Participatory Filmmaking with Qur'anic Students in Kano, Nigeria:
'Speak good about us or keep quiet!'

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'Participatory' research is often presented as a means to 'empower' stigmatised groups by addressing shame and by promoting attitude changes. Drawing on experiences producing a 'participatory' docudrama with traditional Qur'anic students (*almajirai*) in Kano, northern Nigeria, I reflect on the limits of 'participatory' research as a tool for 'empowerment'. I describe the risks stigmatised groups may incur by participating, and consider to what extent, if at all, it can foster social change. The *almajirai* have attracted negative attention as presumed victims of child neglect and as 'cannon fodder' for Islamic radicalisation. Their participation in the filmmaking gave them an opportunity to voice their concerns and to rebuke those treating them heedlessly. At the same time, they became vulnerable to accusations and suspicions within their communities. To escape the negative connotations of poverty, they deemphasised its role for *almajiri* enrolment, thus concealing structural inequalities.

Keywords: participatory research, film making, *almajirai*, madrasa, Qur'anic education, young people

'Participatory' research: panacea or poisoned chalice?

'Participatory' research is often presented as a magic bullet that allows researchers to overcome the epistemological and ethical challenges involved in researching poor and powerless groups. 'Participation,' it is argued, allows researchers to get a better grasp of people's realities while treating informants with respect. It can help reduce the inevitable power differentials between researcher and researched (Chambers, 1997). It can help adjust to participants' preferred forms of communication (e.g. Barker & Weller, 2003, with respect to young people), and let them direct the research towards their most pressing concerns (e.g. Alderson, 2001). On a more political note, the case for 'participation' in the creation of knowledge has been argued with reference to its 'empowering' potential. Freire (1972) for

1   example advances the view that through 'conscientisation,' 'oppressed' people can develop an

2   understanding of reality that enables them to fight for liberation.

3   A growing body of literature explores the opportunities offered by 'participatory' research

4   with social groups who are stigmatised. Many have lauded the potential of such research to

5   give 'voice' to people whose concerns are often ignored. Potentially, it can help tackle shame

6   and promote social change. It has been argued that by creating a platform for reflection and

7   discussion, such research may create conditions under which 'members of a stigmatized

8   group can become aware of themselves as agents not objects' (Buchanan & Murray, 2012, p.

9   41). Through the dissemination of research findings, members of the public may be prodded

10   to rethink their stereotypes (e.g. Moletsane, de Lange, Mitchell, & Stuart, 2007, on

11   HIV/AIDS related stigma in southern Africa). If nothing else, 'participatory' projects may

12   foster solidarity and mutual support amongst stigmatised participants (e.g. Wang, Cash, &

13   Power, 2000, on homeless people in the US).

14   Yet, the hype for 'participatory' research has been countered by critical scrutiny of the

15   actual practices declared to be 'participatory'. For research to be 'empowering' it is not

16   enough to pick a method from the 'participatory menu' during data collection. Ideally

17   participants are involved not only in the creation of data but also in the formulation of

18   research goals and the interpretation and dissemination of findings (e.g. Byrne, Canavan, &

19   Millar, 2009; Cooke & Kothari, 2001). Power imbalances are particularly pronounced at the

20   analysis stage, from which participants are most often excluded (e.g. Hastrup, Elsass, Grillo,

21   Mathiesen, & Paine, 1990). 'Participation' may become a 'more subtle form of manipulation'

22   if it bestows legitimacy upon otherwise illegitimate practices (Rahnema, 1992, pp. 125–126),

23   and ring hollow if it leaves structural inequalities unaddressed (e.g. Hart, 2008).

24   Research with stigmatised groups compounds the political and ethical challenges of

25   'participation'. Safety is a major concern as people suffering from stigma often lack social

26   power, which makes them vulnerable. For example, we have to ask whether it is safe for

participants to publicly disclose conditions that evoke shame, conditions which they may otherwise prefer to keep secret (cf. Buchanan & Murray, 2012, on mental health issues). What are the chances that a project contributes sufficiently to attitude changes that it is justified for participants to risk disclosure? Participants may indeed prefer to de-emphasise, embellish or disguise their disadvantage in their messages to the public (e.g. Lomax, Fink, Singh, & High, 2011, on poor council estate dwellers in the UK). This poses a dilemma for researchers. On the one hand, they should respect their respondents' choices of how they wish to portray themselves. Yet, 'on the other hand, by using a parallel discourse, the researchers may fail to use the findings as a means to empower the participants through research' (Sime, 2008, p. 66). Portraying poor people as independent agents without contemplating the structural constraints they face makes them vulnerable to accusations of creating a 'culture of poverty' (cf. Lewis, 1959). Wang et al. (2000, p. 87) for instance warn that depicting homelessness exclusively in the terms of those suffering from it 'may be seen to be casting [it] strictly in terms of personal responsibility rather than community responsibility'.

This paper adds to the emerging body of literature that scrutinises 'participatory' research with stigmatised groups. Drawing on experiences I made producing a 'participatory' documentary film/docudrama with traditional Qur'anic students (pl: *almajirai*, sg: *almajiri*) in Kano in northern Nigeria, I reflect on the limits of 'participatory' research as a tool for 'empowerment'. I describe the risks that young people whose social standing is low may incur by participating, and consider to what extent, if at all, it can foster social change.

I collected the data in this paper during 13 months of ethnographic fieldwork carried out as part of my masters and doctoral research in Kano State between 2009 and 2011. My fieldwork included four months in Albasu, a small rural town in Albasu Local Government Area (LGA) in the east of Kano State. For the remaining 9 months, I lived close to the city gate Sabuwar Kofa within Kano's Old City. From July to October 2011, I facilitated the

production of a docudrama about the perspectives of *almajirai* on their lives and the challenges they face.[1]

Chalfen (2011) distinguishes between participatory 'projects', which aim primarily at awareness-raising and social change, and participatory 'studies', which are geared first and foremost towards creating academic knowledge. The film project described here combined elements of both. We sought to publicise our film widely, and to sensitise the public through it about the *almajirai*'s concerns. At the same time, I used the data I collected during the production process for my academic work. The data, which the present paper is also based on, include my fieldnotes, stories narrated or written down during the script writing process, and discussions about the way the *almajirai* would like to see their lives and identities represented on screen.

The next section introduces the *almajirai* and situates their schooling system and educational trajectories in their historical context, including the crisis rhetoric surrounding traditional Qur'anic schools. I then describe the experiences I made producing a docudrama with and about *almajirai* in Kano. The final section of the paper discusses potential lessons for 'participatory' research, including filmmaking, with stigmatised groups more widely.

The *almajirai*

***Who are the* almajirai?**

The *almajirai* are boys and young men from primary-school age to their early twenties who have come to live with a Qur'anic teacher in order to learn to read, write, and recite the Holy Qur'an. Modern/secular subjects do not form part of their curriculum and Islamic subjects other than the Qur'an are the preserve of advanced learners. Their schools are beyond the

state's purview and regulatory interventions and often lack even basic facilities. During the lesson-free time, the *almajirai* earn their livelihood. In rural areas, they collect fodder and firewood or work as farmhands. In urban areas, older students wash clothes, carry loads and engage in petty trade or handicrafts. Younger students are employed as household helps, or beg for food and money on the streets, which makes them a highly visible feature of the urban landscape. Formerly, *almajirai* lived mainly in remote rural locales, but today they increasingly populate the urban centres of the region – a development that has been accompanied by a steep decline in respect for them.

The traditional Qur'anic school system is widespread in Muslim West Africa and used mostly by poor rural families. Such families often have few alternative educational choices as the modern schooling accessible to them tends to be both poor in quality and financially burdensome. In the *almajiri* system, children are handed over to the teacher (*malam*) and while many students return home at least once a year (for the major holidays or to help their parents farm), others do not see their parents for years. Some teachers migrate with their schools following seasonal agricultural patterns. Enrolment in Qur'anic schools all over Nigeria is estimated to exceed 9.5 million, with more than 8.5 million in the northern part of the country (UBEC, 2010). How many of these students are *almajirai* is, however, subject to speculation, as the existing statistics do not differentiate between day-students (who stay with their parents, potentially attend modern school in addition to Qur'anic school, and include females) and 'boarding' students.

From prestigious avenue to power to reviled coping strategy for the poor

Since the inception of Islam in the region, the religious knowledge possessed by traditional Islamic scholars has been a political asset, as its Muslim rulers, by submitting to the restraints of a written code, exposed themselves to the checks of intellectuals educated in that code

1   (Last, 1993). The introduction of modern education by the British, who conquered what is

2   today northern Nigeria at the beginning of the twentieth century, gradually undermined the

3   religious scholars' "monopoly over literacy" and thus their access to prestige, positions, and

4   resources (Paden, 1973). Upon independence in 1960, the first generation of modern-educated

5   Muslims inherited power from the British (Umar, 2001).

6   Socioeconomic change added momentum to the political transformation. Since the 1970s

7   the income of students and teachers declined as more affluent Muslims increasingly ceased to

8   support the *almajiri* system, and as those segments of society still endorsing it were hard hit

9   by the economic downturn in the aftermath of the oil boom of the 1970s and by structural

10   adjustment which began in 1986 (Ya'u, 2000). The push of the northern Muslim elites in the

11   late 1970s and 1980s to extend modern education to larger parts of the population strained the

12   *almajirai* competing for jobs in the urban economy (Lubeck, 1985). Meanwhile, those sources

13   of income that are the preserve of traditional religious scholars – commissioned prayers and

14   potions to strengthen one's charisma for example (see Last, 1988) – while providing a

15   profitable livelihood to some, can't sustain the bulk of the *almajirai,* and particularly not

16   those only beginning to acquire the requisite knowledge.

17   As economic restructuring accentuated income inequalities and impoverished large parts of

18   the population, the landscape of religious legitimacy was also reconfigured. New religious

19   movements – most prominently epitomized by the *Izala* movement (e.g. Kane, 2003) – began

20   to sprout in the formerly Sufi dominated region. *Izala*'s commitment to public enlightenment,

21   manifested through the establishment of a modern system of Islamic education marginalized

22   the *almajiri* system further. Additionally, in a context of increased anxieties about the

23   religious integrity of the Muslim community (*jama'a*), attempts to ensure its piety, and to

24   'purify' Islam by removing unlawful innovation (*bidi'a*), assumed a new urgency (e.g. Last,

25   2008). The *almajiri* system has attracted criticism in this environment as a Hausa cultural

accretion to Islam. Many object to the *almajirai*'s practice of begging which, in their view, Islam permits only in acute emergencies (e.g. Bambale, 2007).

In the context of increased attempts to achieve universal primary education (see UBEC, 2010) and growing concerns about child welfare, the *almajirai* came to be perceived as a 'lost' generation (Abubakar, 2009). Young *almajirai* are tagged as 'quasi-orphans' (COCFOCAN, n.d.) and 'street children' ('Almajiris: Towards Creating Brighter Future', 2012). *Almajirai* in their youth appear in the public imagination as 'ticking time bomb' ('Almajiris – Nigeria's Ticking Time Bomb', 2011) and 'monsters' in the 'breeding' ('Rehabilitating our almajiris', 2011). The *Boko Haram* Islamist insurgency since 2009 has carried misgivings about the system to the extremes. In an article in Newsweek Magazine, Nobel laureate Wole Soyinka for example propounded that the followers of *Boko Haram* – the 'butchers of Nigeria' – had 'been deliberately bred, nurtured, sheltered, rendered pliant… in madrassas and are generally known as the almajiris.' (2012).

'Participatory' filmmaking

Rationale and participants

The idea of producing a documentary film about the *almajiri* system together with young people living as *almajirai* was born after some months of fieldwork during which I encountered negative stereotypes about the system again and again. Yet, readiness to listen to the concerns and experiences of the young people enrolled in it seldom accompanied such rejection of the system. I envisaged the project to offer a greater forum for *almajirai* to publicise their views, and to add a new perspective to the debate in Nigeria about *almajirai*. Moreover, as an adult, woman and non-Muslim, I was continuously on the lookout for ways

1   to spend time with *almajirai*. I had the chance to use 'participatory' methods including

2   photography and 'radio-interviews', conducted by the *almajirai* amongst each other with my

3   tape-recorder, during my first fieldwork phase in July – September 2009 in urban Kano (see

4   Hoechner, 2011). This was possible because I conducted research in a neighbourhood that had

5   been continually researched over the previous two decades. As a consequence, people were

6   fairly used to curious Westerners, and I was met with little suspicion. But in my rural

7   fieldwork site Albasu, for fear that people might perceive tape recordings and photographs as

8   an attempt to illicitly sneak information out, the District Head discouraged me from using

9   them (cf. Chalfen, who finds that 'greater awareness of the politics underlying photographic

10   practices', including their potential for misrepresentation and surveillance, has heightened

11   suspicions towards their use, 2011, p. 294).

12   I set up English classes for *almajirai* of various Qur'anic schools in both rural and urban

13   Kano, but my teaching was always confined to a few hours on their 'weekend days'

14   (Thursday and Friday), and the inevitable authority attached to my position as teacher made

15   the classroom a difficult set-up for developing a close rapport. A film project promised

16   opportunities not only to spend time with *almajirai*, but also to learn about their experiences

17   and perspectives from what they would want to document and communicate (cf. Hwang,

18   2012).

19   The idea was to involve young people living as *almajirai* in every step of the project from

20   script writing to editing. Through training, so the idea went, they should not only be put into

21   the position to take control of the project as far as possible, but also learn skills potentially

22   useful to them in later life. The Kano branch of the Goethe Institute, a German cultural

23   institution, agreed to support and fund the project. Two professionals from the Kano film

24   industry, Nasiru Bappah Muhammad and Auwalu Indabawa, were in charge of training.

25   The director of the Goethe Institute and I had decided that nine *almajiri* participants would

26   be the maximum to have a manageable group, and that they should come from both rural and

1   urban schools. To work with three *almajirai* from three different schools seemed a good way

2   to make sure that we brought students with diverse experiences together and that the groups

3   from the different schools were big enough and balanced for students to feel comfortable. To

4   ensure a good and balanced working atmosphere, we aimed for students of roughly similar

5   age.

6   In both 2009 and 2011, I had taught English to some 10–15 *almajirai* at the *Child Almajiri*

7   *Empowerment and Support Initiative* (CAESI), an NGO aiming to extend support to *almajirai*

8   in urban Kano, amongst other things by offering modern education and meals to *almajirai*

9   from different Qur'anic schools in Sharada (Kano Metropolitan) on Thursdays, Fridays and

10   Saturdays. The CAESI provided catering during the film production process and made their

11   classrooms available for training. As the NGO was amongst the organisers, it was clear that

12   some of its students would participate in the project. Yet, there was much more interest than

13   places on the project. I therefore suggested participants should come from among the older

14   students. Incidentally, of the five *almajirai* falling into that age group, two were tied up with

15   work or family obligations, leaving the remaining three to participate (Abdullahi, Auwal and

16   Ismail).[2] As the CAESI's younger students came to the project site on Thursdays and Fridays

17   for lessons, and as I was reluctant to exclude interested *almajirai*, some of them participated

18   in the initial training sessions, including script writing.

19   In Albasu I approached Malam Nasiru whom I knew best of all the rural teachers and

20   because I had started to befriend his students, whom I was teaching English. Out of the five

21   older *almajirai* in his school he chose three that would be allowed to participate (Buhari,

22   Kabiru and Anas). The third group of students came from a Qur'anic school that I lived right

23   next to during my stays at Sabuwar Kofa in Kano city. Two students of this school, Naziru

24   and Sadisu, were employed to work as household helps in the house I was staying in. I knew

25   them fairly well not only from home, but also from my first round of research in 2009, in

1   which they had participated. I invited them to be part of the project and left it to them to

2   choose a third person from their school. They opted for Sadisu's friend Ikiramatu.

3

4   ***Production process***

5

6   For 12 weeks, we met every Thursday and Friday, first on the premises of the NGO CAESI

7   for training and to write the script, then at different shooting locations, including all of the

8   participating *almajirai*'s schools, and finally at the Goethe Institute to edit our footage.

9   We dedicated the first four sessions to the script. First came long discussions about the

10   topics the youths wanted to cover and messages they wanted to get across to the public. Next

11   we held sessions during which the youths wrote down how they wanted to translate the

12   messages agreed upon into filmed material, including acted scenes/drama, interviews, and

13   voice-over monologues. Based on the nature of the material produced so far Nasiru Bappah

14   Muhammad, the 'script advisor', proposed the film genre of a docudrama. Many of the

15   experiences – e.g. those of abuse by employers – would be difficult/impossible to capture in a

16   documentary. Many of the messages would be more immediate and emotive if acted out

17   rather than narrated, he reasoned.

18   To develop a structure for the film, Muhammad had the group think through an *almajiri*'s

19   typical trajectory from home to school including his parents' decision to enrol him, through a

20   typical school day from the crack of dawn till late at night, and through a typical *almajiri*

21   career, ending with his graduation. In the next step, we delved into each stage in this

22   trajectory in more depth. Muhammad had the participating *almajirai* re-tell and re-enact their

23   own experiences with respect to the different stages, pointing out to them what made for an

24   interesting and emotive story and captivating cinematographic material. From this collection

25   of stories and the material written down at the beginning, Muhammad then put together a

26   script skeleton, which put scenes in order and gave basic scene instructions. We then

discussed the script skeleton with the *almajirai* who added in some scenes they felt were

missing. The following example illustrates the format of the scene instructions:

> *Scene 11: outside: street – daylight*: Aminu collected food, he laments to his friend that the
>
> food is spoilt, and that it was given to him as a gesture of contempt. The friend advises him
>
> that he is not at home and must have patience. They discuss the reasons why people treat
>
> *almajirai* badly.

From the beginning it had been clear that the participating *almajirai* would act in as many capacities as possible, and that we would try to cast minor roles with *almajirai* from their schools and children from the neighbourhood, not least because we didn't have the funds to engage many professional actors. The decision to still engage professionals was mainly Muhammad's. He argued that finding and training lay actors for adult roles would take time, and be difficult as those likely to perform best in the roles we needed (traditional Qur'anic teachers and *almajirai*'s parents, who are often rather conservative; nasty employers, who are by definition uncooperative) were least likely to agree to participate (cf. Buchanan & Murray, 2012, who faced similar difficulties recruiting people to interview them on camera about their (mis)conceptions about mental illness). That the adult actors we eventually engaged were paid turned out to complicate matters with the *almajirai* (see below).

During another four training days the *almajirai* learned the basics of handling the small digital camera the Goethe Institute had made available for the project, and the fundamentals of acting and directing. Muhammad talked them through the common composition of a film crew, and had everyone state a preferred role. He then assigned crew as well as cast positions based on the *almajirai*'s preferences and on whom he deemed fit.

Shooting took another five days. Since the *almajirai* mainly re-enacted their daily activities and situations they were more than familiar with, acting came fairly naturally to most (cf. Baena, Pérez, Sotelo, & Mateos, 2004). Somewhat trickier were the scenes involving

professional adult actors. Most were actors from the Kano film industry (*Kannywood*), famous in Hausaland and known celebrities to the *almajirai*. The directors gave scene instructions to the actors, but refrained from criticising the actors whom they held in high regard. Muhammad, Indawaba or I would call attention to major divergences from the script.

Editing turned out to be a time-consuming and tedious process. As the participating *almajirai* were very much computer-illiterate, it was difficult to impart more than some basic computer skills and impossible to involve them to any meaningful extent at this stage. The project culminated in a premiere screening at the Goethe Institute on 27 October 2011, attended by some 300 people, including politicians, university staff, civil society representatives, and Qur'anic teachers and *almajirai* from the three participating schools.

The 'end product'

The film that we eventually screened and distributed bore fingerprints from a number of people who weren't *almajirai*. The professional actors, the trainers, and myself had all shaped the production process to some extent by designing scenes in the script, dramatising script instructions, or editing footage in particular ways. Apart from being final touches rather than major surgeries, I think these interventions are also defendable from an ethical standpoint. They helped the participating *almajirai* produce a film that was taken seriously as an artistic production, and while I am confident that their messages remained unchanged, such support ensured that the form met the necessary cinematographic standards for their messages to reach an audience (cf. Baena et al., 2004, who faced a similar trade-off between minimising interference and ensuring the 'quality' of the production).

The finished film tells the story of Aminu, who is sent to Qur'anic school in the city because his father reckons he would progress better in his studies away from home. Aminu struggles to find a place to sleep, enough food to eat every day, and money to buy soap. He is

1 bullied by an older student in his school, abused by his employer, and denigrated by people in

2 his neighbourhood. But against the odds, he eventually manages to secure reputable

3 employment as shop assistant and succeeds in his Qur'anic studies. McCain (2011),

4 reviewing the film for the Daily Trust newspaper, summarises its message:

5   Although their hardships are highlighted here, this is a fairly positive portrayal of the life of

6   an almajiri, presenting arguments about their own worth made by the boys themselves...

7   The critique the boys make and the message they have are… for the communities in which

8   they live, to the people who assume they are thieves and rascals, those who sneeringly tell

9   them their parents don't love them, or those households who think of them only as nearly

10   free labour and not as people.

11

12

13 **Inevitable dilemmas?**

14

15 ***'Having voice' and competing concerns***

16

17 While it was I who had initiated the project, I felt that especially in the early stages, it was

18 spurred by the *almajirai*'s enthusiasm, and feeling that they were part of something special

19 and meaningful. This was evident from the way they spent their free time writing down

20 stories they wanted to include in the script, or learning the English film vocabulary they had

21 noted down during the day. Also, as many more *almajirai* registered interest in participating

22 than we could 'admit', those involved, I think, felt quite privileged.

23   When conceiving of the project, the director of the Goethe Institute and I had planned to

24 compensate the *almajirai* with a small amount of money for the income they would forego by

25 participating in the project. Yet, after the first sessions, we dropped this idea; first, because we

26 felt it would unnecessarily commercialise the project, detracting from the idealistic

1 enthusiasm and curiosity for filmmaking skills sustaining it. While the *almajirai* should not

2 have any detriments from the project (food and transport costs were covered), 'paying' them

3 for participation seemed ill-advised (cf. Alderson, 2001). Second, we feared it would increase

4 inequalities amongst participants and 'non-participants' further; the boundary between them

5 was anyways fuzzy during the initial phases as other *almajirai* from the CAESI participated

6 in the training sessions, also contributing ideas to the script. Yet, imprudently, I had

7 mentioned to two of the *almajirai* a while before the project started, when I had just finalised

8 the agreement with the Goethe Institute, that they would be given something as compensation

9 for their foregone income. This was a remark I forgot about as the youths didn't bring it up

10 with me again but which would catch up with me later.

11   As the project dragged on, the initial enthusiasm began to fade. Increasingly, the *almajirai*

12 came to realise how much of a time and work commitment their participation in the project

13 implied. It was difficult to gauge whether this was an inevitable sign of fatigue or more

14 fundamental discontent about the project. After some weeks, the youths from Albasu came

15 forth with their grievance: the project (and 'weekend') days Thursday and Friday were the

16 only days on which they as 'rural *almajirai*' had a chance of earning cash by hiring out their

17 farm labour. On the remaining days, they would have to attend classes or farm for their

18 teacher. We agreed that I would give them some money each week so as to cover their basic

19 expenses (soap etc.). As none of the urban-based youths approached me with a similar

20 grievance, I assumed 'lacking' Thursdays and Fridays was not a particular problem to them.

21   At no time did the youths tell me that they were discontented but after the project ended I

22 pieced together bit-by-bit that they had been debating amongst themselves for some time

23 whether it was fair that they contributed so much work and energy and weren't paid just like

24 the professional actors. Rumours and gossip in their neighbourhoods/communities and

25 schools further spurred the disgruntlement some youths harboured. They were accused, I

26 learned, of being either dupes, agreeing to 'work' for free for me/the Goethe Institute (who

14

would presumably make a lot of money one day by selling the film), or liars, who hid the money I presumably paid them so they wouldn't have to share it. The attendance of Kano State's Commissioner of Information at the screening ignited such rumours further: if the '*manya*' (the big and powerful) were there, surely there must have been money involved as well!

Such reasoning makes immediate sense if one takes into consideration the socio-political context. Politics in Nigeria have been characterised as 'spoils politics' (Allen, 1995), suggesting that officials relate to their constituencies mainly through the redistribution of resources. The NGO sector in Nigeria is viewed by many as a vehicle for personal enrichment rather than the pursuit of the common good (e.g. Smith, 2007). In the northern part of the country, interventions sponsored by Western donors frequently spark suspicion and trigger questions about the motivations underpinning them. The campaign launched in northern Nigeria from 2003 to eradicate polio for instance was interpreted by some as 'part of a plot by western governments to reduce Muslim populations worldwide' (Yahya, 2006, p. 186). Rumours, Yahya maintains, should be understood as 'commentary on broader political experience' (ibid, p. 187). Seen in this light, the suspicions with which the film project and I were met become intelligible. That the project moreover was not purely a 'project' in Chalfen's (2011) sense, but that it also served my 'study' interests may have added to the confusion about my underlying motivations.

To what extent could ill blood have been avoided? To what extent were people's perceptions of my intentions predefined by their horizon of experience? Surely, it was a mistake to mention a potential compensation to two of the *almajirai* before the project. It was also unwise to jump to the conclusion that money issues weren't something to worry about merely because none of the *almajirai* (the agreement with the youths from Albasu aside) brought them up explicitly. Norms of respect tipped the scales in favour of silent anger. When I asked one of the youths afterwards why he hadn't just told me that he was unhappy about

1 the situation, he said: 'one doesn't tell one's superior – he could get angry.' Also, our

2 relationships were further complicated by the fact that I had agreed to pay for the costs of

3 some of the youths' secular education, which they had just started or intended to start briefly.

4 Maybe they were afraid I could change my mind if they upset me.

5 Yet, some quandaries I think were unavoidable: Had all the youths been paid

6 'compensation', what (if any) amount would have been able to gratify those claiming their

7 labour was being exploited? Would 'payment' have entailed more suspicions by envious

8 bystanders? How could those doubting Westerners do anything not primarily self-interested

9 have been convinced that this was a not-for-profit project aiming to make *almajirai*'s views

10 and experiences public? I wonder whether involving the *almajirai* in the financial

11 management of the project would have solved or compounded such problems.

12

13 ***Reflections on 'participatory' filmmaking and 'empowerment'***

14

15 What lessons can be drawn from this experience for 'participatory' film projects involving

16 stigmatised groups more widely? Several people stressed in their reactions to the film how

17 remarkable it was that *almajirai*, who come from communities commonly known to be poor,

18 rural, and 'traditional' / lacking 'exposure', could use this modern medium to communicate.

19 A film could potentially reach a relatively wealthy, 'modern', urban audience that would

20 otherwise rarely bother to listen to *almajirai*'s views. Their employers, and people in their

21 neighbourhood who thought negatively of them were the people the *almajirai* wanted to get

22 through to primarily. The statements they made in the end credits of the film make this plain:

23 *Isma'il*: My message to society, especially to the rich, is may you support the *almajirai*

24 generously, and take good care of those working in your house.

1   *Ikiramatu*: Through this film, I want to show people who think *almajirai* are hoodlums,

2   that this is not true.

3   *Naziru*: I call upon you to stop accusing *almajirai* of things they didn't do. Please inquire

4   first before you just accuse the *almajirai*.

5   The *almajirai* also felt that the finished film was capable of getting their messages across.

6 One of the youths for example took a copy of the film to his employers so they would 'learn

7 from it' and 'correct their behaviour' towards him. Another commented after the screening

8 that through the film people employing *almajirai* in his neighbourhood had 'understood

9 certain things'.

10 One of the strengths of film as a method/means of communication thus laid in

11 juxtaposing 'modern' and 'traditional'. Yet, its strength was also its weakness in that it

12 rendered the *almajirai* vulnerable in their own communities. For example, one of the

13 *almajirai* who acted as thief in a scene in the film, was afraid that people in his village, who

14 had little/no exposure to film, would not be able to tell reality and fiction apart. In written

15 representations, participants can be anonymised to protect their identity. In visual

16 representations, this is hardly possible (Chalfen, 2011).

17 Coming from likely the most conservative segment of society, some envisaged benefits

18 of the project – learning useful/marketable skills – may well fail to materialise. The film

19 industry as potential future employer is not necessarily on the cards for the participating

20 *almajirai*. One of the participating youths for instance said his parents would never allow him

21 to get involved in the film business. His mother even refused to watch the film. While

22 Indabawa planned to help interested youths enter the film industry by employing them as

23 helps on set, he envisaged problems as the *almajirai* are free only on Thursdays and Fridays.

24 I am quite convinced that the *almajirai* didn't doubt the film to be an efficacious means

25 to communicate some of their concerns to a larger audience. Yet, this didn't mean 'making

their voices heard' overrode other concerns, such as their hope/expectation to benefit materially, or their desire not to feel fooled, and not to be regarded as foolish or be called a liar. These concerns must again be understood in the context of their position within society as well as their (realistic) future expectations: How well equipped were they to defend themselves against accusations and suspicions in their communities? How likely was the film to make a lasting change to their lives?

Most benefits for participants were immaterial. Wang et al. (2000, p. 86), who conducted a 'photovoice' project with homeless people in the US, describe how their participants took pride in being met with curiosity and respect while taking photographs, and how the project, while failing to change participants' material conditions, enhanced their self-esteem. Similarly, there were many moments when the *almajirai* beamed with pride about their work and responsibilities within the project (e.g. when giving press interviews; after shooting in Albasu Buhari told me proudly that people now called him 'dairekta' [director] in town); or reminisced about getting to know Hausa film celebrities personally. Since my departure from Kano, our film was screened at national and international film festivals, and won an AFRICAST 2012 Award, which its director Abdullahi was invited to accept at the prize awarding ceremony in the capital Abuja. None of the participating youths had travelled that far before let alone spoken in front of a comparable audience (cf. Baena et al., 2004).

I would not say that the project did as much as 'conscientise' the *almajirai*: firstly, they had opinions before the project, and secondly, their opinions, as I will argue below, did not necessarily 'liberate' them. Yet, the project created a space to verbalise and collate opinions and grievances. At the end of the project, the participating youths held, and defended (e.g. in media interviews), views on how society failed to do them justice that I have not heard in such clarity and with such fervour from any other *almajirai* I have talked to during my research. This echoes the findings of others working with stigmatised groups that 'participatory' research projects can create a forum for participants to bring together their

experiences, to affirm and consolidate one another's views and to validate one another's sense of injustice (e.g. Cahill, 2004; Buchanan & Murray, 2012). Being taken seriously as the *almajirai*'s flag bearers by the audiences of our film, was, I think, an 'empowering' experience for the participating youths.

Afterlife of the film: the pitfalls of representations

Beyond personally 'empowering' experiences, how effective was the film project as a means to promote the *almajirai*'s interests more generally? Concerns about stigma and how to counter it had been at the core of the project. I had learned from the *almajirai* how widespread prejudice against their education system affected their daily lives. In the end credits of our film where the *almajirai* spell out their messages to the public, Kabiru (ca. 18 years), part of the film production crew, proclaims: 'Either speak good about us or keep quiet!' Being represented in a positive light was a major concern for the *almajirai* and *malamai* I became close to, and a major motivation behind their participation in, and support for the film project and my research more generally.

It has been widely documented that poverty can trigger feelings of shame and inadequacy (e.g. Walker et al., 2013). Poverty connotes negatively in northern Nigeria and *almajirai* may experience their own life histories as shameful as they are often shaped by a lack of support from (supposedly responsible) social elders as a consequence of poverty, divorce or death. Poor young people often seek to escape the stigma of poverty and reject being labelled 'poor' (e.g. Sutton, 2009, on children on a deprived UK council estate). The *almajirai* I got to know well went out of their way to deemphasise in statements made publicly the role poverty plays for *almajiri* enrolment. For example, when the script advisor Muhammad suggested that destitution was indeed a factor underpinning the enrolment of children as *almajirai*, the youths nodded approval. Yet, they did not hesitate for a moment to take him up on his

1 suggestion to disregard this aspect of the system in their script, and invoked any number of

2 social, cultural, and religious arguments to justify enrolment as *almajiri*. They constructed

3 what Sime (2008, cited in the introduction) calls a 'parallel discourse' about their lives, which

4 reinterpreted deprivation as an active choice and necessary sacrifice for religious learning.

5 This raises questions about the potential of the film to draw attention to the roots of the

6 *almajiri* system in the political economy of rural poverty.

7   Narratives of a devoted search for sacred knowledge prioritise the cultural/religious aspects

8 of the *almajiri* system over its material bases. They may easily be turned into culturalist

9 explanations, which, changed into the negative, evoke 'backward' educational aspirations and

10 neglectful and ignorant parents, paving the way for victim blaming. Describing the *almajiri*

11 system in cultural/religious terms alone keeps off the table a debate about the structural causes

12 of the poverty afflicting the constituencies that opt for it.

13

14

15 **Conclusion: A mixed balance sheet as best case scenario?**

16

17   This paper has scrutinised my experiences producing a 'participatory' docudrama with

18 traditional Qur'anic students in Kano, who are both poor and stigmatised. What can we learn

19 from the experiences described here more generally about the potential of 'participatory'

20 research, including 'participatory' video production, for working with groups who suffer from

21 stigma?

22   The project created a space for the *almajirai* to collate their experiences, and to confirm

23 one another's sense that they deserve more respect than society currently accords them. Being

24 taken seriously as spokespersons of the *almajirai* was an 'empowering' experience for the

25 participating youths, I think. Also, the film proved to be an effective medium for transmitting

26 their messages to the audiences they wished to reach, namely the urban middle and upper

classes. That the *almajirai*, who are often considered 'backward' and clueless, could use this modern medium so competently helped them get a hearing, which evidences the potential of filmmaking for working with groups commonly believed to lack competence or 'exposure'.

Yet, at the same time, their weak position within society made the *almajirai* participating in the film project vulnerable to suspicions and accusations in their communities. They were ridiculed as dupes working on the project for free, and suspected of hiding presumed payments so they wouldn't have to share them. As stigmatised groups by definition have little social power, they are particularly susceptible to badmouthing and incriminations. For research to be risk-free and a positive experience for participants, we must take ample account of such pitfalls.

Furthermore, my experiences expose how crucial it is to be aware of the political context of a research project, and of the specific connotations of photographic and film practices in this context. Interventions sponsored by Western donors spur suspicion in northern Nigeria. Pictures and video recordings raise questions about their potential for surveillance and misrepresentation. To ensure a project is safe for all participants, we have to be aware of potential misgivings and manage them carefully.

A further complication arises from the fact that, unlike in most written representations, it is hardly possible to protect the identity of participants in visual representations. As the example of the young actor who was afraid people might consider him an actual thief illustrates, participating in a film project like ours may expose young people to unexpected risks. We have little control over how people receive and interpret the representations we create (cf. Mills, 1997; Nickerson, 1998).

All these factors suggest that to make participation in research safe for members of stigmatised groups it is essential to address their lack of social power and to challenge the roots of their weak position in society. Yet, is 'participatory' research up to this task? Our film project offered a number of immaterial benefits to the participating youths, e.g. in the

1 form of enhanced self-esteem and recognition as the *almajirai*'s flag bearers. Yet, at the same

2 time, it could not remedy the structural inequalities that affect the *almajirai* negatively. What

3 is more, preoccupied with escaping the negative connotations of poverty, the youths drew a

4 picture of their education system that eschewed questions of poverty, and presented it instead

5 as a result of religious and cultural choices. This makes them vulnerable to victim blaming.

6 Does this imply however that we should – for fear of being misunderstood and misconstrued

7 – refrain altogether from engaging stigmatised groups in research, and from creating and

8 circulating representations that show their struggles? Certainly not. But it may be a reminder

9 that 'giving voice' alone is not enough to 'empower' such groups if the structural inequalities

10 that marginalise them remain unchallenged.

11

Notes

[1] The film is available online at http://www.qeh.ox.ac.uk/research/video/video-hlg.

[2] I have not anonymised the participants of the film project, who figure in the film under their proper names. As we publicised the film widely, it is easy to identify the youths who took part in it. While we sought to ensure as far as possible that the messages included in the film do not put the participating *almajirai* at risk (see discussion below), we considered it unethical not to give them the credit for their work. In this paper, I avoid making information directly attributable to specific participants where this could put them at risk or make them uncomfortable.

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