PORRIDGE, PIETY AND PATIENCE: YOUNG QUR'ANIC STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES OF POVERTY IN KANO, NIGERIA
Hannah Hoechner

ABSTRACT

Inequalities are growing on a global scale today and rising consumerism has exacerbated the negative connotations of material deprivation in many places. What does this imply for how poor people experience their situation? What role does religion play in their lives? This paper explores these questions by studying how young Qur'anic students (*almajirai*) in Kano in northern Nigeria experience, and deal with, being poor. In the context of growing violent conflict related to the Boko Haram insurgency, poor Muslims, including the *almajirai*, have frequently been cast as being prone to violence in order to claim their share of highly unequally distributed resources. Religion has often been portrayed as a radicalizing force in their lives. This paper challenges such views. It describes how the *almajirai* deploy religious discourses to moderate feelings of inadequacy and shame triggered by experiences of exclusion. At the same time, recourse to religious discourses emphasizing the values of asceticism and endurance does not further an agenda of social change and thus risks perpetuating the *almajirai*'s weak social position. The paper concludes that consumerism and wealth-based definitions of status are likely to silence demands for social justice.

INTRODUCTION: WHAT IT MEANS TO BE POOR

Your family eats their porridge without soup!

Some months into my fieldwork in Kano State, northern Nigeria, I jokingly complained to a group of children I had befriended in my rural field site of Albasu that nobody had gone to the trouble of teaching me Hausa swearwords yet, which put me at risk of failing to even notice potential insults. To mend the gap in my language skills, one boy[1] gave me the above phrase as an example of an insult among children. Most Hausa dishes consist of cereal porridge (*tuwo*) eaten with a soup (*miya*) that is made, for example, of baobab tree leaves, okra or pumpkin and spinach. Having to eat the sticky *tuwo* on its own indicates dire food deprivation.

I was surprised to learn that labelling someone as being food-deprived was abuse, especially as this came from a boy who himself, by most definitions, would be considered poor. Poverty is both deep and widespread in Kano, especially in rural areas. This is evidenced, for instance, by high malnutrition rates: an estimated 46.3 per cent of children under five years of age in Kano State are stunted (too short for their age), 28.9 per cent of them severely so, which indicates long-term undernutrition. An estimated 17.1 per cent of children under five years old in Kano are two or more standard deviations below the median weight for children of that height, which points to moderate to severe wasting (National Population Commission 2009: 382). Even porridge *with* soup does not necessarily provide children with the necessary balance of essential nutrients and vitamins, and many families cannot afford to buy fruit or meat. How is it that poverty, despite being pervasive, has such a negative connotation in northern Nigeria today, even among the poor? What does this imply for how poor people relate to others who are poor and to the better-off in society?

A growing body of literature explores the experiences of people living in poverty, in Africa and elsewhere. Dissatisfied with income-based definitions, many poverty researchers have urged us to view poverty as a multidimensional experience, which is not conclusively defined by a lack of material possessions (see, for example, Alkire 2002; Sen 1999). What is more, material deprivation has a negative connotation in many places, exacerbating the injury inflicted upon poor people by their lack of material means. Sen (1983: 159) suggests that shame, alongside obvious deprivations such as starvation and hunger, is at the 'irreducible absolutist core' of the idea of poverty. The 'absolute satisfaction' of certain needs – including living without shame – may depend 'on a person's relative position vis-à-vis others' (Sen 1983). Poverty-related shame 'occurs as a reaction to the sense of failure in living up to societal expectations which, in turn, become internalized as personal aspirations' (Walker *et al.* 2013: 217). More than three decades of economic restructuring in the wake of structural adjustment have exacerbated inequalities across the African continent – inequalities of income as well as of health and education. Various authors illustrate powerfully how people's experiences of deprivation are intensified by knowing that others in society enjoy what they do not have access to (see, for example, Ferguson 1999; Katz 2004).

Widespread poverty and inequality have triggered questions about the role religion plays in the lives of poor people. In the context of growing violent conflict relating to the Boko Haram insurgency, poor Muslims in northern Nigeria have frequently been cast as being prone to violence in order to claim their share of highly unequally distributed resources. In both popular and academic writings, religion has been portrayed as a radicalizing agent in their lives, and many authors quote statistics on the high incidence of poverty in northern Nigeria as if such statistics in themselves could 'explain' the current crisis (see, for example, Abbah 2013; Awofeso *et al.* 2003; Comolli 2013; Griswold 2014; Robertson 2012). Yet the empirical evidence that exists about Boko Haram refutes the

'simplistic application of economic deprivation theory' (Umar 2012: 118). The vast majority of poor northern Nigerians have not joined and do not support Boko Haram.

In contrast to discourses casting religion as a radicalizing force, prominent thinkers within the sociology of religion have described how religion can serve to legitimize existing economic and political power relations, for example by levelling poor people's aspirations or by justifying their destitution as divinely ordained (see Bourdieu 1971; Berger 1967). 'Religious capital' and the power to 'produce' particular religious discourses are indeed unlikely to be distributed evenly (Bourdieu 1971). For instance, poor people may have little leverage over religious norms that disparage them, perhaps because they view wealth as a sign of God's favour, and conversely its absence as proof of his wrath or indifference. Yet this should not detract attention from the agency of poor people who may deliberately turn religious discourses to their own ends. For the African context, several authors have described how poor people draw on particular strands of religious ideology to manipulate their social or economic position. The appeal of Islamic reformist ideas to poor urban youth in West Africa, for instance, has been linked to the fact that such ideas provide a justification for rejecting costly traditional social practices such as sumptuous wedding celebrations (see, for example, Kane 2003; Loimeier 2003; Masquelier 2009).

The role played by particular or novel religious movements and ideologies in the economic lives and opportunities of their adherents has been relatively well documented (on Pentecostalism, see Gifford 2004; Marshall 1991; Meyer 1999). However, few authors have taken the experience of poverty, and people's attempts to come to terms with it, as the starting point of their analysis (for a notable exception, see Last 2000a). This means that little is known about how poor Muslims make use of religious discourses to reclaim dignity and resources in the face of poverty. Drawing on ethnographic and participatory fieldwork with

young Qur'anic students (*almajirai*) in Kano in northern Nigeria, this paper offers an empirical enquiry into how young people at the lower end of society use religious discourses to moderate the feelings of inadequacy and shame triggered by experiences of exclusion. It challenges the truism that Islam is ultimately a radicalizing force in the lives of poor young Muslims, and nuances assumptions about its role in legitimizing existing power structures.

The following section discusses methods and data. After introducing the *almajirai*, I trace the historical meanings of poverty in northern Nigeria that provide the backdrop to their experiences. I then ask how the *almajirai* seek to salvage a positive sense of self, and how they relate to others in society. To escape the negative connotations of poverty and to cope with denigrating experiences, the *almajirai* reinterpret their deprivation as a voluntary exercise in asceticism and a necessary part of their education. Also, they claim the religious and moral high ground to rebuke those treating them badly. However, their room for manoeuvre is constrained in a context in which conspicuous consumption is increasingly considered a marker of success and status. Self-assertive strategies go hand in hand with strategies that do not seek to challenge dominant discourses or socio-economic power structures, but instead reinforce them. The conclusion summarizes the lessons that can be drawn from the example of the *almajirai* for the experiences and strategies of poor people more widely.

METHODS AND DATA

This paper builds on thirteen months of fieldwork carried out in Kano State in northern Nigeria 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. Albasu, largely dependent on agriculture, is one of the poorest areas in Kano State. For the remaining nine months, I lived close to the city gate Sabuwar Ƙofa within Kano's Old City. I collected data

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in the form of fieldwork observations, semi-structured interviews, group conversations and casual interactions with *almajirai*, their parents, caregivers and teachers, as well as with former *almajirai*.

My data also include material from participatory research, including discussions of the photographs that young *almajirai* took with disposable cameras, and 'radio interviews' they conducted among themselves with my tape recorder. In addition, I draw on data from the production process of a participatory documentary film or docudrama that I organized during my research about *almajirai*'s perspectives on their lives and the challenges they face. This includes stories narrated or written down during the script-writing process, as well as discussions about the way in which they would like to see their lives and identities represented on screen. The nine participating youths were aged between fifteen and twenty years and came from three different Qur'anic schools in which I had previously taught English.

The following section discusses the context of the *almajiri* system past and present. It traces the decline of this once highly regarded educational institution to the economic, social and political margins, and takes stock of the – overwhelmingly negative – discourses that circulate about it today in Nigeria. Finally, it sets out the reasons why families still opt to enrol children in the system today.

<div align="center">WHO ARE THE ALMAJIRAI?</div>

The *almajirai* are boys and young men from primary school age to their early twenties who come to urban areas to study the Qur'an, often in deprived circumstances. They are enrolled in 'residential colleges' beyond the state's purview and regulatory interventions. Many schools lack physical infrastructure beyond a canopied forecourt where the teaching takes place, compelling their students to cohabit other spaces such as mosques or neighbours'

entrance halls (*soro*). The *almajirai* learn to read, write and recite the Holy Qur'an. Modern and secular subjects, and Islamic subjects other than the Qur'an, do not form part of their curriculum. During their lesson-free time, the *almajirai* earn their livelihood.

As they lack alternative means of subsistence, many young students beg daily for food and money, a task made more arduous by the widespread contempt for *almajirai*. Many *almajirai* complain of being chased away, or being given leftovers that are on the brink of spoiling. Students may also find employment as domestic workers, particularly in middle- and upper-class households. As many women live secluded lives (*purdah*), they depend on children as go-betweens for their transactions with the world outside their compounds. However, payment for such work is often minimal, and treatment sometimes abusive.

The 'traditional' Qur'anic school system is widespread in Muslim West Africa and used mostly by poor rural families. Children are handed over to the teacher (*malam*, or *malamai* in the plural) who receives no salary but lives off the support given by the local community, the alms received in exchange for his spiritual services, the contributions of his students and supplementary income-generating activities. Most teachers are themselves products of the *almajiri* system. 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.

Since modern education was introduced in Nigeria under British colonial rule, the prestige and political influence of 'traditional' Qur'anic scholars have gradually diminished. Economic decline since the 1980s affected the *almajirai* as it reduced both their income opportunities and the ability of others in society to support them through alms (see Lubeck 1985). The emergence of reform-oriented Islamic movements in Nigeria marginalized the *almajiri* system further (see Kane 2003; Loimeier 1997). Increasingly, it attracted criticism 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 (see Bambale 2007). Prestige and status increasingly derive from mastering the 'modern' or reformed forms of knowledge associated with 'high culture' Islam. Such knowledge is taught, for example, in *Islamiyya* schools, which have become popular with many northern Nigerian Muslims. Whereas 'traditional' Qur'anic schools focus almost exclusively on Qur'anic memorization and recitation (using the *qira'a* of Warsh), *Islamiyya* schools teach the Qur'an (*qira'a* of Hafs) as well as other Islamic subjects, including *Fiqh*, *Hadith* and Arabic.

Moreover, the *almajiri* system has been declared responsible for religious violence, particularly since the *Maitatsine* crisis in the 1980s. Members of an Islamic sect, condemning elite corruption and the enjoyment of Western consumer goods, rose against the police, resulting in hundreds of deaths. The *Maitatsine* insurgents were believed to be mainly 'traditional' Qur'anic school students. In the context of the current Boko Haram Islamist insurgency with its attacks on government institutions, including modern and secular schools, 'traditional' Qur'anic students are accused of furnishing the 'foot soldiers' (see, for example, Soyinka 2012).

Today, the *almajiri* system promises neither access to political power nor high social status, its former economic viability has largely been undermined and its religious merit has come under attack. Students are vilified as presumed perpetrators of violence. Yet demand for the system persists. Many believe that this is because parents enrolling their children as *almajirai* are 'backward' and 'negligent' and do not appreciate secular knowledge (see Kumolu 2012; Sule-Kano 2008). However, my research suggests a more complex story.

Increasing acceptance of modern and secular education in principle has been thwarted by state withdrawal from the education sector since structural adjustment (see, for example,

Baba 2011). While basic education is officially free, in reality it implies recurrent costs: for textbooks, writing materials and uniforms, as well as in the form of opportunity costs of foregone children's work (see Tomasevski 2005). Poor-quality teaching (see Johnson 2011), insecurity about the transition to the next level of schooling and more than uncertain pay-offs in terms of future opportunities make parents wonder whether secular school is worth the investment.

Among large parts of the rural population, the *almajiri* system is valued for the Qur'anic knowledge, character building and life skills it is believed to impart (see, for example, Ware 2014 on Qur'anic schooling in Senegal). Strictness and physical punishment are perceived as necessary and even beneficial for a child and his learning, and while it is recognized that parents are reluctant to be too harsh, this is seen as weakness. Thus it appears sensible to send sons away to live with a *malam*.

In addition, the *almajiri* system offers redress for a number of difficult situations. The accumulation of resources to launch an adult career – that is, to build a room for prospective bride(s) and children, and to marry – affords a real challenge to adolescent boys and young men in a largely eroding rural economy where opportunities to earn cash income are scarce. Seasonal or permanent migration to the cities, where petty income opportunities are available as street vendors and odd-job men, promises redress (see, for example, Mortimore 1998). Divorce is frequent and easy to achieve in Hausaland, and often necessitates that children be 're-accommodated'. Divorced mothers, who are expected to remarry soon, can rarely move into new marriages with children from previous ones. Children left with fathers are at risk of suffering neglect, and abuse from stepmothers. High maternal mortality also renders children motherless (Federal Ministry of Health 2011). For boys, the *almajiri* system offers a way out of such constrained circumstances.

In brief, the *almajirai* epitomize a range of social and material deprivations. The next section traces the historical meanings of such deprivations in northern Nigeria. It describes how a context of growing socio-economic inequality and consumerism has exacerbated the negative connotations of poverty. And yet poor people are not helpless victims, and they resourcefully deploy religious arguments to reclaim dignity and resources.

HISTORICAL MEANINGS OF POVERTY IN NORTHERN NIGERIA

It is useful to distinguish between structural and conjunctural poverty, as Iliffe (1987) suggests. The former refers to destitution caused by systemic factors, such as lack of land or labour, and the latter to the momentary deprivation caused by ill fortune or personal failure. We may juxtapose these involuntary forms of poverty with the voluntaristic poverty of the ascetic, who renounces worldly luxuries of his own free will.

Deep structural poverty in Hausaland is largely a product of the changes brought about by colonialization and industrialization, but already in precolonial times, 'a grain-based agriculture dependent upon a short and unreliable wet season bred numbers of very poor cultivators whose condition resulted less from shortage of land or accident of birth than from ill fortune, personal inadequacy, or ... incapacitation' (Iliffe 1987: 34). Moreover, the situation of slaves has long been precarious (see, for example, Smith 1954). Yet in the absence of a modern transport system, which would later concentrate trade and industry in the towns, as a whole the countryside was comparatively prosperous. Poor Hausa could survive on crafts, or by establishing 'a client relationship with a wealthier patron, working on his farm and performing menial tasks in return for subsistence and help in establishing an independent household' (Iliffe 1987: 34). Dire poverty or destitution, when it occurred, implied a 'lack of normal social relations, and hence lack of support (other than charity) when incapacitated' (Iliffe 1987: 42). Precolonial Hausaland also knew the voluntary poor:

ascetic *malamai* who, following longstanding traditions of Sufi scholarship (see, for example, Reid 2013), renounced the pleasures of this world to devote their lives to religion. However, historically, access to a career in Islamic learning was restricted to scholarly families (Smith 1959).[2]

Traditionally, Hausa society juxtaposed *talakawa* (poor commoners) and *masu sarauta* (wealthy office-holders), while slaves constituted the bottom stratum of society. According to Smith, political 'office has always been the principal road to wealth among the Hausa' (Smith 1959: 241). Not only slaves but also *talakawa* stood limited chances of accessing wealth and status, however, as occupational status, which mapped relatively neatly onto wealth categories, was 'almost wholly ascriptive' (Smith 1959: 251). Particular professions were reserved to 'closed descent groups between which all movement is disapproved' (Smith 1959: 251). Social mobility and status could thus rarely be achieved through individual achievement in the professional domain, as Western conceptions of presumably 'self-made' social mobility have it.

While historically access to riches was thus unevenly distributed in Hausaland, wealth was – and still is – considered a blessing that ought to be shared to some extent. 'It is the hoarding of wealth for oneself that is questioned: miserliness suggests the wealth came not from Allah but through some evil pact or witchcraft,' writes Last (2000a: 222–3). Conversely, poverty 'implies either failure in attracting Allah's blessing or a pact that went wrong; the poor are not specially beloved of Allah' (Last 2000a: 223). Alms-giving in this context was (and is) not a 'charitable' act, but meant to 'sacrifice' a part of one's wealth in order to earn protection from the powers causing misfortune. This was a real concern to the powerful, whose 'right to power' depended on their ability to ensure the well-being of their households or communities (Last 2000a: 223).

In brief, with the exception of ascetic scholarship, being poor has long been a sign of low status in Hausaland. At the same time, it was considered divinely ordained rather than self-inflicted and entailed certain expectations towards wealthier patrons, with the effect that dire destitution was limited to exceptional circumstances. To what extent have 'modern' developments altered the meanings of poverty?

People not belonging to 'ruling' families still frequently refer to themselves as commoners (*talakawa*) and attribute a range of conditions and behaviours to this status, which commonly implies a concomitant lack of resources.[3] For example, a poor mother in my rural field site explained to me that she let her daughter marry a well-off medic who treated her badly because 'he has money, and we are *talakawa*. Amina really wanted to marry him, and he brought us so much money.'

Being a *talaka* is not a cause of shame (and slave origin carries little stigma today; see Last 2000a), but, as suggested by the quote at the beginning of this paper, people who are destitute (*matsiyaci*, or *matsiyata* in the plural) are looked down upon. I have not come across anyone identifying himself or herself as being destitute, as destitution is treated as something to be concealed. When I told the youths participating in the film project that there were many poor people in the US, Abdullahi declared the Americans to be 'cunning' (*suna da wayo*): everything looked neat and wealthy in the American films he had seen, so they knew how not to 'show their poor'.

Economic and societal changes and growing socio-economic inequality have exacerbated the negative connotations of poverty. Where inequalities are large, the poor are a particularly long way away from achieving what other people in society have. As suggested in the introduction, this may trigger experiences of shame. Shame arising from a failure to procure material goods may be most strongly felt in societies 'where consumerism is

increasingly seen as the mark of success' (Chase and Walker 2013: 752). However, traditional notions of shame in Hausaland have little to do with one's ability to procure material goods. *Kunya*, which means 'modesty', 'self-restraint' or 'shyness' (see, for example, Gaudio 2009: 208) as well as 'shame', refers to behaviour considered appropriate to someone's age, gender and social status. *Kunya* also refers to a reluctance to publicly display affection, especially affection that is associated with sexual relations (see, for example, Last 2000b: 378). While poverty may not evoke shame in the sense of *kunya* in northern Nigeria, with consumerism gaining momentum,[4] it attracts disdain, especially among those who are not poor.

However, certain cultural and religious discourses seem to impose a limit on consumerist ideologies, or at least to furnish those unable to engage in conspicuous consumption with the necessary vocabulary to reclaim some legitimacy and dignity. Longstanding Sufi traditions of ascetic scholarship are a case in point (see below). Also, Islam encourages 'generosity as reciprocation for God's bounty' and enjoins the Muslim *umma* to 'purif[y] and [maintain] its wealth by giving up a portion of it in alms, and [to take] ample account of the kinsman as well as the disturbing, unknown, poor stranger' (Bonner 2005: 404; see Salih 1999). Poverty is seen not only to put individuals and their faith at risk as it may push them 'to cross the limits of religion and morality' but to endanger 'the security and stability of the society as a whole' (both Al-Qaradawi 1994 cited in Salih 1999: 69).

Religious injunctions enjoining the rich to support the poor generously allow poor people to assess – and judge – the behaviour of the wealthy. For example, the fact that giving in secret does not seem to come easy to the rich in Hausaland gave rise to a mixture of cynicism and amusement among my respondents. The youths participating in the film project considered those donating food during Ramadan to be calculating rather than acting

selflessly. They would give generously during Ramadan (when God rewards good deeds at a tenfold higher rate) but would stop giving once Ramadan was over, the *almajirai* scoffed.

A number of factors work against the interests of the poor, though. The dictates of shame (*kunya*, see above) usually require people to exert self-constraint and modesty, meaning that the poor stand few chances of making effective claims on the resources of the rich. My neighbours' small children, who often came to visit me, for instance, would usually refuse the sweets or fruit I offered them. I learned that their father, the *malam*, had impressed upon them not to accept food from people in the neighbourhood so as not to appear greedy or gluttonous.

The growing gulf between rich and poor also reinforces spatial segregation, as the better-off move to gated communities or shield their compounds with barbed wire and armed guards. This makes it more difficult for poor people to lodge claims and to get a hearing from the rich in society. Furthermore, religious reform movements, which are garnering increasing support, have been said to challenge traditional redistributive practices and to provide ethics that match the new individualistic and acquisitive economic spirit. Kane writes that the reformist *Izala*,[5] founded in 1978 in opposition to the Sufi brotherhoods, appealed to the 'nouveaux riches' brought forth by the oil boom, who sensed that 'some traditional values and institutions hampered their economic goals and curtailed their autonomy'. Religious reformism allowed them to eschew 'costly traditional practices of wealth redistribution' (Kane 2003: 237).

Meanwhile, the increased movement and mixing of people in the context of urbanization and demographic growth may also have contributed to the emergence of strategies to signal status that put wealth or conspicuous consumption centre stage. In a very status-conscious environment like Hausa society, migrating means removing oneself, at least

to some extent and for some time, from one's assigned position within the status hierarchy. Coming to a noisy, crowded and heavily populated city such as Kano means encountering instances of anonymity (Last 2008: 43) and unstable hierarchies made in the present moment. In this context, demonstrations of wealth – expensive cars, flashy mobile phones, glamorous clothes – are a popular default option for those wishing to make claims to high rank.

How do the *almajirai* position themselves within this context and how do they manage to maintain a positive sense of self? The next section describes their strategies to come to terms with experiences of exclusion and denigration. I also highlight the contradictory, potentially self-defeating and socially corrosive effects of some of their strategies.

MAKING SENSE OF INEQUALITY

Asceticism: endurance as a show of faith and character?

Most of the *almajirai* I got to know well were from poor families, and most of the families enrolling children as *almajirai* that I knew were poor. Given current political and economic conditions in northern Nigeria, the *almajirai*'s prospects of escaping poverty as they come of age are slim. Nonetheless, the young people with whom I conducted my research portrayed their deprivation as finite – a temporary sacrifice for knowledge's sake. This not only allowed them to maintain hope for a better future, but also to position themselves within the category of the voluntaristic poor.

I gained the impression that the burden of poverty was easier to carry for the *almajirai* when they could reinterpret it as a deliberate choice. Their teachers did so routinely. The *malamai* I befriended in Albasu considered modesty and frugality outstanding virtues. They were, for instance, reluctant at first to allow their students to participate in our film project as they objected to the presumably immoral nature of the film industry. Once the youths had

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acquired a taste for money, they would not study diligently anymore. They themselves would not do anything for the sake of money, they claimed, but for the sake of God alone. What God provided them with in their fields was all they needed and desired. This, of course, simplified their lived realities, as cash had also penetrated their daily lives as subsistence farmers. Yet, from their declaration transpires the ideal of living uncorrupted by the temptations of money. One teacher in Albasu explained corruption among the Nigerian elites in similar terms: as their children grew up close to money, they would get used to it, and once they were old, they would put the money they received into their bank accounts rather than using it to help the poor.

The *almajirai* could also embrace frugality or asceticism as a desirable, if also necessary, virtue. Cultural norms that ascribe educative value to hardship provide a vocabulary with which *almajirai* can justify their deprived conditions, eschewing the familiar narratives of poverty and parental neglect. In this way, being an *almajiri* can attenuate the negative connotations of poverty. After all, have not the *almajirai* proved their outstanding religious dedication by forgoing the (presumed) comforts of home for the sake of knowledge? The *almajirai* I got to know well worked towards this narrative. During script writing, the boys involved in the film project invoked any number of social, cultural and religious arguments to justify enrolment as *almajiri*, for example:

At home, he [a child] becomes stubborn, quarrelsome with other children and disrespectful towards elders. If he's told to go to school, he doesn't go. He just goes for a stroll, annoying the people in the neighbourhood.
Parents want their children to get to know their religion, and know people, and know how to live together with people.

The youths I got to know well in the course of my research joked about their own and each other's material hardships in a way that made me think of boy scout-style displays of toughness. Ibrahim, for example, a young teacher in Albasu who enjoyed introducing me to curious Hausa concepts, once teasingly asked me whether I knew *gajala*. That was the *almajirai*'s food, he declared, and described the 'recipe': one had to combine soups of various kinds (*miyan kala-kala*), leave the potpourri to stand overnight, and heat it up in the morning. His description of this presumed 'Hausa dish' caused amusement among the bystanders (including other *almajirai*), who were aware that *almajirai* often have to scramble together various different leftovers to fill their stomachs. Ibrahim's description took the edge off the *almajirai*'s food deprivation. Sadisu, an *almajiri* at Sabuwar Ƙofa, boasted that he got so used to eating whatever food he could get hold of, including food on the brink of spoiling, that today nothing could disturb his stomach.

Being poor and being used to exercising 'patience' when it came to monetary expenses (or even the necessities of life) were considered some kind of '*almajiri* trademark'. For example, one evening Abubakar, an *almajiri* from Albasu, called me in Kano while his schoolmates were with me for the film project. He passed his phone to an acquaintance who also wanted to greet me, but quickly took it back and hung up abruptly, although we were only halfway through the standard greetings. The fact that Abubakar did not want to spend his hard-earned phone credit on other people's extensive greetings caused amusement among the other *almajirai*. '*Almajiri – sai a yi haƙuri*!' they explained, laughing. (An *almajiri* has only one option: have patience!) Being able to share one's phone credit generously was not a freedom the *almajirai* could currently enjoy.

Material want caused neither grief nor shame if it could be reinterpreted as a more or less self-inflicted temporary condition one had entered for the sake of knowledge. To

exercise patience (*yi haƙuri*) is a valued cultural skill in Hausa society. It means 'to endure pain, to refrain from letting your passions get the better of you, and to put your trust in God' (Gaudio 2009: 198). In a context where individuals are expected to subordinate their wishes and desires to socially sanctioned norms and authorities, and where people's hopes and future plans are often shattered by difficult economic, social and political circumstances, *haƙuri* is an indispensable skill.

The *almajirai* invoked their own 'proven' ability to withstand hardship to set themselves apart from other young people. In one instance, for example, some *almajirai* from Sabuwar Ƙofa visiting my house were talking about their *malam*'s son Ali; he was slightly younger than them and until now had lived with his parents and had attended a modern secular (*boko*) school. To get him to follow in his footsteps as a Qur'anic teacher, his father now wondered about sending him away as an *almajiri*. The *almajirai* questioned whether this could prepare Ali for the task of teaching *almajirai*. As *ɗan birni*, a 'city boy' (as opposed to a 'villager' or *ɗan ƙauye*), he had not experienced hardship and would therefore fail to comprehend the *almajirai*'s circumstances. He would be unable to exercise enough strictness to ensure that his students studied well. Being able to withstand hardship was also a quality invoked to redeem 'village *almajirai*' vis-à-vis urban *almajirai*, potentially to counter the widespread association of village life with a lack of sophistication and exposure to the world more widely. Buhari, who was studying in Albasu when I met him, told me that *almajirai* staying in Kano City all year round lacked the ability to cope with village life, whereas he and other *almajirai* who migrated seasonally could deal with the challenges of both environments.

Claiming the religious and moral high ground

Mann, when writing about young refugees in Tanzania, states that one strategy children use to keep feeling strong is 'to assert their cultural superiority over that of their hosts in Dar es Salaam' (Mann 2012: 194). I have described elsewhere in detail how the *almajirai* depict themselves as being particularly moral in order to counter negative attitudes towards them (Hoechner 2011). *Almajirai* may also take refuge in self-conceptions that place their compliance with (presumed) Islamic norms in the foreground, relegating lack of economic success to the background. When I asked Ali and Abubakar, two young men and former *almajirai* in Albasu, one of whom was a barber, how their *almajiri* education had helped them in terms of their income-generating activities, they explained it thus:

> If for example you're a barber and charge so and so much, and then someone comes and says, how much is the barbering, and you say 40 Naira [approximately £0.15], and you know actually it's done for 30 Naira, you see, deception has come in. Therefore even if you assemble 1 million, these 10 Naira that you added will spoil all this money [before God]. But if you have Qur'anic knowledge, you wouldn't do this … you wouldn't cheat.

The *almajirai* are certainly not alone in northern Nigeria in using Islam as their primary frame of reference. Together with other economically disenfranchised segments of society, however, they may resort to religious modes of thinking and arguing more frequently so as to maintain viable self-definitions. From the point of view of classical economics, the behaviour condemned in the quote above looks like a fairly conventional procedure to tap customers' willingness to pay. It is reinterpreted in a way that prioritizes moderation in the pursuit of profit and 'honesty' over individual economic advancement. Being able to recast a lack of economic success in positively connoted religious terms may be an important resource to buffer frustration.

Religion also provides a frame of reference for the *almajirai* to preserve their dignity in highly unequal relationships with other members of society. As religious scholars, to some extent they can conceive of themselves as legitimate recipients and even claimants of charity, meaning that they can assess the treatment they receive in religious terms. The *almajirai*'s interpretation of their begging helped them to maintain some self-respect in the face of denigrating treatment. Abdurrahman and Canham (1978: 70), who write about child-rearing in northern Nigeria, ask whether there could be any 'better way to [practise humility] than to make oneself dependent on the charity of others for food and other necessities?' Such an interpretation of begging as an educative practice reverberates, for example, in the following statement by Danjuma (aged fifteen):

> some people think … you come out to beg [because you don't have food in your house]. But it's not like that; it's because you're searching for knowledge.

Before very long, most *almajirai* experience being insulted and chased away when begging. Some even describe physical assaults. As mentioned earlier, begging by *almajirai* has been attacked as un-Islamic. In this context, it is important to the *almajirai* that an interpretation of their begging as a legitimate activity is available. Insiders of the system widely believed that giving alms to *almajirai* was a form of worship. One father, for instance, explained to me that *almajirai* would receive more support nowadays as everyone was searching for a way to earn rewards in heaven.

Almajirai embrace religious interpretations of the charity they receive. For example, one young student I befriended in Albasu had a crippled hand and limped. When I asked him whether he sometimes struggled to find enough food, he explained proudly that six households took care of feeding him. 'Because he is crippled,' a bystander declared. '*Suna kyauta*?' I asked, enquiring whether the food was given as a free gift. '*Suna sadaka*,' I was

corrected: it was given as charity. Whereas gifts (*kyauta*) connote transfers purely between humans, charity (*sadaka*) implicates God in the transfer.[6]

In a similar vein, the *almajirai* I got to know during my research criticized those denying them support and respect for being malign and lacking faith and knowledge. One *almajiri* at Sabuwar Ƙofa (aged fifteen) argued in a 'radio interview' that *almajirai* in urban areas are treated worse than in rural areas because:

> most of the village people are [Qur'anic] teachers, they know the Qur'an and its importance very well. In Kano, some of them are illiterate. They only have the *boko* [modern] studies.

Aliyu (eighteen years old) and Hamisu (about nineteen) equated supporting *almajirai* with having strong faith – and a failure to do so with a lack thereof:

> *Aliyu*: In Nigeria, how many *almajirai* do the rich take responsibility for?
>
> *Hamisu*: Actually, the rich in Nigeria, not all of them have faith [*imani*]. Out of a hundred, you can only get 1 per cent that have faith.

Both the *almajirai* and their teachers thought that the rich in Nigeria did not fear God enough. With Muhammad, for instance, I talked about the differences between the children of the poor and the children of the elites. The latter would smoke marijuana and drink alcohol, some would not pray on time and others not at all, and they would not fast during Ramadan, he told me.

The *malamai* I befriended in Albasu largely commended *hakuri*, patience, as the appropriate response for the poor (*talakawa*) vis-à-vis elite corruption, and they trusted that God would restore justice once the Day of Judgement had come. I was surprised about the serenity and equanimity Ibrahim, a young teacher, and his senior *malam* showed when we

discovered that the Kano State official whom I had asked to convey *Sallah* presents for me to their school had stolen half of them. While I was appalled, the *malam* and Ibrahim shrugged the incident off as unsurprising.

Scott reminds us that, even though 'it may serve just as efficiently to produce daily compliance', 'resignation to what seems inevitable is not the same as according it legitimacy' (Scott 1985: 324). The *almajirai* and their teachers understood that their penury was to some degree the product of other people's actions, and they did not suspend their judgement of people higher up in the hierarchy. Often they invoked God, whom they thought was 'on their side', to substantiate their criticisms. One boy, for instance, argued about people giving bad food to *almajirai*:

> Allah said what you cannot eat, don't give it to someone to eat, even if he's a mad man. The people who are doing this, do not know. May Allah show them the way. May Allah give them understanding. ('radio interview')

The *almajirai* were also confident that God would eventually ensure justice and punish the miserliness of the rich. During script writing for our film, one of the boys drafted a frank appeal to the political leaders and wealthy members of Nigerian society:

> We *almajirai* call upon you, why don't you help the *almajirai*? You should know they are also citizens of this country. Therefore, for God's sake, keep looking after them. Everything you give is your share (*rabo*) in the afterlife. But you don't care, you don't think of the afterlife … ALLAH doesn't care a fig about your money or rule (*mulki*), you will only reap what you have sown. Therefore, better prepare before your death.

In brief, the *almajirai* found strong words to criticize the rich in society, and to demand that resources be distributed more equitably. Yet, at the same time, when relating their own life histories, they concealed compromising personal circumstances. This is what I turn to next.

Keeping up appearances

Walker *et al.*, asking how poor people handle poverty-related shame, found that they struggle to keep up appearances, to conceal their poverty and to avoid 'situations likely to publicly expose their circumstances' (Walker *et al.* 2013: 227). This has also been argued for young people (see, for example, Sutton 2009). The *almajirai* pursued similar strategies. As migrants – newcomers in their places of study and far enough from home to have some control over the information 'trickling through' from their communities – they could keep to themselves the circumstances that had led to their enrolment as *almajirai* (see Hoechner 2013b, where I discuss the opportunities migration offers to *almajirai* in more depth). These circumstances are often experienced as embarrassing, as they are shaped by a lack of support from (supposedly responsible) social elders as a consequence of poverty, divorce or death.

For example, on one occasion, Saifillahi was at my house when two girls from a northern elite family living in the neighbourhood came to visit with a female relative aged about twenty who did not know Saifillahi. While she tried to ascertain his social position, he cunningly avoided answering her questions. Rather than 'giving away' the fact that he was an *almajiri* at my neighbour's school, he declared himself to be 'the one selling petrol along the road'. When we talked about our planned trip to his father's house during *Sallah*, he said he lived 'far … you get there only by car' (suggesting overland travel) – a fairly deceptive description of the slum neighbourhood within Kano City where his father actually resides (some 30 minutes from Sabuwar Ƙofa on public transport).

Even schoolmates who had been enrolled in the same Qur'anic school for years and shared their daily routines with each other as friends knew very little about each other's family backgrounds. Bashir, for instance, did not know that Khalidu was orphaned and had become an *almajiri* as a consequence of parental death. They had been schoolmates for over two years and appeared to be quite close friends.

It is understandable that the *almajirai* seek to keep their life histories private in a context where giving away personal information means making oneself vulnerable.[7] As a researcher, I regularly contravened rules of respect for people's privacy by inquiring into personal circumstances and life trajectories. Expectably, my informants were reluctant to give away compromising information. Often it was only after probing, or engaging other family members in the conversation, that I found out about the underlying material circumstances of a child's first enrolment as an *almajiri*. The young people themselves often prioritized religious and cultural values over material constraints when explaining their careers as *almajirai*.

Idris, for example, in his early twenties, had enrolled as an *almajiri* after only one month of secondary school. When I asked about the school change, he explained it in terms of the importance of religious knowledge in this world and the hereafter. Only when I probed whether any key event had triggered his leaving secondary school did he reveal that his father had died at the time.

When the script adviser, a professional from the Kano film industry, suggested that destitution was indeed a factor underpinning the enrolment of children as *almajirai*, the boys nodded approval. Yet they also agreed to his suggestion to disregard this aspect of the system in their script. On other occasions, the *almajirai* rejected explanations invoking poverty or

difficult conditions at home (such as parental divorce or death) as reasons for *almajiri* enrolment outright. For example, Naziru (fifteen years old) contended that:

> people bring their children to Qur'anic school not because they hate them, but because they want them to have the knowledge (*ilimi*).

I do not mean to imply that people do not mean what they say when they stress the importance of religious knowledge, or that *almajiri* enrolments are necessarily caused by acute household emergencies. Rather, my point here is that people are likely to seize the opportunity to conceal personally compromising circumstances if such an opportunity offers itself. The *almajiri* system and its ideology provide a versatile tool for such concealment strategies. Enrolment as *almajiri* does not require an explanation in terms of personal circumstance: after all, searching for religiously enjoined knowledge is not an endeavour in need of justification. The conclusion considers the implications of strategies that conceal the material bases of the *almajiri* system for opportunities to demand social and economic justice. Yet before concluding, I describe one last strategy employed by the *almajirai* I got to know well, which also has a potentially problematic effect, namely that of shifting the blame apportioned to them onto other *almajirai*.

Assuaging shame through 'othering': corroding social cohesion?

Chase and Walker (2013: 749–50) find that experiences of poverty-related shame, instead of giving rise to collective action, actually undermine social solidarity. Their informants felt that dominant images of the poor as lazy or undeserving did not fit with their own perceptions of themselves and their lives. But rather than rejecting such denigrating images, their informants:

sought to find others who fitted the widely promulgated portrayal of the undeserving poor, hence finding comfort in the belief that they were no longer at the bottom of the social pile … [R]espondents inadvertently divided any concept of 'us' into smaller units and set themselves in opposition to other groups of people in poverty. (Walker *et al.* 2013: 229)

This is a strategy that the *almajirai* also embraced. By distinguishing themselves from other *almajirai*, for example, whom they considered to be at risk or fault, they could escape the negative image of the *almajiri* system in general.

Young *almajirai* are very much at the bottom of the social pile in their schools, and older students often take advantage. For instance, younger students may be sent by older students to beg for food for them. I heard of students who write Qur'anic verses on the right hand of the boys they send to beg: if the ink has come off when the boy comes back (licked off together with the food eaten 'clandestinely' rather than being handed in), he will be in trouble.

While older students thus know how to benefit from the presence of younger students in their schools, the *almajirai* I talked to did not hesitate in drawing a dividing line between themselves and young *almajirai*. The youths participating in the film project held the enrolment of very young children to be largely responsible for the negative image of the *almajiri* system. Too small to do physical work, they would necessarily have to rely on charity for a living. One boy explained that, because they begged on the street and in car parks, chanting '*Allah ya kiyaye, Allah ya kare*' ('May God protect/look after you'), they got on people's nerves and were insulted and chased away. The *almajirai* recommended in their messages in the end credits of the film that parents should not enrol small children, and that if they enrolled them they should visit them regularly.

To put some distance between themselves and the *almajirai* attracting most of the negative attention, the young people also drew a strong dividing line between children begging for money on the street (mostly very young children) and children begging for food at houses (slightly older boys). This argument emerged during our discussions of the photographs the *almajirai* at Sabuwar Ƙofa had taken with disposable cameras in 2009. While they considered 'begging at houses' acceptable and safe, they deemed 'begging on the street' corrupting and dangerous. There was some disagreement as to why *almajirai* take to the street to beg – whether it was because of 'profligacy' (*iskanci*) or because of a need for cash. The children concurred, however, that begging on the street was physically dangerous, as children risked being hit by a car, and that it went hand in hand with truancy. One boy went so far as to claim that begging on the street was not even 'proper begging', as begging (*bara*) was 'house by house' (as opposed to *maula*, which is usually for money). The fact that the young people dissect the broader category of *almajirai* in this way casts doubts on the opportunities for solidarity to develop.

CONCLUSION

Inequalities are growing on a global scale today. Arguably, this alters the way in which poverty is perceived and experienced. This paper has sought to trace such changes in northern Nigeria. I have argued that in a context of growing socio-economic inequality and consumerism, poverty has increasingly negative connotations. Urbanization and demographic growth have given rise to an increased movement and mixing of people. This has increased the importance of material wealth as a sign of status as it can be displayed instantaneously. Lacking material means has become more painful than in the past. Given such changing contexts, how do poor people experience their situation? What role does religion play in their

lives? This paper has tried to shed light on these questions by studying how young Qur'anic students in Kano experience, and deal with, being poor.

Even though structural changes that emphasize consumerism and wealth-based definitions of status constrain their room for manoeuvre, the *almajirai* resist victimization to some extent. By making creative use of religious and cultural arguments, they manage to retain viable self-definitions. They deploy discourses that cast deprivation as a voluntary exercise in asceticism and a valuable form of character building. Also, they put their trust in God and his ability to eventually restore justice. All too frequently it is assumed that poverty and religion, if combined, lead to problematic outcomes. Yet, rather than radicalizing the *almajirai*, religion helps them endure difficulties and denigration. This is an important insight in a global context where Muslims, especially those who are poor, are frequently vilified as 'foot soldiers' and 'cannon fodder' for violence.

While the *almajirai*'s strategies certainly help them save face and buffer frustration, do they have the potential to contribute to social and economic change and a lasting improvement of the *almajirai*'s conditions? In all probability no: by embracing self-conceptions as devoted searchers for sacred knowledge, and by concealing some of their personal circumstances, ironically they become more vulnerable. They adopt a narrative that prioritizes the cultural and religious aspects of the *almajiri* system over its material bases. Thereby, they may unwittingly buttress culturalist explanations. Such explanations often reduce the complex circumstances leading to *almajiri* enrolment to a matter of parental backwardness and religious fundamentalism. Such views, in turn, stigmatize the constituencies of the *almajiri* system and detract from the material context of the system.

Finally, the young Qur'anic scholars I got to know well responded to the negative image of their education system by 'othering' students who were in an even weaker position

than they were. In an attempt to improve their own position, they malign other *almajirai*, for example. This raises questions about the chances for solidarity and social cohesion, and an awareness of the origins of their shared predicament in the political economy – 'class consciousness' – to develop among people on the bottom rungs of society. As long as consumerism and wealth dominate definitions of status within society, it is likely to be difficult for people suffering from the negative connotations of poverty to speak up for themselves and demand social justice.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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