objectives.

Historical Background

Almajiri is a Hausa word meaning im-migrant children in search of Qu'ranic education. The Qu'ranic School is the pre-primary and the primary level of traditional Islamic education. It is an institution which has its origin traced to the prophetic period of Islamic education

Historians have traced the *almajiri* system of education to the beginning of the 11th Century, largely promoted by leading lights of Islam who were determined to spread Islamic knowledge and learning, long before the amalgamation of the Northern and Southern Protectorates of British Nigeria.

The word 'Almajiri' emanated from Arabic word 'AL-MUHAJIRIN' which came as a result of Prophet Mohammed's migration from Mecca to Medina. From the Islamic perspective, the word was first used by the prophet Muhammad to indicate those of his companions

(muhajirun) who migrated with him for the sake of Islam from Mecca to Medina. However, the name Muhajirun later came to refer to those knowledge seekers who move from one place to another in search of knowledge like the Quranic school teacher and his pupils. In a Hadith (sayings) of the prophet in the collection Al-Tirmidhi (1980), the Prophet is quoted to have said “the search for knowledge is obligatory upon every Muslim”. The Hadith did not discriminate against age or status. In another Hadith collection by Wali’al-din (1977) (Mishkat al-masabih) the prophet said: “go in search of knowledge even to china”. The above Hadith shows that the search for knowledge knows no geographical, social or religious boundary. He said in another Hadith “wisdom (knowledge) is the lost property of the believer wherever he sees it, he picks it up.” These and many other similar Hadith propelled Muslims to go in search of knowledge.

In Hausa land Almajiri refers to “children sent from their homes and entrusted into the care of Islamic teachers to learn the Islamic studies. In Nigeria, the Almajiri system started in the 11th century, as a result of the involvement of Borno rulers in Qur’anic literacy. Seven hundred years later, the Sokoto Caliphate was founded principally through an Islamic revolution based on the teachings of the Holy Qur’an. These two empires run similar Qur’anic learning system which over time came to be known as the almajiri system.

The Plight of the Almajiri

Almajiri are found mostly in the Northern part of Nigeria. They are usually between the ages of seven to fifteen. Originally, the idea was for these children to be sent out from their homes to learn Qu’ranic education in traditional way under the care of a “Mallam”. However, this system changed and the children are now left to wade about the streets, and beg for alms in order to sustain themselves and their mallams (Obioha, 2009; Thinkquest, 2010). They neither receive the Islamic education nor the western education. Almajiri practice leads to child abuse in the sense that the children are exposed to laborious work at tender age (between 6 to 17years), lack the necessities of life and plunged into poverty and its attendant evils and may not be trained in any skill. They are a common sight in the Northern states including Kano, Katsina, Kebbi, Niger, Gombe, Kaduna, Jos and Sokoto. According to the statistics released by the Ministry of Education in 2009, Kano State alone harbors 1.6 million Almajiris in some 26,000 madrassas. Sokoto, Kaduna, Niger and Borno states are home to approximately 1.1 million, 824,200, 580,000 and 389,000 Almajiri pupils respectively. They also have a large presence in

neighboring West African countries like Mali, Togo, Niger Republic, Chad and Cameroon. Trying to be precise, the Ministry of Education estimated that there were 9.5 million *almajiri* children in the northern part of the country in 2010. Over the past few decades, the system has been overwhelmed, neglected and abused. (Christian, 2010; Abdullahi, 2011). The mere mention of the word *almajiri* or its plural form, *almajirai*, evokes different feelings among Nigerians. For many, a picture of unkempt, hungry looking children of school age clutching plastic plates and begging for alms readily comes to mind. the ‘*Almajiri*’ who are a fallout of the abuse of the ‘*tsangaya*’ system of Islamic education. (Alechenu, 2012)

According to Abdullahi (2011), Nigeria’s *Almajiris* have been denied every single right enshrined in the Child Rights Convention. These street urchins are a product of a failed Islamic education system and impoverished homes. They are deserted or are turned out from their parents' homes as early in life as age 5 or 6, to live with and memorize the Quran from teachers in local *madrassas*. Also called “*makaranta alo*” (Arabic schools), the *madrassas* are mostly dilapidated “*dormitories*” constructed from rotten corrugated roofing sheets or inferior bricks. The pupils’ learning materials are torn fragments of papers with portions of the Qur’an or small wooden slates known in the Hausa dialect as “*Alo*” is used to write down verses of the Qur’an to be memorized.

In an effort to capture the plight of the *almajiris* Abdullahi (2011) lamented that the students endure utter deprivation, and their appearances leave much to be desired. With their unkempt hair, dirty faces, blistered lips, tainted teeth, crusty skin, stinking bags and bare feet; they are distinctive. Armed with plastic bowls, decorated with shabby attires, and congregated into small groups, they accost members of the public with alluring songs and soliciting alms. The begging proceeds are used to sustain themselves and their teachers. Though there are no exact figures on the *Almajiri*, they are estimated to number in the millions.

Tsangaya schools or *almajirici* as they are popularly known in the north, have thus become breeding grounds for political thuggery and religious fanaticism. The success so far made by the Boko Haram sect for instance, might not be unconnected with the proliferation of the *almajiri* schools. It is believed that the leader of the sect, Muhammed Yusuf while alive went recruiting his members from mosque to mosque and from one *Almajiri* School to the other. The vulnerability of the *almajiri* made them handy as they were already antagonistic to western culture and opposed to society which has failed to treat them well. Peace (2012)

According to Yahaya (2004), the almajiri who is thought to be a pious pupil in search of knowledge became rather a social problem in the society. Begging for food took most of his time instead of learning. As he grows up, he becomes a graduated beggar moving around hotels, market places, bus stops and motorparks. He may become porter and do all sorts of minial jobs, or pick pockets. These jobless youths constitute a good force in case of any social, political or religious uprising. They were usually recruited during riots e.g. maitasine riots in Kano, Dangungu riot in Kaduna, the Bulunkutu riot in Borno state and many recent Islamic riots in the north and the present Boko Haram menace. Some of these children are used for drug peddling and other criminal activities.

Islamic Almajiri Education

Through Almajiri phenomenon, early in life children are sent out to seek Islamic knowledge outside their environment and are placed under Islamic teachers who because of poverty eventually send them out to search for their livelihood. And that is where destinies are thrown to the dogs and to the vagaries of chance and fatalism. These children, like other children from wealthy homes, have dreams that could not be fulfilled, and may not, when trapped in between search for knowledge, “submission to the will of Allah”, and the bleak future of joblessness that awaits them.

The ‘mallams’ (scholars) abuse and exploit these children by sending them out to the streets to beg for food and alms, thereby deviating from the intent of the program, and the children grow up to become a nuisance and menace to the society. The child hawkers who are forced to the streets by their families, to help in bringing in money to support the family, or as a result of being trafficked and used for child labour. The child beggars, out on the streets on their own or accompany disabled adults.

Importance of Western Education to the Almajiri

The development of western education in the north has always lagged behind that of the south. By 1842 when western education started in the south, the north had thousands of Qu’ranic schools. By 1914, Lord Lugard estimated that there were at least 25,000 Qu’ranic schools scattered throughout northern Nigeria with a total pupil population of 218,618 (Fafunwa 1977) . However these schools did not (apart from Islamic religious teachings) provide any form of

literacy and training that will make graduands functional members of civil society. Fafunwa (1977) posited that many parents would rather send their children to Qu’ranic schools than formal institutions.

The rate of illiteracy in the north is very high and health survey (data 2004) revealed that parents/guardians in the South-South, South-East and South-West Nigeria have the highest literacy rates of 74, 73 and 72 percent respectively. On the contrary, the North-west has 39%, North-East 43.6% and North Central 59.5%. Figures from various educational departments showed that education in the north has sustained a progressive decline over the years. For example in 2000 the six states with the lowest number of applications in the university matriculation examination (UME) were all from the North. These states had a combined total of 6729 applications or 1.45 % of the national total (NPC 2002).

UN Convention on the Rights of the Child cited by Nwangwu(1976) emphasized that the state should provide at least free and compulsory primary education for the child; that the education of the child shall be directed to the development of the child’s personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential

Education as a concept has been subjected to multifarious definitions but reference to a few will suffice. Chikelu (1992) defines it as thus:

Education in its everyday sense could mean formal training that is given in schools and institutions, i.e. the acquisition of the ability to read and write and calculate. It could mean the specialized training that is given on the job. In a wider sense, education could mean the training of the entire person to enable him not only to be able to read and write and calculate or to be proficient in a given job, but also to enable him fit himself for living in a society. So education could be treated either, as a very narrow subject relating to school and formal education or as training covering the whole life”

Chikelu (1992) outlined the purposes of education as: to enable a boy or girl to make his/her living; to equip him/her to play his part as citizen and to enable him/her to develop all the latent powers and faculties of his/her nature and so enjoy a good life. Ali (2006) and Alphonsus (2004) enumerated the importance in the following ways:

- Education develops the human resources mentally, emotionally and socially, giving them a sense of self esteem, a sense of worth and self respect, necessary to free them from the grip of poverty.

- Education also imparts on people the competence, abilities and skills to work in all spheres of the economy.
- Education equally brings scientific and technological progress in an area and this means new and improved ways of accomplishing economic and social tasks such as growing maize, making cloth and taming of hitherto considered intractable
- Education will also be used for political socialization and social mobilization
- Education also leads to social stability and progress as the people are taught the expected values, customs and behaviors of the society such as hard work, obedience and honesty among others.

Education is a vital tool for empowerment that allows meaningful contributions to society. Education is particularly important to the almajiris now because politicians, religious fanatics and terrorist groups have begun to exploit their vulnerability (Olagunju, 2012). Thus children, who ordinarily should be useful members of society, have become great security threats to the corporate existence of Nigeria. Olagunju (2012) also observed that this trend may be responsible for the recent move of the Federal Government of Nigeria to build special schools for almajiri children.

Education and Libraries: What Role for Almajiris?

Libraries are agents of social communication. They serve as vehicles which help to bridge the awareness gap among members of the society. The causes of lack of education to the almajiris have been attributed largely to parental influence, poverty and religious fanaticism (Olagunju, 2012). Libraries (particularly public and school libraries) as agents of change can help to address these challenges.

The Role of the Public Library

Public libraries are established to provide and create access to information to all members of its community and beyond irrespective of age, sex, religion, ethnicity etc. Kargbo (2002) outlined the functions of the public library to include:

- To support and re-enforce programmes of adult and fundamental education
- To provide effective service for children and young people including requisite services for schools

- To provide much needed information and reference services
- To promote and stimulate reading for pleasure and recreation
- To provide, here needed, adequate services for special groups, that is women, language groups, the disadvantaged etc

Public libraries can reduce or eliminate barriers to the provision of formal education to the almajiris through public awareness campaigns. Rural dwellers, traditional and religious bigots need to be educated on the ills of not sending their children to school. This can be done through the following services:

- Printing and distribution of pamphlets and illustrative flyers on the importance and need for parents to send their children to formal schools. The pamphlets and flyers could also be produced in local dialects and interpreted for the sake of the illiterates.
- Librarians could organize public rallies in various communities, speaking to the indigenes in their local dialects on the need to send their children to school. This may also involve inviting important personalities and role models to address both parents and children in the community on the importance of education.
- Document delivery to homes: This service is meant for those who for whatever reason are not able to visit the library. This involves the librarian carrying various relevant titles and a list of other titles from which the users can choose what they want. It is believed that continuous access and exposure to relevant information can help eradicate illiteracy and ignorance (Kargbo, 2002). For users who cannot read or write, the library may provide talking books in the local dialect. Talking books are books in audio cassettes or discs which are played either within the library or at home.
- Librarians could work with community agencies and professional persons to develop programmes that will promote education for Almajiris. Where possible, they should function as members of local community education team or committee. They should use their institutions as publicity centres for the almajiri education programmes by displaying posters, advertisements, community radio programmes schedules and other relevant media publications.
- Libraries should modify their provisions and services with the aim of becoming research centres. They should not only be seen as places to study for examinations and read for leisure, but also as information and research centres for key national issues like the

provision of education to almajiris. Libraries should create special collections comprising of books, journals, newspapers, databases, brochures, flyers, posters, radio/television interview and documentaries as well as other audio-visual materials. Exhibitions and displays should be organized while relevant persons should be allowed to hold talks, seminars, conferences, workshops and meetings in the halls or conference rooms of libraries.

- Libraries could also partner with Government and non government agencies in executing programmes aimed at accelerating almajiri education. This is particularly important as the collaborating agency may be able to provide needed funds for the library to prosecute various information awareness programmes or carry out any other function or service required.

The Role of the School Library

Libraries are as important for children as education itself. School library services involve both availability and accessibility of library facilities and services to students and the willingness and ability of the students to use the facilities and services provided. Stressing the role the library plays in a learning environment, Travaline (1997) asserts that today's library is like a big play ground waiting to be explored and the librarian the best playmate: one who makes the play ground worthwhile. Students' thinking patterns could be changed as they explore and participate in a literacy-rich environment. This helps the students to improve their quality of choices in life (Travaline, 1997). The school library encourages its users to fully accept the responsibility for education and development.

School libraries should carry out the following functions to encourage almajiri education:

- It should provide specialized and individualized services to the almajiris. This implies providing motivational and counseling services for almajiris, so as to awaken and sustain their interest in education.
- Inviting authors and subject specialists for lectures and talks on topics of interests to almajiris
- Organizing educative and entertaining film shows and documentaries on the ills of illiteracy and lack of education, as well as the benefits of having a good education

- Inviting highly educated and successful Islamic leaders who may serve as role models to talk to the children
- Work with public libraries, community workers and other relevant agencies in executing programmes geared towards encouraging education for almajiris.

However, for libraries to effectively carry out these functions there is the need for adequate funding and willingness of libraries to be committed to the cause of Almajiri education. Public and school libraries do not function in isolation; they depend on their parent organizations/institutions for financial support. Unfortunately, Nigeria like other nations is experiencing economic meltdown. This has led to budget cuts especially in the education sector (Mordi, 2008). Consequently, libraries would need to seek for funds from external sources in order to execute planned programmes and ensure effective and efficient service delivery. Such external sources of funds include international and other non governmental agencies.

Conclusion

Education is the right of every child, a key to transforming his/her life and making him/her a responsible member of society. Without education, children are denied the opportunity to develop their full potentials and play productive roles in the society. Libraries are important educational agencies that can help foster and improve almajiri education. The government, non governmental agencies and philanthropic individuals should provide funding for public and school libraries to effectively play their roles. An independent ministry of library services should be created at both Federal and State levels of government. This will allow for direct funding and better attention to library development. Librarians in public and school libraries must begin to see themselves as agents of change. They must also begin to see their libraries as veritable tools that can help to eradicate discriminations against children.

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