

**SITUATIONS OF THE AL-MAJIRI SYSTEM OF EDUCATION IN
CONTEMPORARY NIGERIA: MATTERS ARISING**

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Abstract

Like any other traditional system of education in other parts of the Muslim world, the al-Majiri system in Nigeria used to be a decent and reputable scheme that produced eminent scholars and policy makers. It mustered support and solidarity from all stakeholders and propelled the nation to enviable status in literacy, social, diplomatic and economic spheres, to mention a few. Its prominence however took a nosedive with the arrival of the British who hijacked the administrative power in the land and relegated all religious and traditional structures to the background. The upshot of this scenario paved the way for all forms of adulteration being smeared on the system today, which denigrates the whole structure. Numerous social vices are being linked to the managers and pupils of the scheme, which inevitably provoked calls for its abolition from some quarters. This paper holistically examines the scheme and scrutinises its operability, viability and sustainability for today's world. Besides being historical and analytical in its disposition, the paper exploits the philosophical method in proffering practicable suggestions on how the scheme could be properly managed and integrated into the modern system of education to realise its objectives.

Keywords: *Al-Majiri education, Islamic education, Traditional education, Nigeria*

Introduction

Islam regards knowledge as the pedestal of civilisation and foundation of human development in both physical and spiritual realms. Significance of knowledge acquisition was evidently demonstrated when Allah instructed Prophet Muhammad to seek knowledge before entrusting him with His Message to the entire mankind.

Read! In the name of your Lord, Who has created (all that exists), Has created man from a clot (a piece of thick coagulated blood). Read! And your Lord is the Most Generous, Who has taught (the writing) by the pen, Has taught man that which he knew not. (Qur'an 96:1-5).

Being the vicegerent of Allah on earth, mankind and most especially Muslims have been enjoined to acquire knowledge for proper understanding of their religion as well as for adequate preparation for challenges of existence. “The search for knowledge is obligatory upon every Muslim.”¹ Prophet Muhammad was also reported to have said: “Wisdom (knowledge) is the lost property of the believer, wherever he sees it, he picks it up.”² As a way of demonstrating the gulf between knowledge and ignorance, the Qur’an asks a rhetorical question: “Are those who know equal to those who know not?” (Qur’an 39:9). Abu Amamah, a Companion of the Prophet also mentioned that: I heard the Messenger of Allah saying: “Read the Qur’an, for it will come as an intercessor for its reciters on the Day of Resurrection.”³ Aside the call for acquisition of knowledge, the Prophet equally mandated the believers to disseminate whatever they have acquired to benefit mankind. “The best amongst you are those who learn the Qur’an and teach it to others.”⁴ In order to answer this clarion call, Muslims across the world, from one generation to another put in their best to educate themselves and disseminate the knowledge they acquired. Their efforts in this regard gave birth to the *Kuttub* or *madrasah* in the Arab world, North Africa, and part of Asia, the *Pondok* in Malaysia, the *Pesantren* in Indonesia, the *Tsangaya* or *al-Majiri* in Nigeria and other numerous systems in other parts of the Islamic world.⁵

The *al-Majiri* system in Northern Nigeria, which forms the nucleus of our discussion in this paper, was said to have begun around 11th century in Kanem-Borno and was later replicated in the Sokoto Caliphate after the triumph of the Jihad led by Sheikh ‘Uthman Dan Fodio (1754-1817).⁶ These two empires promoted the scheme and supported it with the state resources. Besides authorities’ recognition and promotion, the scheme also enjoyed the support of other major stakeholders, such as the community, the parents and the pupils themselves. In other words, the stakeholders regarded the scheme as their own collective project, which must not be left to “whom it may concern”. The products of the system, in addition to their role as teachers, Imams and preachers, formed the crop of elites that manned various government organs and parastatals in the pre and post-colonial era in Northern Nigeria. Similarly, they played significant roles during the Indirect Rule introduced by the colonial authorities in the region, as the *Ajami* (writing and reading of Hausa language in Arabic Alphabet) was widely used throughout the region. The British were left with no option but to recruit them as clerks and office attendants in the heyday of colonial activities in the area⁷

The fortune of the *al-Majiri* system however took a nosedive as the British invaders relegated it to the background by starving it to a comatose state, alleging that promotion of religious education was not the government’s priority, though the same state funds were later used to propagate Christianity in the land. As such, demonization of the scheme was predicated upon the double standard exhibited by the British “conquerors”. Since the state funds were no longer there to finance the scheme, the whole project crumbled and its admirers and

sympathisers became helpless. The teachers and their pupils were later regarded as a bunch of illiterates, due to their deficiency in the newly introduced literacy order called *karatun boko*, Western education. In order to make ends meet, both the teachers and pupils of the *al-Majiri* scheme now turned beggars, which formed the origin of the *al-Majiri* dilemma today.⁸ It would be an unfair and otiose statement to assert that the government of the day has done nothing to return the scheme to its lost glory. Through various organs, such as the National Programme for Nomadic and The National Council for the Welfare of Destitute (NCWD), the authorities have fashioned out ways by which the over 10 million indigent children can be rehabilitated and provided with formal education.⁹ However, a lot needs to be done as the present state of affairs, especially with regard to the *al-Majiri* system remains a smear on the face of the authorities and the generality of Nigerians.

Evolution of the *Al-Majiri* System

The basis for the *al-Majiri* system of education is entrenched in the Islamic tradition of prioritising knowledge over any other things admired by the believers. As such, it is believed that once a person is knowledgeable any other things he wishes to acquire in life become easier. That is why many Muslim scholars left the comfort of their homes and places of birth to other parts of the world in search of knowledge. They put themselves in such disquieting situations in order to benefit themselves, their immediate community and humanity as a whole. This assertion is apparent in the meaning of the word *al-Majiri*, which is a derivative of the Arabic terminology *al-Muhajir* (the traveller or migrant).¹⁰ The expression is customarily used in depicting someone who migrates for a precious purpose. Popularity of the lingo is dated back to the heydays of Islam when the Prophet and his Companions migrated from Makkah to Yathrib, later known as al-Madinah. Similarly, Allah uses the expression in various verses of the Qur'an while referring to the believers; "And the first to embrace Islam of the *Muhajirun* (those who migrated from Makkah to Al-Madinah) and the *Ansar* (the citizens of Al-Madinah who helped and gave aid to the *Muhajirun*) and also those who followed them exactly (in Faith). Allah is well-pleased with them as they are well-pleased with Him..." (Qur'an 9:100). He also says in another verse: "Allah has forgiven the Prophet, the *Muhajirun* and the *Ansar* who followed Him (Prophet Muhammad) in the time of distress (*Tabuk* expedition, etc.), after the hearts of a party of them had nearly deviated (from the Right Path), but He accepted their repentance. Certainly, He is unto them full of kindness, Most Merciful" (Qur'an 9:117).

In Northern Nigeria, *al-Majiri* is particularly used to refer to school-age children who leave the comfort of their homes and parental care to seek knowledge in nearby towns and cities.¹¹ The efforts exerted in expeditions for knowledge by many famous Muslim scholars in the ilk of al-Imam as-Shafi' (767CE-820CE) and Ibn Khaldun (1332CE-1406CE), etc could be akin to this

system. As earlier mentioned, the scheme was enthusiastically supported by all stakeholders in the education enterprise, which enabled it to record unprecedented success in the pre-colonial epoch in Northern Nigeria. In addition to free tuition the Mallam (teacher) provides for the pupils whose population may be as much as the teacher can accommodate. He also provides feeding and lodging for his wards free of charge with the support of the community and some well-meaning members of the society. The culture of generosity and being one's brother's keeper that were held in high esteem in those days actually assisted the *al-Majiri* system. With meagre income, support from farming and the public, the Mallams were able to sustain and maintain their schools.¹² The arrival of the British colonial Masters however stole this away from the scheme, its supporters and admirers. Those who operated the system afterwards were doing so on their own. The attention of the parents, community and other stakeholders was shifted to the trending western system of education, which is funded with the state resources. Those who patronise the *al-Majiri* schools today deny themselves Western system of education.¹³

The Al-Majiri System in Recent Times

Unlike pre-colonial Nigeria, when the *al-Majiri* system of education flourished and recorded exceptional accomplishment in literacy and social services, the system is today faced with a myriad of challenges with glaring abnormalities. Since the live wires that used to be sources of funding and morale booster for the scheme have been cut, the proprietors of *Makaranta Alo* (local *Madrasah*) and their pupils were left "to whom it may concern".¹⁴ Findings revealed that 6 out of 10 of the *al-Majiri* pupils never find their way back home. Many lose their lives through street violence, ritual killing, kidnapping, disease and hunger.¹⁵ Those who are able to survive the harsh condition they are subjected to exhaust most of the profitable hours of learning on the streets in the name of eking out a living, while majority of them eventually drop out in the long run. Instead of being brought up, they grow up like wild grass and lose out on all grounds; educationally, morally and, above all, religiously. It is on record that the current insurgency in Nigeria and neighbouring countries handily recruit their foot soldiers from the *al-Majiri* schools after brainwashing them that the Western system of education is a sin.¹⁶ Through this loophole, the future workforce of the nation that is supposed to man various sectors of the economy slowly but steadily and gullibly wastes away. Those who prefer a "dignified" means of livelihood among them end up as *maigadi* (security guards), housekeepers, bus drivers, conductors, etc. The lazy ones who are comfortable with the life on the street continue to beg throughout their lives. The luxury loving ones usually end up as political yobbos and live on handouts from unscrupulous politicians. One may argue that it is inconceivable to expect that everybody would be at the helm. From among those who are privileged to have formal education, some would be

leaders, while others would be the led. In response to this, Prophet Muhammad was reported to have said in a hadith narrated by Abu Hurayrah:

A strong believer is better and is more lovable to Allah than a weak believer, and there is good in everyone, (but) cherish that which gives you benefit (in the Hereafter) and seek help from Allah and do not lose heart, and if anything (in the form of trouble) comes to you, don't say: If I had not done that, it would not have happened so and so, but say: Allah did what He had ordained to do, and "if" opens the (gate) for the Satan.¹⁷

Going by the spirit of the above hadith, Islam discourages the believers from condemning themselves to the low ebb of affairs right from the onset. One has to aim high and work towards achieving his goals. But if after exerting all necessary efforts towards achieving one's lawful desires and it turns out the other way, one must succumb to destiny.

The word, *al-Majiri*, which used to command respect, sympathy and solidarity, nowadays generates obnoxious feeling in the public domain. What quickly comes to the mind of many people whenever the word is uttered is the image of malnourished and destitute school age-street children, who constitute public nuisance and security threat to the society.¹⁸ In addition to child labour, child abuse, and a vague future, the *al-Majiri* pupils today are being linked to the insurgency in the country due to their vulnerability to crime. While justifying this assertion, some analysts argue that a person who solely relies on begging for survival; who is enduring instead of enjoying the preamble of his life as a result of societal negligence; and who does not know where his next meal will come from, can easily fall prey to terrorists' biddings through a peanut bait. As such, the *al-Majiri* system in its current state is akin to a societal time bomb waiting to be remotely detonated.¹⁹

Operability and Sustainability of the Al-Majiri System Today

Many challenges militating against the *al-Majiri* scheme in contemporary times could be regarded as spanners in the wheel of its progress. Those who were operating the scheme during its heyday were doing so in response to the clarion call made by the Prophet that "the best amongst you are those who learn the Qur'an and teach it to others."²⁰ The Prophet reiterated this call in the occasion of his farewell sermon in which he was reported to have said that those who were present should disseminate his message to those who were absent. By engaging in this noble task, the society in turn encouraged them as a way of contributing their own quota to the wellbeing of the educators on the one hand, and, as an avenue for expressing their gratitude to the instructors on the other. In order to supplement the token the society was offering them to support their families, the *Mallams* (teachers) on their part had other sources of livelihood such as farming, fishing, trading, etc. In other words, they valued dignity of labour and ensured that their reputation was not tarnished. The pupils of those days were equally

exceptional in their commitment to learning. They maximised their chances of being the best they could be by burning the midnight oil.

Unfortunately, majority of those operating the system today lack prudence. They want to live flamboyantly at the expense of their pupils and the society.²¹ The departure of the *al-Majiri* operators from the traditional life of dedication to their calling to a life of greed and over-ambitiousness, the negligence of the parents and the society of their responsibilities in the hands of caregivers, the lackadaisical attitude of the current crop of pupils who value street life more than education are some of the indicators that make it difficult if not impossible to successfully operate the *al-Majiri* system of education nowadays. Therefore, the above scenarios suggest that the *al-Majiri* system might have outlived its relevance, as the problems of the scheme have been compounded by the fact that the *Mallams* are not remunerated, the pupils are not certificated, and no specific duration is set for completion of the programme. All these aberrations and many more are major deficiencies that constitute a debacle in the smooth running of the scheme, which make its operability and sustainability a mirage in today's world.

Government Integration Programme

Based on the National Policy on Education and transformation agenda of Goodluck Jonathan's administration in the country, the Federal Authority took special interest in integrating the *al-Majiri* system into the main stream educational system in the country. This was formally signed into law and presented to the National Economic Council in July 2013.²² On the occasion, the then Minister of State for Education, Nyesom Wike reiterated that the authority had set up the National Committee on Implementation of *Al-Majiri* Education Programme to ensure that the pupils are provided with opportunities to access Basic Education. The Programme, according to him, would also involve acquisition of various skills to enable them participate more positively in the development of their immediate environment and the nation at large.²³ This development is an indication that the Federal Authority has not turned a blind eye to the menace of the *al-Majiri* system. Similarly, a visit by the author to some *al-Majiri* facilities in Niger and Nasarawa States revealed that the authorities are really committed to the integration of the *al-Majiri* pupils into the nation's educational system. Quadri also acknowledges government's intervention through the Tertiary Education Trust Fund (TETFund) and Universal Basic Education Commission, which culminated in the provision of day and boarding facilities for the pupils and their teachers.²⁴ In addition, an in-depth survey carried out by the Leadership Newspaper, one of the leading dailies in the country revealed that the Federal Government has intervened in ameliorating the plight of these children. Classroom blocks are being constructed across the Northern parts of the country where the system is being practiced. For smooth implementation of the programme, the Federal Authority sometimes collaborates with the state

authorities by providing infrastructures while the states take care of staffing and pupils' enrolment. Among the benefiting states in this intervention are Niger, Jigawa, Zamfara, Sokoto, Kebbi, Kaduna, Plateau, Taraba, Yobe, Adamawa, Bauchi and Katsina.²⁵ While commending the government's efforts in providing enabling environment and necessary facilities for the *al-Majiri* pupils to be properly educated, Quadri reiterates that for this gesture to have meaningful impact on the lives of the pupils, it must be properly maintained and sustained by the authorities. In the same vein, he warns that parents must take the destiny of their children in the own hands by ensuring that they are immunised against deadly diseases such as polio to complement government's efforts in eradicating street begging.²⁶

Having acknowledged the involvement of the authorities in finding a lasting solution to the problem, a lot needs to be done as some of the infrastructures in some states are lying fallow and unattended to. After the euphoria of groundbreaking and commissioning ceremonies, some state governments starve the scheme and allow it to die a "natural death".²⁷

The Way forward

In order to change the status quo with regard to the *al-Majiri* situation in Nigeria today, all stakeholders must work together to put a stop to the embarrassing situation. Muslim scholars and leaders in the affected areas should encourage Muslim parents to accord upbringing and education of their children adequate attention. They should be educated that contrary to what some misinformed elements among the Muslim community harbour in their minds, western education is not a sin and Islam challenges Muslims to seek any form of knowledge, so long as it does not contravene the teaching of Allah and His Prophet. Caution should also be exercised before entrusting their children to relatives and caregivers. In a situation where sending the children out to live with a relative or caregiver is inevitable, the guardian should be adequately supported, especially when he is not economically buoyant. Unscheduled visit should be occasionally embarked upon to have first-hand assessment of how the children are being catered for. These measures are envisaged to forestall child labour, child abuse, hawking and street begging. The authorities on their part should live up to expectations by providing social amenities in the rural areas to dampen down rural urban migration. In the same vein, enabling environment should be created for middle and lower classes of the society to lead a better life devoid of humiliation and dehumanisation in the hands of the elites and the well-to-do in the society.

Owing to the above analyses of the anatomy of the *al-Majiri* system of education and its intrinsic problems, the paper proposes the following recommendations:

1. As earlier asserted, the key players in the education sector should key into the authority's intervention of giving the *al-Majiri* pupils a second chance.
2. Competent and qualified Muslim teachers should be employed in government owned institutions to allay the concern of some Muslim parents who are afraid of losing their children to Western ideology.
3. The Northern Governors Forum should properly scrutinise the activities of the mushrooming glorified *al-Majiri* schools in the name of private schools in their states.
4. In order to secure a befitting future for the Nigerian children, quality should not be sacrificed on the altar of quantity at all levels of the nation's educational institutions.
5. The search light of future studies should be beamed at rehabilitating the "area boys" in the southern part of the country.

Concluding Remarks

The paper maintains that in order to avert greater catastrophe more than what is being experienced in Nigeria today as a result of laxity on the part of the major stakeholders in the education sector, all hands must be on deck. Bastardisation of the *al-Majiri* system by its contemporary operators, pupils and the society encourages child abuse, and, above all, portrays Islam in bad light to the outside world. The current system should be abolished as it puts the future of the younger generation in jeopardy. The government integration scheme is a welcome development provided it is sustained by successive governments. In order to avoid abandonment, which customarily characterises some of such interventions, the programme should be adequately funded and backed up by necessary laws at the federal and state levels so as to compel succeeding authorities to make adequate budgeting for its funding.

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