

THE CAUSE OF PERPETUAL ATTRACTION OF ALMAJIRI PARENTS TO THE ARCHAIC QUR'ANIC SCHOOL SYSTEM IN NORTH-EASTERN NIGERIA AND ENVIRONS

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ABSTRACT

The cause of the Almajiri parents' perpetual attraction to the archaic Qur'anic school system was examined. The purpose was to find out why the Integrated Almajiri Education System, which was introduced to amalgamate the Qur'anic with Basic Education curricula, was shunned by the beneficiary stakeholders. Consequently, millions of them are still roaming the streets in the North, especially the North-East Geopolitical Zone, Nigeria. This paper employed a historical qualitative research design as a guide and then collected secondary data from libraries and online. Then qualitatively analysed data using content analysis methods. The findings revealed that a poor policy formulation approach and a lack of implementation strategy made the programme difficult to implement. Inadequate publicity and sensitization made the beneficiary stakeholders ignorant and suspicious of the government's intention. Hence, they perceived the programme as a ploy to rob them of the benefits of relief from childcare burden and almajiri exploitation that they were deriving from the anomaly. Lack of preliminary and feasibility studies and poor funding created inadequacies in terms of quality and quantity of staff, office, and classroom equipment, school plants, and infrastructure. It was then recommended that implementation of the Integrated Almajiri Education System should be done through a gradual process from parental empowerment, temporary relief of parents from childcare burden to employment and certification of the mallams, before enacting laws to enforce the programme.

Keywords: Perpetual attraction, Shun, Almajiri Qur'anic schools, Anomaly, Exploitation.

BACKGROUND

The recent history of the Almajiri Qur'anic education system is traceable to the Sokoto Caliphate, founded in 1803. The caliphate had a well-organized administration, and its education system was the Almajiri Qur'anic education. It was adequately funded by the caliphate government (AbdulQadir, 2007). Therefore, the Qur'anic Schools that *Almajirai*

(students) attended then were once functional, and they produced the pioneer emirs of the major cities of the north, among other Islamic jurists.

As the caliphate was reigning with its functional education sector among others, the British colonialists entered the shores of Nigeria in 1849. They inched their way hinterland progressively, until 1903 when the British conquered the Sokoto caliphate and established their own government and administration (Mashema et al, 2017). Shortly after the inception of the British Administration, it sought to strengthen its grip on the reins of power. Hence, they decided to officially impose their own form of education and even went further to relegate the Qur'anic education to the background and adopted their own (Shehu, 2002). This singular action of the British, as Shehu (2006) posited, made the entire Muslim community illiterate in Western education. This was how the Qur'anic education was downgraded, and the prospects of its products became bleak.

On the other hand, the western form of education was given prominence, and those who acquired it had and still have a brighter future and the advantage of occupying lucrative job vacancies, and its products took the centre stage in administration, statecraft, social work, and organisations (Jibril et al, 2015). The consequences of this action could not then be immediately discerned. However, it is now common knowledge that the Qur'anic education system used to be funded by the Caliphate State, but after the advent of the British colonialists, funding and supervision were stopped. As experience has shown, neglect of the system resulted in several challenges that boarder on inadequate infrastructures leading to learning under trees. Then, poor feeding led to begging, while insufficient accommodation led to sleeping in the open air and study-bonfire places. Furthermore, an unstructured curriculum, inadequate learning materials, and teaching aids led to slow learning and elongation of course duration (Galadanchi, 2014). Then, the absence of skill acquisition lessons led to an unproductive life, dependence on charity, and menial jobs to survive. Ultimately, the result was that the nation had to cope with the emergence of multitudes of almajiris roaming our streets as beggars.

PAST FAILED ATTEMPTS AT INTEGRATION

The menace created by these Almajiri youths on the streets has become a cause for concern and an embarrassment to the elites of the Northern region of Nigeria. The issue came to a head recently, when the *Almajiri* youths increased their tempo of begging for remnants of food and money. They were so desperate that whenever charity failed to come their way or was "inadequate", most would at times resort to committing petty crimes. Such was the trend in their daily lives as chores for years, until they grew into adults. Eventually, with bleak job prospects, they would have no choice but to ultimately pick up menial jobs such as petty trading, traditional costume embroidery, shoe-shining, manicure artists, labourers, local Hausa music artists, and motor park commission agents. However, a few disenchanted ones would usually join bandits and insurgents to take vengeance against the society that they presumed was against them. This was what the country ultimately came to cope with recently, from 2009 to date (2025).

The ugly trend led to a public uproar, forcing states and federal governments to intervene. Subsequently, the Federal government reacted in 2013 by formulating a policy introducing the *Almajiri* Integrated Education System (AIES) in Nigeria (Amoo, 2019). The aim of introducing the integrated system was to entice the parents/guardians to accept the dual

system and enroll their children to absorb most of the *Almajiris* into the schools to provide them with temporal and spiritual education. The introduction of the integrated system in 2013 was not the first time the government intervened to provide the *Almajiri* with the dual system of education. The Islamiyyah Education System was instituted in the late 1950s and early 1960s in Northern Nigeria, but it did not quite succeed then, due to a skewed curriculum more towards Western form education, as well as high costs of fees, and consequently, the targeted beneficiaries shunned it.

The government then made another attempt by introducing Universal Basic Education (UBE), which was not only all-encompassing in terms of curriculum, but it also covers all citizens as target beneficiaries nationally. The main objectives were to develop educational consciousness in the citizenry and to provide free, universal, and compulsory basic education. However, it was observed that even the new UBE package was still deficient in core Islamic subjects like memorisation of the holy Qur'an, calligraphy, and Arabic language, among others (Baban'umma, 2018). These deficiencies and other monetary charges intrinsic to the UBE programme induced skepticism in the minds of most *Almajiri* parents. Hence, the laudable objectives of the UBE programme were not significantly achieved with respect to the absorption of the *Almajiris* into it.

The non-achievement of the objectives was due to challenges that border on curriculum deficiency, ignorance of the content and importance of the National Policy on Education, weak political will to improve access, low quality, and poor equity of the education system. These challenges have hindered the proper take-off of the UBE programme, which was expected to subsume the *Almajiri* education system to provide basic education to all Nigerian children of school age.

The latest intervention was the formulation of a more comprehensive policy of introducing the *Almajiri* Integrated Education System (AIES) with complete Islamic Qur'anic and Basic Education subjects, exclusively for the *Almajiris* to gain their parents' acceptance of the programme. The goal was to absorb the 2018 UNESCO estimated figures of 9.5 million *almajiris* out of the 13.5 million out-of-school children (OOSC) in Nigeria (Yusha'u, Tsafe, Babangida & Lawal, 2013). The Federal Government's effort was targeted at *Almajiris* nationwide, with a projected number of Model Schools to be established in predominantly Muslim populated areas. It was noteworthy that, by May 2015, some 152 *Almajiri* Integrated Model Schools (AIMS) out of the scheduled 157 were completed nationwide, costing about ₦15 billion and commissioned in 26 states of the Federation and Federal Capital Territory (FCT) (Wakili, 2019). But the efforts did not quite succeed due to the ill-preparation of its implementation.

The factors affecting the implementation of the integrated *Almajiri* education programme and access to basic education are mainly: poor adherence to policy guidelines and a lack of a reach-out strategy. Others were poorly spread by the geographic location of the model schools because of poor funding and corruption, and the unavailability of adequate and quality infrastructure. Lastly, inadequate school plants as well as poor funding of school running costs (Mohammed & Yusuf, 2015). All these factors may explain why 4.75 million *almajiris* are still roaming the streets of cities in the North-East Geopolitical zone, Nigeria. (Aghedo et al, 2013).

ONSET OF THE ANOMALY AND ITS DERIVED BENEFITS

It is paradoxical that, several years after the relegation of the Qur'anic education system to the background, the masses of the region kept pursuing the archaic, unfunded programme by sending their children to the schools. Onitada 2015 argued that it was for no other reasons than belief, and old-habits-die-hard syndrome. On the contrary, Safiynu and Bugaje 2020 posited that poverty and ignorance, as well as the cheapness of the system, had a greater influence on the parents' patronage of the archaic system. But Shittu and Olaofe 2015 insisted that it was the neglect by the British colonialists who watched then, without intervening, that caused the anomaly. Teke et al 2020 wondered why even the subsequent self-governments of the country would keep watching too, as the poor parents kept patronizing the archaic system. At any rate, the anomalous system was eventually churning out only half-baked and unemployable citizens. The patronage of the archaic Qur'anic schools kept occurring perpetually because the poor parents had somewhat found a laundered depository for their children and an excuse to abdicate their childcare responsibilities. The *Mallams*, too, had discovered how they could be extorting money from the *Almajiri* labour efforts. Hence, they accept the children from the parents without a farthing. The practice went on for a long time until it became a norm, but as an anomaly.

The attraction to the anomaly was from two perspectives. One from the point of abdication of childcare responsibilities by *Almajiri* parents and the other from the point of *Almajiri* exploitation by the *Mallams* (Qur'anic Teachers) (Baba, 2012). The benefits parents derive from the abdication of childcare responsibilities cover such duties as: feeding, clothing, accommodation, healthcare, and the cost of providing education. On the other hand, the *Mallams* derive their benefits from the exploitation of the *Almajiri* by subjecting them to the payment of ₦200.00 Wednesday levy (*Kudin Laraba*), proceeds of commercial farm works for clients, domestic chores, farm work on *Mallams'* farms and benefiting from food sourced through begging by the *Almajiris*.

The anomaly that resulted from the government's neglect of the Qur'anic education sector had induced a lucrative culture of abdication of childcare responsibilities on the part of the parents and child-exploitation on the part of the *Mallams*. A few state governments had attempted to convert the *Almajiri* system from migratory to sedentary in the past without addressing the derived benefits the parents and the *mallams* were enjoying. Hence, it was met with stiff resistance from the parents and the *Mallams*, who accused the governments of dabbling in their religious affairs. The resistance was not so much for the interest of the child, but for the protection of the benefits the duo was and still enjoys. Inquiries by the Author later revealed and confirmed the earlier suggestion that the government's packaged intervention programme did not consider the interest of the parents and the *Mallams*, to make them forego the benefits they were deriving from the anomaly. Therefore, the anomaly has become a norm, making it difficult to do away with. This was because all attempts in the past aimed at addressing the education problems of the teeming *almajiri* youths had not considered the interests of the parents and the *mallams*, which the anomaly had induced as a norm.

WAY FORWARD

The launching of the Integrated *Almajiri* Education System and the implementation of the *Almajiri* Integrated Model Schools programme have been bedeviled by several problems and challenges. The challenges linger around poor policy formulation, poor programme

execution, inadequate publicity and sensitization, lack of feasibility studies, poor staffing and equipping, as well as insufficient funding (Mohammed, Timson, & Gyang, 2024). The way forward is necessary to address the problems and challenges to make the model schools functional for the benefit of the stakeholders. Some of the ways forward could be by revisiting the policy formulation process and taking the bottom-to-top instead of the top-to-bottom approach. The aim would be to carry the stakeholders along in the decision-making process while acknowledging their own socio-economic incapacities and inabilities to meet what is expected of them in the programme. These, if addressed, would make them take ownership of the programme and easily key into it. Preliminary studies are essential at the planning stage to obtain accurate statistics in terms of the number of *almajiris*, the required number of infrastructures, the reliable quantity of school plants, the adequate number of staff (academic & non-academic), discern subterranean factors that could hinder access to the AIMS, and reasonable school running costs estimates. Then, at the execution stage of the programme, feasibility studies at the conceptual level of the Almajiri system are necessary. This is to establish the degree of stakeholders' attitude and the acceptability of the system. It is also necessary to determine the workability of the system and to what extent the programme can be achieved; adequate publicity and sensitization of the stakeholders and even some policy implementers are essential for organising regular conferences, workshops, and media jingles. This will help all stakeholders to understand, accept, and always remember the programme and for whom it was established; the employment of educational experts at all critical points of policy formulation, implementation, and running of the AIMS programme is imperative. This would lead to the professional establishment of model schools devoid of inadequacies. It will also ensure that expert academic and non-academic staff are employed. Then the acquisition of appropriate and quality equipment, as well as a better-designed and constructed infrastructure, will be guaranteed.

The next important step is to empower parents to improve their financial situation while temporarily relieving them of all childcare responsibilities until the children they initially enrolled graduate. These graduates will serve as role models and demonstrate the benefits of the program, and the time spent will help the newly empowered parents get used to the program's challenges, which will then become normal for them. Gaining parental acceptance of the program would mean removing one of the two main sources supporting the old Qur'anic school system. Additionally, all recognized Tsangaya Qur'anic Schools should be registered by the relevant government agency, employ the *mallams*, evaluate and assess their level of Qur'anic knowledge and their earnings from the old system. They should then be graded and certified appropriately. Their initial pay should not be less than 75% of their earnings in the old Qur'anic system to encourage them to accept the offer to leave the old system for the new program.

Finally, once the Integrated Almajiri Education System is widely recognized as a standard system accepted by most stakeholders, the next step is to enact legislation that ensures guidance and sustainability for the system. The law overseeing the operation of the *Almajiri* system should include enforcement measures and sanctions to prevent setbacks, as has occurred in the past. The tendency is for government officials to pass a law without a gradual introduction or implementation that allows beneficiaries to see, understand, and accept the system. Failing to go through a process of gradual stakeholder persuasion will likely result in

resistance, and since the system is linked to religion, a sensitive issue in the country, the goal of providing access to basic education for the *Almajiri* may not be achieved.

CONCLUSION

The study explored the incidence of shunning the *Almajiri* Integrated Model Schools by the state governments and the beneficiary stakeholders. The findings revealed that most of the beneficiary stakeholders (the parents, the *Mallams* & *almajiris*) shunned the programme because of inadequate publicity and sensitization, leading to ignorance and suspicion. The integrated *Almajiri* education system was packaged to integrate the Islamic and Basic Education curricula. The aim was to settle the *almajiri* near his/her parents to acquire dual knowledge, without addressing his/her other basic needs, which the parents are relieved of when they migrate. On the other hand, the Mallam accepts the *almajiris* without any form of fees to exploit them. Hence, the parents and the *Mallams* saw the programme as a ploy to rob them of the benefits they were deriving from the anomaly and shunned it. Consequently, the *almajiris* are still being seen roaming the streets in their millions, and most of the model schools are abandoned and undergoing decadence, except for a few.

The Integrated *Almajiri* Education System was intended as an intervention to address the issues of out-of-formal-school *Almajiri* children. However, the hurriedly implemented intervention was plagued with numerous problems, including poor policy formulation, lack of publicity and stakeholder sensitization—which fostered suspicion over a potential scheme to deprive them of benefits from the system—and the absence of preliminary and feasibility studies. The engagement of non-professionals, inconsistent human and material resources leading to inadequacies, along with insufficient budgetary allocation and funding, all contributed to the shortcomings of the integrated *Almajiri* education system as an intervention. Therefore, the study's findings suggest that these shortcomings should be addressed to ensure stakeholders accept and embrace the *Almajiri* integrated model schools' program. This acceptance is crucial to removing these children from the streets and transforming them into productive citizens.

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