



# Contemporary muslim educational system: *Almajiri*, misconceptions and the positive emerging trends in Kontagora, Niger State

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## Abstract

The *Almajiri* system of education has been viewed by many Muslims and non-Muslims as a menace in contemporary times. Most people see it as a form of education that the learners become a nuisance to the society as a result of associated begging and other perceived forms of child abuses; despite the fact that most of the *Mu'allim* do not consent to this unfortunate happening in the society. This paper brings to light some of the misconceptions associated with the *Almajiri* system of education. It also highlights some of the modern trends in the *Almajiri* system of education especially in selected *Zawayah* in Kontagora town of Niger State. Some of the modern trends include establishment of *Islamiyyah* under the *Zawayah*, introduction of uniforms, *Tajwid* classes and certification of learners on graduation. In conducting this research, oral interview was conducted with relevant stakeholders in order to gather adequate information. Some suggestions were proffered at the end of the paper, such as: Muslim intellectuals should conduct fact finding researches on real *Almajiri* education, rather than banking on conjectures as it is believed that the learners of this system are a nuisance to the society. Also, seminars and workshops should be conducted to enlighten the educators under various *Zawayah* and *Tsangaya* to embrace modern trends in teaching of Islamic religious studies in order to meet up with contemporary ways of acquisition of knowledge.

**Keywords:** *Almajiri*, Modern trends, Misconceptions, Education, *Zawayah*

## Introduction

The search for and acquisition of knowledge is one of the first and major aspects of a Muslims' life. That's why anywhere Islam goes it takes along with it the quest for knowledge for it is with the knowledge acquired that a Muslim is able to serve his creator Allah to the best of his ability. Throughout the history of Islam, Islamic education is not left out, that's also why in every Muslim community there's the traditional *Makarantun Allo* (singular *Makarantan Allo*). The various *Mu'allim/Sheikh* who established the *Makarantan Allo* and who are resident in a particular town often have the *Madaris* (singular-Madarasa) in their homes which serves as both resident and school for the learners (*Almajirai*) known as the *Zawiyyah*.

Traditional method for seeking of knowledge in *Makarantun Allo* means the method for seeking of knowledge of the glorious Qur'an that was passed down from the time Islam came to date where the students are categorized as follows: those that are 3–4 years are learning by memorization of short *Suwar*, *Hadith* and *Sirah* (history of Prophet S.A.W). While those that are 5 years and above learn the Qur'an by writing the Qur'an on their slate (*Allo*) and add other books of *Figh* that will guide them towards performing their *Ibadat* (acts of worship) correctly (Aliyu, 2007) [3].

Firstly, they begin with knowledge of Arabic letters, then the vowels and then learn how to make sentences to recite the Qur'an. However, in recent times it has been observed that this traditional *Makarantun Allo* under the *Zawayah* has embraced a modern trend in the structure of running the teaching and

learning process in the *Zawiyyah*. In writing this paper ten (10) *Zawayah* were selected in other to find out how the traditional method for seeking of knowledge was in those days and to identify the modern trends for seeking of knowledge that has been introduced into the traditional method for seeking of knowledge in *Makarantun Allo* in Kontagora town of Niger State.

## Definition of concepts

### *Almajirci*: concept and development

*Almajirci* or seasonal migration of school age male children from rural to urban areas of Hausa land in the name of Islamic education is one social phenomenon that has, for decades, been a source of major concern to the people and Government of Northern States of Nigeria. Some works have been written on the historical background of Qur'anic education in general, some of the problems facing the *Almajiri* system of learning and yet many more are needed on the need to restructure the system of Qur'anic schools. This should be in terms of physical structure, a designed curriculum, welfare of the teachers and their pupils as well as general academic activities of the schools.

A majority of the *Almajirai* are children between the ages of 5–19. A study found that about 83.49% of the *Almajirai* are between the ages of 5–15 out of which 33.33% are in the age category of 5–9. The term *Almajiri* is a Hausa word for pupil or student, derived from the Arabic term *Almuhajiri* meaning migrant. Historically, the term has its origin in the flight of Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W) and his

companions from Makkah to Madinah in the early days of Islam (Khalid, 1998) <sup>[14]</sup>. Those who emigrated with the Prophet (S.A.W) were known as *Muhajirun* (sing. *Muhajir*), while their Madinan hosts were categorized as *Ansar* (supporters). Since the Prophet (S.A.W) was known to have admonished the Muslims to travel in search of knowledge and wisdom “even up to the great walls of China (Sahih Muslim)” those who respond to this precept are, to this day, referred to as *al-Muhajirun* or emigrants. In this usage, therefore, the word means those who left their towns or villages, parents, friends and relations, in search of religious knowledge and scholarship (Khalid, nd) <sup>[15]</sup>. *Almajiranci*, Islamic-based system of education in Northern Nigeria, involves boys as young as seven years being sent to study and memorize the Glorious Qur’an under the tutelage of a *Malam* (Abdul Rahman, 2001) <sup>[12]</sup>. The chanting of the song (*Ya Almajiri. Bayin Allah*) signifies the presence of a child called *Almajiri* (a migrant Islamic school pupil). He sings the song to draw attention to his plight which is highly deplorable. The child, usually male, is a Qur’anic school migrant pupil who left home in search of sound Qur’anic or Islamic education (Amzat, 2015) <sup>[5]</sup>. In essence, the search for knowledge pushes an *Almajiri* away from his parents and makes him set his feet on the hot street of Sokoto metropolis and other urban centers in Northern Nigeria. From Maiduguri, Yola, Kano, Kaduna, Birni-Kebbi, Gusau, to the extreme end in Sokoto, *Almajirai* are almost ubiquitous and constitute major urban social reality in Northern Nigeria. Hence, *Almajirci* or seasonal migration of school age male children from mainly rural to urban areas of *Hausaland* is a social phenomenon that has drawn great concern among various interest groups (Khalid, 2001) <sup>[16]</sup>.

Knowledge was dispersed and not geographically bound; disciples were encouraged to seek knowledge. The Prophet is quoted to have said “whoever sets out seeking knowledge will be walking in the path of Allah until his return” (Sunan Abu Dawud), and whoever dies while travelling for learning will be regarded as a Martyr (Ibn Khaldun, 1967) <sup>[12]</sup> and those who respond to the call be referred to as *al-Muhajirun* (emigrants). *Almajirai* are part of the disciples yielding to the call of the Prophet in search for knowledge and scholarships away from their home (Amzat, 2015) <sup>[5]</sup>. Khalid observed that *Almajiri* does not originally connote the destitute or beggars but with their pattern of movement and living, the terms are now closely related (Khalid, 1998) <sup>[14]</sup>.

In this paper the term *Almajiri*, refers to students of learning who are either resident at the *Zawiyyah* or who come from their parents homes in search of Islamic knowledge, not the itinerant beggars.

### Modern trends

According to Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary, Modern; means something of the present time or recent time, it is synonymous to contemporary, up-to-date, something new and intended to be different from the traditional styles, ways of behaving, thinking or doing things. It defines trend as; toward/in something, a general direction in which a situation is changing or developing, economic/social/political/educational.

From the two definitions above, it can be said that modern trends in *Almajiri* education in *Zawayah*, are the contemporary developments brought into the traditional system of learning in the *Zawayah* in order to make the system of learning to meet up the requirements of current times in meeting up with the educational needs of the *Almajiri* in a competitive society. This is done with the aim of making the educated *Almajiri* under this system to be able to further his/her studies and to contribute to the development of the society in his/her own capacity.

### Misconception

Is defined as a belief or an idea that is not based on correct information, or that is not understood by people, for example the frequently believed idea that all *Almajirai* are beggars.

*Zawiyyah* (plural *Zawayah*), usually a *Masjid* (Mosque) cum *Madrasah* which has the house of the Sheikh, *Imam* or *Malam* (Teacher) where he serves as the leader of the *Zawiyyah* usually situated within the town. The Arabic term *Zawiyyah* literally a building and institution associated with Sufis in the Islamic world. It can serve variety of functions such as a place of worship, school, monastery and /or mausoleum. *Madrasah* is an Arabic term for School; but is usually known in Nigeria, and some West African Countries to mean an Islamic school where the Qur’an and other religious sciences are taught. While *Tsangaya*, is a boarding house made of corn stalk at the outskirts of a town or city away from distractions where the *Malam* and his *Almajirai* reside for a period of time.

### Education

“The compact disc version of the oxford talking dictionary” gives the following four different definitions.

- The process of nourishing on learning
- The process of bringing up children in particular manner, habits, on way of life, (b) the training of animals.
- The systematic instruction, schooling or training of children and young people or by extension, instruction obtained in adult life the whole course of such instruction received by a person.
- The development of mental or physical powers, molding of character.

We can see from this that education is a very broad concept which has a very wide spectrum of application. From these definitions; we see that it covers not just the nourishing and training of humans, but indeed of other animals.

Islamic Education is one of the best systems of education, which makes an ethical groomed person with all the qualities, which he/she should have as a human being. The Muslims all over the world are thirsty of acquiring quality education. They know their boundaries and never try to cross it. Just as (Jah, 1982) sees Islamic religious education as a process of physical, mental, intellectual and spiritual training. It aims at producing well disciplined, highly skill full and responsible human beings who know their rights and accepts their duties and responsibilities; human beings who, by virtue of their proper Islamic education, can claim their rights without denying others rights, and who are at the same time prepared to discharge their duties properly and in the best interest of their

society. Today, the Muslims are acquiring good ideas, thoughts, knowledge, and skills, from all corners of the world. The world is moving very fast, and in this industrialize world, It is the duty of the teachers to give quality ethical integrated education to the Muslim students worldwide, because children are invaluable assets of future generations. The Prophet Muhammad (SAW) encouraged all Muslims to acquire knowledge and share it. He said:

"Acquire knowledge, for he who acquires it in the way of Allah performs an act of piety; he who speaks of it, praises the Lord; he who seeks it, adores Allah; he who dispenses instruction in it, bestows alms; and he who imparts it to others, performs an act of devotion to Allah." (Bukhari & Muslim).

### Education from the Qur'an and Sunnah

In a society where religion and knowledge in general and science in particular do not go hand in hand, it seems necessary to briefly describe the position of Islam vis-à-vis knowledge, Islam, in theory as well as in practice, has always promoted knowledge. Distinctive mark of human beings over the angels is knowledge:

"And Allah taught Adam all the names..." (2:31)

The first verses of the Quran began with the word:

"Read. Read in the name of thy Lord who created; [He] created man from clot of blood, read in the name of thy Lord who taught by the pen: [He] taught man what he knows not." (96: 1-5).

The Qur'an says.

"Are those who have knowledge equal to those who do not have knowledge?" (39:9).

The Prophet of Islam (peace be upon him and his progeny) has also emphasized the importance of seeking knowledge in different ways:

- Time: "Seek knowledge from the cradle to the grave."
- Place: "Seek knowledge even if it is far as China."
- Gender: "Seeking of knowledge is a duty of every Muslim" (Ibn Majah).
- Source: "Wisdom is the lost property of the believer, he should take it even if finds it in the mouth of a *mushrik*."

The Prophet did not only preach about importance of knowledge, he also gave examples of promoting knowledge. In the very first battle between the Muslims and unbelievers of Makkah, known as the war of Badr, the Muslims gain victory and caught seventy *kuffars* as prisoners of war. One of the criteria of releasing the prisoners devised by the Prophet was that those who were literate among the prisoners could go free if they teach ten Muslim children how to read and write.

### The normal setting in Zawayah

According to "Wikipedia" *Zawiyya* literary means corner is a building and institution associated with Sufis in the Islamic world. It can serve a variety of functions such as place of worship, school monastery. The term is often used for a place where the founder of a Sufi order or a local saint or holy man lived and was buried. In the *Magrib* the word can also be used

to refer to the wider *Tariqah* (Sufi order or brotherhood) and its membership.

According to oxford reference.com: *Zawiyya* can be define as a Sufi place of worship and welfare institution. May be identified with the mausoleum of a saint, location where the five daily prayers are said litanies of the Sufi order are recited, offerings are brought, food and sanctuary may be sought, and social activities requiring religious blessing are conducted. It is also the designated place for achievement of various spiritual states. Under the direction of a spiritual guide an aspirant isolates himself in *Zawiyyah* eating minimally and reciting Adhkar in the hope that they will bring him to spiritual fulfillment. *Zawiyyah* has also served as a unit of politico-religious organization; it often has a school attached.

According to Debrawakitsch in a spiritual retreat, called *Zawiyyah*, is a holy opportunity to move closer to Allah. Students are guided to move beyond the patterns and beliefs that keep their hearts from knowing God's love. It is a time for greater silence, rest, and to be deeply held in love. Through traditional Sufi practices such as remembrance (*Adhkar*), prayer (*Salat/ Du'a*), and reading of eulogies of the Prophet (S.A.W) written by Sufi's, participants can experience their hearts turning to face only Allah. New students can grow more familiar with the practices and prayers of the Sufi way and more experienced students can deepen their reverence to Allah. Extended *Zawiyyah* can also greatly benefit anyone yearning for physical or emotional healing.

According to (Khan, 2010) <sup>[17]</sup> The morning starts with the *Fatiha* and general recitations from the Glorious Qur'an. Each student is then asked what their intention is for the day followed by a group *Wird*. There might be a short reading or teaching before each student will be assigned their individual writing assignment for the day. These assignments include; recitations of the Glorious Qur'an under various teachers within the *Zawiyyah*

The day is meant to be spent in silence and cut off from the outside world and all of its social media. This means no phones, texting, emails e.t.c. there will be a second check in at the end of the day, followed by dhikr and working with the qualities. In conducting this research ten *Zawayah* was selected being they are the oldest established in Kontagora town they are;

- Zawiyyatu Sheikh Mallam Abdullahi Idris Alkali,
- Zawiyyatu Sheikh Alhaji Ahmed Nagwade,
- Zawiyyatu Sheikh Mallam Muhammadu Musa Dan Taro Chadon Daji,
- Zawiyyatu Sheikh Mallam Hassan Haliru Unguwan Kanawa,
- Zawiyyatu Sheikh Adam Haruna Kontagora,
- Zawiyyatu Sheikh Mallam Umar Na Gusau bin Isah bin Aliyu,
- Zawiyyatu Sheikh Mallam Hussaini Filin kwallo,
- Zawiyyatu Sheikh Mallam Na Ingaski,
- Zawiyyatu Sheikh Mallam Kasimu Alera,
- Zawiyyatu Sheikh Mallam Tanko Rimate.

### Modern Trends Identified from the *Zawayah*

- The modern trends identified in the selected *Zawayah* in Kontagora are as follows:
- Establishing an *Islamiyyah/Madarasah* under each *Zawiyyah* and giving it a name such as; “*Madarasatul Hizburrahim Litilmizati Sheikh Ibrahim*” unlike during the traditional method is being recognized as *Zawiyyatul Sheikh Adam Haruna Kontagora*, “*Madarasatul Nurul Islam Litta'alimi wat Ta'adibul Adfal*” formerly known as *Zawiyyatul Sheikh Malam Umar Na Gusau* etc.
- Establishment of memorization of Qur'an section, during the modern era of seeking for knowledge the memorization of the Qur'an has its own section in the school while traditionally there were no any sections for memorization.
- Another modern trend was the introduction of school uniform, unlike during the life time of founders there was nothing like uniform. But now each school has its unique colour of uniform and style of sewing; some even have school badges.
- The issuing of certificate was introduced at the end of the school period the students were issued certificates to enable them enroll into Higher Islamic Schools or Colleges of Arabic and Islamic Studies (CAIS).
- The registration for new intake varies from one *Zawiyyah* to the other but it between the ranges of #50 to #200 as registration fees.
- The monthly fees (kudin wata) are collected from every students in the *Zawiyyah* the sum of N50 is been collected from the younger ones and N100 from the older students but traditionally the money was collected weekly and also students pay a token fee on every Wednesday as (kudin mai) kerosene money for providing light during learning at night sessions.
- Another modern trend identified were the use of technology and learning tools as now students used phones to listen to recitations of the Qur'an and make corrections through it and they learn while sitting on chairs and tables unlike before they learned only from their Malams while sitting on the floor either on a mat or bare floor.
- Storey buildings with modern classes are now built and the students are placed into classes according to their age and level of comprehension. The classes are either numbered or named after the family members of the Prophet S.A.W., his wives, or the Sahaba.
- Graduation *Walimah* is organised either annually or bi-annually as the case may be. Parents of the students are made to pay for the *Walimah* as it forms part of their child's graduation ceremony.
- Opening of branches of the *Islamiyyah/Madaris* in different parts of the township and some neighbouring villages, either assigning a *Mu'allim* further more for a student who has graduated in order to benefit his immediate community and to curb rural–urban migration of students (sourced from the oral interview conducted by the head teachers of the ten schools selected).

- Organizing Muslim Students Society (MSS) where every last Wednesday or Saturday of the Islamic calendar the learners visit a designated *Madarasa* under a *Zawiyyah*. During these visits they exchange ideas and also conduct *Muhadara* (debate) and quiz.

### Impact of the modern trends in learning

Modern trends have had a notable impact on the traditional way of seeking Islamic knowledge in the context of *Makarantan Allo* or Qur'anic schools, particularly in Niger State, Nigeria and in West Africa. Here are some of the key Impacts:

- Technology and learning Tools: Modern trends here introduced Technology into traditional Qur'anic Schools. This includes the use of smart phones, tablets and educational apps to aid in Qur'anic recitation and memorization. Digital resources can help students practice and learn more efficiently.
- Improved pedagogy: modern educational methods have influenced teaching techniques in traditional Qur'anic schools. Educators are incorporating modern pedagogical practices to enhance the learning experience for students.
- Quality improvement: modern trends may prioritize quality in education by offering standardized curricula, trained teachers and well-equipped facilities this focus on quality and can lead to a better educational experience.
- Broader exposure: modern trends may assist the students to have access to a more diverse range of Islamic scholars and resources through their schools broadening their perspectives and understanding of Islamic knowledge.

The impact of modern trends on traditional ways of seeking Islamic knowledge can be significant, as it introduces new elements and approaches to Islamic education.

### Prospects

The *Zawayah*, also known as Islamic seminaries or institutes, have prospects for following modern trends in seeking Islamic knowledge. By adapting to contemporary methods and embracing technology, these institutions can enhance their relevance and impact. Here are some of the prospects.

**Diversified curriculum:** *Zawayah* can expand their curriculum to include a wider range of subjects, including modern science, languages and other aspect of Islamic knowledge. This makes graduates more well-rounded and versatile in today's world.

**Preservation of Islamic heritage:** *Zawayah* plays a significant role in preserving Islamic heritage and the Qur'anic tradition. They can continue to serve as custodians of Qur'anic recitation and memorization.

**Access to higher education:** Graduate students can transition to higher educational institutions, including Islamic universities, where they can further their Islamic studies or pursue more comprehensive educational paths.

**Government support:** In some region's government authorities are recognizing the importance of these schools and are providing support in terms of infrastructure, teacher training and curriculum development. This support can help improve quality and standards of education in these *Zawayah*.

**Community involvement:** Qur'anic schools continue to be centre's of the local Muslim community, and modern trends can strengthen their role. They can serve as hubs for community activities, social services and support for educational initiatives.

### Conclusion

The new trends as embraced by the *Madaris* under the Zawayah have started a phase of transition into acceptance of modern trends in teaching, outlook to learning and improved pedagogy. However, these has not shifted them away from the traditional methods of impacting Islamic knowledge to the child. The Qur'an still remain the centre and main focus of the learning experiences, as well as the other branches of Fiqh, Sirah etc. The most prominent thing observed is the emphasis on memorization of the Qur'an and the introduction of Arabic Language as a subject in all of the *Madaris*. Initially there's no emphasis on the language aspect as it is now, because their learners now compete with each other during the month end *Muhadara* on spoken Arabic language. This in itself is a plus and a win-win situation for both learners and the teachers as it makes the teaching and learning much easier since the learners are becoming more conversant the with the language of instruction.

### Recommendations

- The immediate community should strive to take advantage of the system by enrolling their children into these *Madaris* in order to make good use of the opportunity, thereby contributing to the proper running and maintenance of the system.
- Since the *Madaris* are not being sponsored by the government, then individuals within the community should come together to support the *Madaris* in service for Islam, as it serve as a form of *Sadaqatul Jariyah*
- The government education board at the local government level can provide supervisory services and registration for the *Madaris*.
- As the system advances the government and Muslim intellectuals can come together and bring forth a modality for running these *Madaris*, by accreditation and provision of an approved certificate that will enable the products of the system to compete favorably in the labour market and in gaining admission for further studies with those who attended conventional schools anywhere in the world.

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