
Reformation of the Almajiri through Formal Education: A Pathway to Countering Religious Conflicts in Nigeria

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Abstract

Religious conflicts have become very rampant in Nigeria, especially in Northern part of the country. A large proportion of these crises have been traced to religious bigotry, intolerant attitude of some religious fundamentalists towards adherents of other religion, as well as some politicians who exploit religious sentiments for their selfish interest. Unfortunately, the vulnerable Almajirai have become easy tools for such misguided mission. The main thrust of this paper therefore, is to examine formal education as a catalyst for reforming the Almajirai as a means of countering religious conflicts in Nigeria. The study employed historical analytical method and considered formal educations to have the capacity to reorient and enlighten the Almajirai to be morally sound, tolerant, and productive in order to promote peace and stability in Nigeria. It also examined Government strategies for the rehabilitation of these vulnerable children, and identified persistent cultural and religious challenges coupled with poor funding as major impediments to the policy. The paper therefore recommended that Government should collaborate with non-Governmental agencies to properly supervise the policy, embark on public enlightenment to disabuse the minds of the Almajirai on erroneous cultural beliefs; employ qualified teachers, provide adequate funding for the programme, and equally include religious education in the school curriculum for moral instructions.

Key Words: Reformation, Education, Religious Conflicts, Almajiri

Introduction

Reformation of the Almajiri through formal education is currently a subject of national discourse. This is against the backdrop of their constant use by disgruntled elements to perpetrate heinous crimes in the guise of religious conflicts. The growing population of these street urchins in Nigeria popularly known as the Almajiri is highly alarming. For many years, the Almajiri syndrome has been a matter of concern to religious, traditional and political leaders, particularly in the Northern part of Nigeria. Several attempts by successive Government to provide a permanent solution to the menace of the Almajiri have so far proved abortive. Available statistics show that there are more than ten million Nigerian children with no access to education. The data also reveal that out of this number, more than nine million are the Almajirai in Northern Nigeria (Sani, 2012). It is disheartening that majority of these children do not attend conventional basic education schools, hence they are products of failed education (Abdulahi, 2012). This explains why unscrupulous political elites who exploit religious sentiments for their selfish interest engage their services to destabilize the serenity of the country. These indoctrinated, vulnerable and disillusioned children have become tools for destruction of human lives and properties.

Ifijeh and Iwu–James (2012) accentuate that the Almajiri (Qur’anic School Pupil), is more of a social problem than a useful member of the society due to lack of formal education. The Quranic Islamic Schools have remained archaic with the adoption of highly compromised administration, curriculum contents, teachers qualifications, teaching method and poor infrastructure. In Nigeria, there are three forms of education: Traditional, Islamic and Western Education. Traditional Islamic education has been in existence in Northern part of Nigeria before the advent of Western education. It has been a cultural value of the Hausas which operated through the Qur’anic schools with the aim of acquainting pupils with the tenets of Qur’an, and possibly emerge as Islamic scholars. Since the commencement of this system of education, the Qur’an has been the core–curriculum based on its pivotal function in the spiritual, social, political and economic lives of Muslims. Ediyang, Bassey, & Ushe, (2020) posit that the Almajiris are vulnerable for being used as political thugs by some politicians who capitalise on their lack of formal education. They are considered as security risks as many of them have become miscreants who actively participate in ethnic, religious violence, as well as terrorism such as Boko Haram.

Interestingly, the Federal Government of Nigeria has made several attempts to integrate Islamic education into Western education with the objective of transforming these street urchins to functional members of the society. To actualize this goal, the Government has built ultramodern schools, and also declared free education across the states where Almajirai exist. This venture ought to improve the enrolment of the Almajirai into schools to acquire formal education. However, much success has not been recorded due to poor supervision, inadequate funding, sabotage by some mallams or Islamic clerics, fear of being converted to Christianity which is incompatible with the Islamic religious norms, and the inability of the Almajirai to fully engage in the programme due to misconceptions and prejudice from religious and political leaders who benefit greatly from their begging activities and illiteracy. In the words of Sufuyan (2012) beyond “area boys’ syndrome” prevalent in some parts of the country, especially during political campaigns, Almajirai are the army of potential criminals that are freely recruited as dogs of war by the Boko Haram and other clandestine groups which have now become national concern. This harsh reality poses great challenge to the very existence of individuals in the Nigerian nation thereby calling for the education of the Almajirai to enable them function effectively as well as promote peace and stability in the country.

There is no gainsaying that the Nigerian Almajiri has been denied the right to education as enshrined in the United Nation’s 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Ughamadu (2016) defines education as the process of changing the behaviour of the individuals in the desired direction. In this regard, Peretomode (2012) cites UNESCO (2009) thus, “Since war begins in the mind of men, it is in the minds of men that the defence of peace must be constructed”. Education, as a major agent of socialization, plays a positive transformational role in changing minds of individuals from evil to good, from conflict to resolution of conflict, and from war to peacemaker. Nigeria certainly needs a well-educated and skilled population to curb religious conflicts. Perhaps, this informed the decision of the Federal Government to initiate the integration of the Almajiri system into the country’s formal educational system. This giant stride is indeed a welcome development. This paper will therefore examine the role of formal education in reforming the personalities of these less privileged children to become useful citizens and future leaders who would propagate religious tolerance, and oppose religious conflicts for peaceful co–existence.

Clarification of Concepts

Formal Education

Education can be defined as the process of acquiring of knowledge, skills, values, beliefs and habits. It is the art of learning about facts, ideas and skills. Ushe (2015) described education as the oldest discipline in human history which deals with the art of imparting and acquiring knowledge through teaching and learning, especially at schools or similar institutions. Adebayo (1997) regards education as the total process of human training by which knowledge is imparted, facilitated, trained and skills developed. It caters for the cognitive, affective, and psychomotor development of individuals. Amadi (1989) corroborates that education being a systematic cultivation of the natural powers of the mind, for the acquisition of skills through training and instruction, has the capability of imparting knowledge to effect discipline and maturity in the recipients to enable them survive as independent entities. Education could be acquired through formal, informal and non-formal means.

Formal education is the acquisition of education through trained teachers in a secluded place, at specific and regular periods. In this regard, formal education is that kind of education that operates in structured environments, which consists of multiple students in classroom learning together under the influence of certified and professional teachers. Adeoseun (2018) adumbrates that Formal education is the process of facilitating learning, thinking, and practice of all that have been learnt in order to obtain solution to problems or life challenges. Through formal education, a child is fully trained to think, discover, and apply solutions to his or her problems. Consequently, the child becomes independent, sociable, self-confident, responsible, respected and knowledgeable with respect to the social values and acceptable norms which ultimately become useful to them, the nation and the entire universe.

Formal Education is the education that is provided in educational institutions and training centres. Appropriate teaching-learning methods are used and within the educational institutions and classrooms, there are proper rules and procedures. Acquisition of formal education would help the individual not only understanding academic concepts, but also to inculcate the traits-virtues of morality and ethics and emerge into principled, honest and productive human beings. Thus, it is comprehensively understood that the acquisition of employment opportunities is the major objective of all individuals. Through formal education, the individuals are able to develop the skills that would enable them to acquire employment opportunities (Radhika, 2019).

The Almajiri System

Etymologically, the term, “Almajiri” evolved from the Arabic word, “almuhaajiroon” or “almuhajirin” translated as “Migration” (emigrant or immigrant). It refers to the traditional or non-formal system of education where a learner or pupil travels from his place of origin to seek Islamic knowledge from a teacher known as “mallam” (Ediyang, Bassey & Ushe, 2020). Abubakar(2016) asserts that Almajiri originate from the concept of Hejira when Prophet Mohammed and his companions migrated to the city of Medina in the year 622CE due to persecution by the Meccan idol worshippers. In Islamic Religion, Prophet Muhammad is said to have legalized the Almajiri system and enjoined Muslims to always leave their homes in search of knowledge. (Sani, 2012). In Hausa parlance, “Almajiri” (singular) or “Almajira” (plural) is variously identified as: a child who engages in some form of labour to fend for himself; any individual irrespective of the gender who solicits for support from house to house or on the street due to some deformity or disability; Children between the ages of 7–15 years who attend Qur’anic schools and equally roam about in order to receive help (Ediyang, Bassey & Ushe, 2020).

Traditionally, the Almajiri system is the method of memorizing texts of the Qur'an for deeper knowledge. Bombs (2003) observes that there are three categories of Almajiri, namely: "Gardi" – Adult; "Titibiri" – Adolescent; and "Kolo" – Infant. Basically, the Almajiri System is a semi-formal education process which depends exclusively on Qur'anic teachings whereby the children, mostly boys are sent by their parents to live with the mallam. It is also the traditional inculcation of children into adulthood that is, learning how to earn a living for themselves, but usually under the tutelage of a mallam. Moreover, these students could serve in their teachers' farms or beg for alms as a compensation for knowledge acquired and their upkeep. In Nigeria, the word has been used interchangeably to mean street urchins or one who abandons Qur'anic schools to continuously beg for arms (Abdusalam, et al, 2012). In the light of this, the Almajiri is popularly referred to as child beggar or child destitute. The plural form is "Almajirai" and they are found mostly in the Northern part of Nigeria. They are usually between the ages of six and seventeen. Abdulahi (2012) observes that they are turned out from their parent's home as early as five or six to live with and memorize the Qur'an from teachers in local "Madrassars" also called "Makaranta alo" (Arabic Schools).

The Almajiri system actually started in the 11th century under the Kanem Bornu Emirs leadership, with the basic aim of training future scholars for the propagation of Islam (Sufuyan, 2012). It was also designed to build in young minds sound doctrines of Islam as specified in the Holy Qur'an. Essentially, it was meant to teach children basic spiritual, moral and social values in order to enhance their sense of responsibility. Sadly, the institution later deteriorated and became highly corrupted. Lamenting on this deplorable situation, Uzuegbu (2012) observes that it has become a platform that breeds vulnerable children now left to wade about the street, to beg alms in order to sustain themselves and their Mallams. Worse still, the leaders and students are averse to Western Education with the view that it is opposed to, and incompatible with Islamic knowledge.

According to Abdusalam et al (2012) it is alarming to know that there are 9.5 Million Almajiri children in Northern Nigeria. Regrettably, it has become a ground for radicalism and misguided missions in recent times. Due to indoctrination, idleness and dejection, the Almajirai are lured by disgruntled personalities into violent acts which result in wanton destruction of human lives and properties in the name of religion. Socially, economically, and politically speaking, it is a very dangerous situation in a nation where ethnic rivalry, religious bigotry and political cynicism hold sway, to have close to ten million illiterate children from poor and socially backward homes roaming the streets without sense of hope for the future.

Religious Conflicts

Religious conflicts refer to a situation in which the relationship between members of two or more different groups in a multi-religious society is characterized by lack of cordiality, mutual suspicion, fear and a tendency towards violent confrontation (Salawu, 2010). Oyesola (2006) postulates that religious conflict occurs when there is a disagreement, dispute or controversy in the opinion of two or more persons, communities, or religious groups. Such contradiction usually fuel suspicion between the religious groups and could generate a violent physical or emotional force which might be injurious to the opponents. Nigeria is a country endowed with multifarious religious beliefs and practices. However, it has witnessed the most perturbing and unprecedented upsurge of religious conflicts in recent times, which threatens its unity as a nation.

The three religions that stand out in the country are: Traditional Religion, Christianity and Islam. These religions exist in the same society and interact with one another. Sadly, the history of religious pluralism in Nigeria is replete with all kinds of painful experiences. This is obviously caused by religious intolerance, bigotry, assertion of religious superiority and

self-determination which manifests itself through political manipulation of religion. Okwueze (2003) opines that some individuals have used religion as a means of facilitating crises of diverse kinds within the nation. He further affirms that these conflicts pose great threat in the sustenance of democratic governance. Naturally, religion is a viable agent of reformation, cohesion and national development, but wrong application by adherents makes it divisive. The religions in question are the two imported monotheistic religions: Christianity and Islam. On this note Egbunu (2009) avers that the very essence and spirit of religion which is supposed to suffuse every facet of individual or societal life is most embarrassingly absent.

Historical Analysis of Religious Conflicts in Nigeria

An overview of religious conflicts in Nigeria reveals that the adherents of the three major religious groups were originally in cordial relationships before the independence in 1960. Subsequently, there was a religious consciousness which ignited the fire of political control on religious affiliations between the Christians and Muslims. This religious awareness, expressed in daily interactions through job opportunities, recruitment into the armed forces and admission into tertiary institutions gradually assumed a religious colouration and created a crack in the relationships between the adherents of the two religions (Ushe, 2015). Obviously, these viewpoints categorically affirm that religious conflicts in Nigeria are hydra headed with social, political and religious undertone. The attitude of intolerance exhibited by the adherents of Christian and Islamic religion has often resulted in successive conflicts emanating between them which sometimes degenerates into violent confrontations or skirmishes.

From 1980 till date, several religious conflicts have occurred in Nigeria claiming innumerable lives and properties. Okwueze (2003) and Salawu (2010) enumerate some of them as follows: The Maitatsine Religious Crisis in the early 1980s by the Cameroonian Islamic cleric Kukah, alias Maitatsine in parts of Zaria, Kano and Bulunkutu in Maiduguri; Jimeta–Yola Religious Disturbances in Adamawa State in 1984. A controversy ensued in 1986 over the purported registration of Nigeria as a member of the Organization of Islamic Countries (O.I.C) by the Ibrahim Babangida’s administration. Besides, Major Gideon Gwaza Orka’s coup attempt in April, 22, 1990 was attributed to religious fracas; Bauchi Religious Riot (1991); Zango Kataf Crisis in Kaduna State in 1992; the move for the implementation of Sharia law in 2002 also resulted in a bloody squabble between the Christians and Muslims (Okoye, 2000); Jos Carnage of 2001, 2008; the agitation against the hosting of the world beauty contest in Nigeria in 2002 culminated in another clash between the two religious groups in Kaduna; and the worst of all, Boko Haram Crisis in 2009 and 2010; the fatal bomb blast on Churches such as St. Theresa’s Catholic Church 2011, Madala and a host of others.

Unfortunately, the institutions of learning are not exempted from this religious fracas. In 2002, there was a clash between Christians and Muslims over the election of the Students Union President of the Federal College of Education (F.C.E.) Zaria. That same year, another riot occurred in Queen Amina College, Kaduna over alleged desecration of the Qur’an. The reprisal attacks that ensue in other parts of the country result in more casualties and great insecurity of lives and properties. Incidentally, these conflicts are masterminded by some religious fundamentalists and politicians who exploit religion to satisfy their selfish interest. Sadly, while their children are in special and secured schools outside the country, they manipulate the less privileged children like the almajirai to perpetuate all manner of evils in the guise of religion. Lamenting on this pathetic situation, Sufuyan (2012) exclaims that these almajirai have unwittingly lent themselves to despicable usage by these power mongers.

Government Strategies for the Rehabilitation of the Almajiri: How Feasible?

The Federal Government on April 12, 2012 inaugurated the First Almajiri Model School in Gagi, Sokoto State in the bid to confront the Almajiri menace. This is in consonance with the objective of National Commission for the Eradication of Child Destitution established for facilitating the integration of the Almajiri Schools into Western Education, while maintaining their purposeful identity (Abubakar, 2016). At the inauguration, President Goodluck Jonathan reiterated the determination of his administration to take the 9.5 Million Almajirai off the streets and give them quality education in a conducive environment. This accrues from the notion that knowledge is the foundation on which a nation's social cohesion and economic development depends, hence the need to cater for the educational needs of the Almajirai (Abdusalam, et al 2012). To strengthen the initiative, the following strategies were mapped out;

- The President approved the construction of more than 400 Almajiri Model Schools in 19 States of Northern Nigeria.
- About 100 out of 400 built schools were expected to be delivered before the end of June, 2012.
- The Federal Government constructed and delivered 35 Model Schools – 10 boarding and 25 Day Schools at the cost of 5 billion naira.
- Universal Basic Education Commission (UBE) intervention project concurrently constructing 51 Almajiri Schools including boarding and day schools across the country to be later handed over to the State Universal Basic Education Board to manage.
- Each School will be equipped with basic science laboratory, computer, room, vocational education workshop and library.

The effort of the Federal Government to integrate the Almajiri System into formal education was applauded as calculated steps in ensuring equal access to education in the North for enduring peace. However, several persons expressed fear that the policy might suffer “policy summersault” which has been the hallmark of policies and initiatives in Nigeria. For example, the Nomadic Education Scheme, established in 1989 by the Babangida regime with the aim of bridging the literacy gap between the Fulani and the rest of the society among others was hampered by faulty procedure, inadequate finance, poor supervision, incessant migration of students, obsolete data, lack of qualified teachers and religious taboos (Abdusalam et al, 2012).

Already, some of the Imams and instructors of the former Almajiri traditional school in Gagi have expressed distrust towards the programme due to non-involvement. What is the guarantee that such persons will not sabotage the Government effort? Besides, Government's promise to build at least 100 Almajiri Schools is yet to be fulfilled. The libraries and laboratories are yet to be fully equipped. With the former corrupt Almajiri teachers still retained as head teachers, the programme appears to be a complete fiasco. This laudable initiative is yet to produce the desired result due to laxity, corruption, selfishness and ignorance. The Almajirai who are averse to Western education due to indoctrination and ignorance need to be reoriented with the myriad profits and freedom associated with literacy. As a matter of fact, formal education remains the most viable means to reform the Almajirai if properly implemented with the right motive for peaceful coexistence in Nigeria.

Formal Education of the Almajiri, a Gateway for Curbing Religious Conflicts

The current spate of violence in Nigeria which presents itself in form of religious conflicts, Boko Haram menace and all manner of social vices, traceable to the Almajirai will receive a permanent solution if the Almajirai are reoriented and rehabilitated through Quality formal education. Obviously, the resolution should be through rapprochement. Gofen (2004) postulates that rapprochement is not limited to purposeful dialogue, but a dialogue that is

embarked upon through education geared towards reconciliation of the adherents of different religious groups in Nigeria. Formal education has the capacity to refine individual's mindset. Onwuka (2012) asserts that education is an indispensable means of unlocking the human mind and protecting his personality. This assertion is justified on the ground that when an individual is educated, he experiences an inner reformation which broadens his horizon and enables him to make useful personal decisions. Abubakar (2016) observes that migration, begging and Quranic education are part of Hausa life and culture, hence they are uncomfortable with Western education which is contrary to their cultural values. Besides, there is the misconception that they might lose their children to Christian religion which is incompatible with Islamic religion. Through enlightenment, the Almajiai would understand that formal education is not exclusively for Christians as explained below.

The European missionaries introduced Western education into Nigeria in 1842 as a vehicle for evangelism (Fafunwa, 1977). The Western part of the country willingly embraced the system, while the Northern part rejected it and entrenched Islamic schools which concentrated mainly on Islamic education based on Qu'ranic teachings. Originally, the missionaries' concept of education for the Africans was rudimentary enlightenment which would only aid the converts to read the scripture and moral instructions as well as translate it into their various languages. However, this was contrary to the expectations and aspirations of the converts and educated liberated slaves for their fellow countrymen. In their view, secular education is a gateway to the secrets of European science and technology which could not be actualized through half-hearted approach. Thus, their sharp resistance to the missions' half-baked education policy resulted in the introduction of Grammar Schools to train the children of their converts. Subsequently, in 1882, the colonial Government adopted the policy of education for the people in their colonies. That venture led to the emergence of Kings College, Lagos in 1909 (Ushe, 2015).

Incidentally, during the tenure of Lord Lugard in the North as first high commissioner, he explicitly directed that Christian Missionaries should focus their educational programme to the non-Muslim areas. According to Ushe (2015) that instruction was not an act of patriotism, but based on the opposition of the Northern oligarchy to secular education. Besides, it was in accordance with the British interest to hold indefinitely to power. Sadly, the numerous Qur'anic schools scattered throughout the North with thousands of pupils do not provide any form of literacy and training that would produce functional members of civil society. Consequently, the Northern part of Nigeria has the highest percentage rate of illiterates in Nigeria due to ignorance. Essentially, the system of education currently practiced in Nigeria and officially approved by the Federal Government is Formal Western Education, devoid of interference by any religious group as erroneously assumed by the Northerners. Individuals attend educational institutions to acquire formal education, to be trained to think and socialize in order to fit properly into the society. Undoubtedly, when the right to education of the Almajirai is guaranteed, and his access to and enjoyment of other rights are enhanced, he will understand that "one's right stops where other person's own begins (Ekwunife, 2003).

In addition, Education is a veritable instrument of empowerment of human beings and nations. Since formal education entails impartation of knowledge by qualified and professional teachers, the Almajirai would be equipped to effectively lead productive public and successful personal lives in accordance with their talents and interests. But this system must be such that gifted individuals have ample opportunity to develop their skills. It must promote cultural understanding and respect, universal moral values and social cohesion, social justice, peace, harmonious co-operation and co-existence (Pretomode, 2012). With the preoccupation of the Almajirai in various areas of interest for their future progress, they

would no longer be indoctrinated and used as agents of vandalization in the guise of religion. Rather, their socialization with people from other parts of the country would spur them to advocate for peace and unity.

Moreover, formal education will help to inculcate sound moral values and the spirit of 'learning to live together' (LTLT) into the Almajirai. The reason is because formal education encompasses various fields of learning, ranging from Science, Social Sciences, Arts which involves religious education and a host of other disciplines. Learning to live together is an on-going UNESCO-supported education framework in which citizenship education in the 21st century is emphasised. It advocates pedagogical practices and learning materials fostering tolerance, social cohesion, intercultural understanding, sustainable development facilitating peace, non-discrimination, and dialogue among people—all these are key elements that citizenship education should nurture (UNESCO, 2011). Peretomode (2012) advocates that LTLT education programme is also considered as a social necessity as it socializes the individual in the society where learning and sharing takes place. It is through education that the four pillars of learning can be emphasized:

- Let us work together; Think together,
- Learn to live together; Achieve together with no hatred to each other.

Bhagabati (2006) puts it thus, "Everyone must learn to live in harmony and in a violence free environment". The above knowledge when inculcated into the Almajirai will propel them to imbibe the spirit of love and tolerance and ultimately detest all forms of violence. They would also be equipped to formulate ideas for resolution of problems confronting them in the wider society. By so doing, the potential leadership qualities of the Almajirai would be fully harnessed.

From the definitions of education, it can be deduced that in the course of being educated, an individual learns to uncover solutions to the problem of humanity. For instance, most discoveries and inventions were realised through educational research. Yet, in seeking solution to these challenges, thinking is the fundamental instrument to be applied. Inadvertently, an individual is compelled to ponder over the possible causes of the problem and its remedies. This explains the fact that education is not just the learning of facts, but the training of the mind to think. During the learning process, the person meditates on the subject matter in order to understand and capture the mind of the speaker or instructor. Thus, teaching and learning entails the training of the mind to think. Undoubtedly, thinking is the initial step for unravelling solutions to the problems of mankind. Through training, one is propelled to think to enable him socialize and respond appropriately to issues, and equally exercise respect for human rights. Based on this understanding, it is expedient for the Almajirai to take advantage of formal education accorded by the Federal Government for the reformation of their minds for them to be well behaved and fitted properly into the society.

Recommendations

To enhance effective and efficient implementation of the Almajiri education for a permanent solution to religious conflicts in Nigeria, the paper recommends the following:

- ❖ The Almajiri system should be completely dissolved to enable the formal education start on a new platform
- ❖ Young graduates should be employed and trained for quality education of the Almajirai
- ❖ Religious education should be included in the school curricular as a means of inculcating moral values into the Almajirai
- ❖ Religious adherents as well as the Almajirai should be encouraged to embrace the virtue of tolerance and practice sincere dialogue.

- ❖ The Government, non-governmental agencies and philanthropic individuals should embark on public enlightenment of the programme to enable the Almajirai understand the benefits.
- ❖ Government should make fund available since it is capital intensive and good salary should be paid to the teachers
- ❖ Government should erect more structures as promised as well as equip the libraries and science laboratories
- ❖ Government should supervise the project continuously to ensure proper compliance by parties involved.

Conclusion

Formal education of the Almajirai is the fundamental prerequisite for the reformation of their minds in order to counter the prevailing religious conflicts in Nigeria. As their horizons are broadened through quality education, the Almajirai would imbibe the unique values of fostering tolerance, social cohesion and intercultural understanding. However, to sustain this distinctive policy and ensure that it does not fade into irrelevance, the Federal Government should adopt sincere and adequate modalities as discussed in this paper. Formal education can effectively be utilised to resolve religious conflicts and sustain national unity.

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