1 Porridge, piety, and patience
Qur'anic schooling in northern Nigeria

'Your family eats their porridge without stew!' proposed Abdulmalik, a seven-year-old boy in a football jersey several sizes too big. This sentence was a good example of an insult, I was told. Jokingly I had complained to the children in Albasu, a village in eastern Kano State in northern Nigeria where I lived for four months, that nobody had gone to the trouble yet of teaching me swear words in Hausa, the region's lingua franca. Surely, I would do well to fill this gap in my language skills! I had come to northern Nigeria to research Qur'anic schools there,[1] and the boys and young men who study in them experience a vast amount of abuse in their daily lives. By asking about the insults they hear from the people who consider them nuisances, I was hoping to learn more about such experiences of abuse.

Most Hausa dishes consist of cereal porridge (*tuwo*) eaten with a stew (*miya*) that is made, for example, from 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 abusive, especially as this came from a boy who himself, by most definitions, would be considered poor. Poverty is both deep and widespread in Kano, particularly 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) and 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* stew does not necessarily provide children with the necessary balance of essential nutrients and vitamins, and many families cannot afford to buy fruit or meat. To learn that young people in Kano experience poverty as embarrassing or even insulting disconcerted me. How

[1] To avoid the loaded term 'traditional', I refer to the schools I studied as either 'classical Qur'anic schools' or simply 'Qur'anic schools'. Whenever I discuss Qur'anic schools departing from the classical model (such as so-called *Tahfeez* schools, 'modernised' Qur'anic schools), I will note this specifically.

was it possible that poverty, despite being pervasive, has such a negative connotation in northern Nigeria today, even among the poor? What did this imply for the ways in which poor people relate to others who are poor and to the better-off in society? Finally, what did it mean for the young Qur'anic students with whom I was conducting my research?

Most of the students living in Qur'anic schools in northern Nigeria are – by all common definitions – poor. The *almajirai* (singular: *almajiri*), as they are called in Hausa, deriving from the Arabic term *al-muhajir* or migrant,[2] are boys and young men from primary school age to their early twenties. They leave their homes – mostly located in rural areas – to live with a religious teacher, or *malam* (plural: *malamai*), and to study the Qur'an. Qur'anic schools are common in both rural and urban areas.[3] Usually, teachers in such schools receive no salary but live off the support given by the local community, the alms received in exchange for their spiritual services, the contributions of their students, and supplementary income-generating activities. Most teachers are themselves products of the Qur'anic education system. Schools operate informally and largely outside the purview of the state. Similar schools exist across the West African Sahel.[4] Many schools follow the seasonal rhythms of the region in that individual students, and entire schools, migrate in accordance with agricultural work cycles. Many students return home during the rainy season to help their parents farm, while others visit their families for the major Muslim holidays, but some do not see their parents for years. Girls may attend Qur'anic schools as day students, but, unlike boys, they do not leave home to live with a Qur'anic teacher.

Most Qur'anic schools do not have the means to provide for their students' upkeep. Whereas in rural areas, to earn their living, the *almajirai* collect fodder and firewood or work as farmhands, including on their teachers' farms, in urban areas they must seek other sources of livelihood. Older students wash clothes, carry loads, and engage in petty trade or handicrafts.[5] Younger students are employed as domestic workers, or beg for food and money in their neighbourhoods and on the streets,

[2] The term echoes the Prophet's *hijrah* from Mecca to Medina, indicating its religious connotations.

[3] In Hausa, the Qur'anic schools in which the *almajirai* learn are often referred to as *tsangaya*; however, strictly speaking, this term refers only to Qur'anic schools in remote rural places. *Almajirai* can also be found in less remote areas and in urban schools, where they often study alongside day students. Such schools are commonly referred to as *makarantun allo* (literally: wooden tablet schools; singular: *makarantar allo*).

[4] Similar schools exist as far east as Darfur (Seesemann 1999).

[5] The *almajirai* in my research all positioned themselves unambiguously as either 'older' or 'younger' students, depending on whether they considered adult gender norms fully applicable to themselves (usually from about 15 years upwards). Many of them did not know their exact biological age. In Hausa, young *almajirai* (about seven to 11) are called *ƙolo*, adolescent *almajirai* (about 12 to 18) are called *titibiri*, and advanced students and assistant teachers are referred to as *gardi* (plural: *gardawa*).

which makes them a highly visible feature of the urban landscape. Many urbanites consider begging *almajirai* a nuisance.

Living arrangements in most Qur'anic schools are frugal to say the least, and often the teacher's (or teachers') compound constitutes a school's only premises. This means that many students spend their nights barely sheltered from the elements in canopied forecourts or in the open. Even those who can secure a place in the entrance room (*soro*) of their teacher's compound have to contend with leaking roofs, dirt, and the smell of urine. In urban areas, where water and space are scarce, Qur'anic students struggle to find places to wash and relieve themselves. Students also face difficulties as they try to earn the cash needed to buy soap and occasionally new clothes. Given the crowded conditions in many Qur'anic schools and the lack of hygiene and sanitation facilities, infections and infestations are frequent and communicable diseases spread easily.[6] Tattered clothes and skin diseases have become a trademark of the *almajirai*.

Qur'anic schools are, of course, not the only place where young northern Nigerians can learn about religion. 'Modern' Islamic schools or *Islamiyya* schools, whose teaching technologies resemble the secular education introduced under British colonial rule, became increasingly popular from the 1970s onwards, especially in urban areas. They combine Qur'anic study with instruction in other Islamic subjects. Many of them are run as private enterprises and levy set fees to cover teachers' salaries and school running costs. Qur'anic schools, on the other hand, rarely fix fees. Instead, students are expected to reciprocate the education they receive by contributing their labour and paying long-term allegiance to their teacher. This makes Qur'anic schools accessible even to the poorest.

Poverty is thus an inherent feature of the *almajiri* system. Many people find this alarming. To understand why, it is instructive to look at wider discourses about poverty, masculinity, and religion. Poverty has often been cited as a condition that predisposes boys and young men to problematic behaviours. Some authors, such as the proponents of the 'youth bulge hypothesis' (e.g. Kaplan 1994; Urdal 2004), have projected scenarios of youth exclusion fuelling frustration, which in turn translates into violence. In a global context of widespread and deep-seated fears of Islamic radicalisation and militancy, poor Muslim boys and young

[6] Damen et al. (2011) found that over 80 per cent of the *almajirai* participating in their study in Konduga, Borno State, had intestinal parasites. Kabir et al. (2005), conducting research with *almajirai* in Gwale, Kano State, found skin diseases to be a major problem, with 23 per cent of their respondents suffering from scabies, and 8 per cent from ringworm infections. Dr Mahmoud Nasir, whom I interviewed at the Hospital for Infectious Diseases in Kano, mentioned cholera and meningitis as major health threats for *almajirai* (21 October 2011). Eating leftover food, moreover, puts *almajirai* at risk of getting stomach illnesses (e.g. Fada 2005: 37–9).

men in particular have quickly been linked to violent outcomes (see, e.g., Beehner 2007).

Meanwhile, institutions of Islamic learning, which often cater for poor boys and young men, have become the subject of anxious attention among journalists, policymakers, and academics who examine the presumed links between Islamic education and militancy, especially in South Asia (see, e.g., International Crisis Group 2002; Fair 2007; Winthrop and Graff 2010). Influential think tanks and publishing houses such as the Brookings Institution and *Foreign Policy* have written about Islamic educational institutions as 'terrorist training schools' (Singer 2001) and 'universities of jihad' (Haqqani 2002; see also Goldberg 2000). Their teaching pedagogy has been equated to rote learning and indoctrination, which supposedly leaves boys no room for independent or critical thinking (e.g. Friedman 2001).

Not least since the rise of the Islamist terror group Boko Haram,[7] crisis discourses about boys and young men in Qur'anic schools have become widespread in Nigeria, too (including among academics; see, e.g., Onuoha 2011; Aghedo and Eke 2013). In an article in the magazine *Newsweek*, Nobel laureate Wole Soyinka (2012), for example, writes about the followers of Boko Haram that 'economic factors have facilitated the mass production of these foot soldiers' who can now be 'rendered pliant, obedient to only one line of command, ready to be unleashed at the rest of society. They were bred in madrassas and are generally known as the almajiris.'

Are we right to consider poor boys and young men – and those studying in Islamic schools in particular – tinder easily ignited by radical

[7] Boko Haram, which most commentators translate as 'Western education is forbidden', is an exonym coined by the people of Maiduguri and taken up widely by the media as a label for the northern Nigerian Islamist insurgency group, which gained notoriety for its repeated attacks on secular educational institutions, including the spectacular abduction of 276 schoolgirls from the Government Girls' Secondary School Chibok (in southern Borno State) in April 2014. The group itself has used the name *Ahl al-Sunna li-l-Da'wa wa-l-Jihad*, or 'People Committed to the Propagation of the Prophet's Teachings and Jihad'. Today, the insurgents are split into at least two opposing factions, one of which claims allegiance to ISIS. Violence related to the insurgency has caused bloodshed on a massive scale across the region. Borno State Governor Karim Shettima, drawing on estimates by community leaders, puts the total death toll at almost 100,000 (Tukur 2017). (Since most deaths are not reported, estimates based merely on media reporting, such as those put forward by the Nigeria Security Tracker, are likely to significantly underestimate the actual death toll.) Escalating violence since 2014 has caused massive displacement across north-eastern Nigeria and the neighbouring countries. According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM) Displacement Tracking Matrix (http://nigeria.iom.int/dtm), over two million people were displaced within Nigeria alone. According to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA), some 200,000 people have fled across the border to neighbouring Niger, Chad, and Cameroon (www.unocha.org/nigeria). UNOCHA puts the total number of displaced persons across the region at 2.4 million. Prolonged conflict and displacement have resulted in a huge humanitarian crisis. According to UNOCHA, in 2017 over 5.2 million people needed urgent food assistance in north-eastern Nigeria alone.

religious ideas, as these discourses suggest? How do young Muslims experience poverty? What role does faith play in their lives? To my surprise, many of the older *almajirai* I met joked about their own and each other's material hardships. They boasted that not even spoiled food could upset their stomachs today after months and years of eating whatever they could get hold of. They bragged that their bodies had grown so used to the mosquitoes infesting their shabby sleeping places that they no longer felt their bites. They spoke in conspiratorial voices about the foods that only *almajirai* had managed, by the force of circumstances, to acquire a taste for, such as *kwaki*, dry cassava flakes that are soaked in water and effectively quell one's feelings of hunger, or *gajala*, which is created by mixing together various food leftovers.

I was reminded of boy scouts by these displays of toughness. Given the inevitable hardships involved in Qur'anic schooling, I was told that no *almajiri* would fail to train himself in patience. Patience (*hakuri*) is an indispensable skill and a crucial part of moral personhood 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. Patience and humility, moreover, are central elements of faith: God moves in mysterious ways, and the faithful are expected to accept his will unquestioningly.

Seen from such an angle, Qur'anic schools appear ideally placed to teach boys the necessary skills to become self-sufficient and socially acceptable men as well as good Muslims. The *almajirai* did not hesitate to interpret their difficulties as having an educational purpose when they were confronted with disparaging attitudes about their poverty. Inusa, for example, an *almajiri* who was roughly 15 years old, declared in one of our discussions that 'especially now that there is *boko* ['modern' school], if you come for *almajiri* education, some people think it's because you don't have food in your house, that's why you come out to beg. But it's not like that; it's because you're searching for knowledge.'

If Abdulmalik and his example of an insult offer us insights into the dominant conceptions of poverty within northern Nigerian society, Inusa's statement challenges these dominant conceptions. This suggests that the *almajirai*, and poor young people more generally, are not only recipients of the dominant norms of society. They also actively contest and reinterpret norms that disparage them. Religious discourses about the educational worth of particular experiences may thereby provide a vocabulary with which to defy stigmatising norms. Religious discourses may help to moderate feelings of inadequacy and shame triggered by experiences of exclusion, and thus help poor youths maintain a positive outlook with regard to themselves and their lives.

Yet, how sustainable are such discourses? Can they cancel out experiences of frustration entirely? And, more importantly, what do they imply

for the politics of poverty and the struggle for social justice? While the *almajirai* in my research emphasised the educational value of hardship, they simultaneously sought to conceal as best they could their own financial difficulties and those aspects of their life histories that were shaped by poverty. Like Inusa cited above, many *almajirai* declared that *almajiri* enrolment had nothing to do with difficult circumstances in their rural homes. Their reluctance to link their education system to rural poverty raises questions about the chances for a politics of poverty to get off the ground.

This ties in with wider questions about the role Qur'anic schools play in the (re)production of poverty. Within policy circles, Islamic schools spark concern as presumed obstacles to universal basic education, jeopardising children's opportunities to acquire economically useful skills (e.g. Adetayo and Alechenu 2012). Most Qur'anic schools in Nigeria focus narrowly on teaching to read, write, and recite the Qur'an; specialised Islamic fields of study are the preserve of advanced learners, and in most cases 'modern' secular subjects do not form part of the curriculum. Many commentators conclude from this that the *almajirai* will lack 'the practical skills required in the real world to contribute meaningfully to modern society, or even to earn a livelihood' (Suleiman 2009).

It is true that the *almajirai*'s chances of escaping poverty as they come of age are slim. In a context of protracted economic crisis, avenues to social mobility are increasingly foreclosed to the rural poor. But can we conclude from this that the *almajirai* would be better off in 'modern' secular schools, as meritocratic discourses about such schools as 'springboards for social mobility' (Levinson and Holland 1996: 5) have it? What role do wider social relations play in the (re)production of disadvantage?

This book traces the trajectories of boys and young men through the Qur'anic education system. It makes their experiences its focal point, while embedding these experiences within the socio-economic, political, and religious/cultural context of contemporary northern Nigeria. Drawing on material from long-term ethnographic and 'participatory' fieldwork with Qur'anic students and their communities, the chapters in this book address questions that have been answered only cursorily so far. Why do boys and young men enrol in Qur'anic schools rather than in 'modern' education if this choice is likely to perpetuate their poverty? What experiences do they have in Qur'anic schools, and how do they deal with the destitution and denigration that inevitably accompany life as an *almajiri*? What role do religious discourses play for them, and to what extent do the *almajirai* seek to challenge the status quo? Finally, what consequences does the Qur'anic education system have for the future lives of the boys going through it, and what can this reveal about the wider processes underpinning protracted poverty in northern Nigeria today? While this book provides a detailed empirical account

of the Qur'anic education system in northern Nigeria, it also uses the *almajirai*'s experiences as a prism through which to explore wider questions about the purposes and pitfalls of education, about the meanings of poverty and exclusion, and about the role that religion plays in the lives of poor boys and young men.

There are few ethnographies of Islamic schools that pay attention to the experiences of their students and to their wider social and economic contexts (for notable exceptions see Eickelman 1985 and Boyle 2004 on Morocco; Starrett 1998 on Egypt; Bano 2012 on Pakistan; see also the edited volume by Hefner and Zaman 2007). In-depth studies of Islamic schooling in sub-Saharan Africa are even rarer, even though questions about the role of education in social mobility and the reproduction of disadvantage are particularly pressing on the subcontinent, given both its youthful population (e.g. UNFPA 2014) and the high incidence of poverty. The works that exist tend to approach Islamic learning from either an Islamic studies perspective (e.g. Brigaglia 2009; Seesemann 2011; Tamari and Bondarev 2013) or a historical perspective (see especially Brenner 2000 on 'modern' Islamic schools in Mali; Ware 2014 on Qur'anic schools in Senegal; see also the edited volume by Launay 2016b).[8] While these works offer a range of important insights on the historical transformation of religious education systems in the region as well as on their doctrinal and epistemological underpinnings, they reveal little about Islamic students' present-day experiences.

A central argument I make in this book is that bringing insights from education studies, poverty research, and childhood and youth studies to bear on debates about young people in Islamic schools can allow us to develop a more profound understanding of the workings of religious educational systems, their students' experiences and the implications for wider society than is allowed for by the existing literature. If we want to understand the role played by institutions of religious learning in social reproduction and/or the (re)production of poverty and disadvantage, it does not suffice to look at them in isolation or at their curricula only. Rather, as anthropologists and sociologists of education suggest (e.g. Willis 1977; Bourdieu and Passeron 1990 [1977]), we have to look at the wider social and economic contexts in which educational decisions are taken, including religiously motivated ones (e.g. Bano 2012). Also, we need to consider the factors that determine who can translate particular forms of knowledge and skills into gainful opportunities in the future. In this book, I describe how Qur'anic education becomes a way forward for poor boys and young men in the context of a declining rural economy, a public education system in disarray, and frequent family break-ups. If the *almajiri* system is likely to (re)produce poverty in the long run, we

[8] For a detailed literature review, see Chapter 4.

cannot understand this without reference to the adverse terms on which its students participate in society, and especially in the labour market.

Another consideration highlighted by education scholars is that educational experiences are inherently gendered (e.g. Stambach 2000). To understand the appeal of the *almajiri* system to rural parents, we must study their ideas about the gender-appropriate upbringing of boys. Also, by studying the *almajirai*'s schooling experiences along the lines of gender, we can understand the boys' emerging self-conceptions and struggles to conform to normative notions of masculinity. Such an analysis can shed light on the *almajirai*'s at times problematic relationships with other members of society – notably women – while simultaneously rebutting stereotypical depictions of male Islamic students as inherently prone to violence.

Furthermore, I argue that it is not sufficient to study the curricula and doctrinal orientations of Qur'anic schools to understand what their students learn. As both education scholars and scholars of childhood and youth have argued insistently, young people are not passive recipients of experience (e.g. James and Prout 1997 [1990]), but are actively engaged in constructing the social worlds around them. This means that they do not mechanistically or linearly learn what they are being taught in school (e.g. Starrett 1998: 11ff.; Levinson and Holland 1996: 1); rather, they actively engage with their schools' wider environments and make sense of the messages they receive through school in light of these broader experiences. Schools, then, are only one among many settings within which children acquire particular dispositions. In this book, I draw on these insights to highlight both the contextual factors that shape the experiences of young Qur'anic students and their 'capacity for action' (Mahmood 2001: 210) in dealing with these experiences. Being looked down upon by others in society because they are poor and lack 'modern' knowledge is a crucial experience for the *almajirai*. In this context, they eagerly take up religious discourses about the meritoriousness of asceticism and Qur'anic erudition promoted through their schools to maintain a positive view of themselves. Religion becomes a means to cope better with challenging circumstances. Yet, in a context where inequality and consumerism are pervasive, religious justifications for living in deprived conditions cannot entirely cancel out feelings of shame about being poor, or aspirations for urban, cosmopolitan lifestyles and 'modern' forms of knowledge, which are, however, difficult to achieve for the *almajirai*.

Insights from poverty research, which draw attention to the inherently social nature of experiences of poverty, can elucidate the implications of poverty-related shame for the ways in which the *almajirai* engage with others in society as well as for the forms of politics in which they may (or may not) engage. Struggling for recognition, the Qur'anic students seek to improve their relative position within society by hiding their poverty

and by distancing themselves from others who are weak. Rather than rallying for redistribution and radical change, they pursue a respectable position for themselves at the cost of nurturing solidarity with people who are also negatively affected by the current configuration of power in northern Nigeria. The scorn that poverty attracts undermines both radicalising tendencies and positive social change. While this book holds on to the idea put forward by scholars of childhood and youth that young people are competent 'social actors' (e.g. James and Prout 1997 [1990]: vii), I hold this notion in productive tension with the emphasis that both studies of chronic poverty and seminal studies of education (see, e.g., Willis 1977; Bourdieu and Passeron 1990 [1977]) place on the wider structural power relations that constrain their 'capacity for action' (Mahmood 2001: 210).

Finally, methodologically and epistemologically, this book takes up the central tenet of childhood and youth studies that it is only by listening carefully to what young people have to say that we can understand their experiences and, in turn, the wider social implications of these experiences (e.g. Boyden 1997 [1990]). Capturing young people's experiences can be taxing, especially in a context where the age difference between researcher and research participants is compounded by differences in religion, ethnicity/nationality, socio-economic status, and gender, as in my case. Scholars of childhood and youth have urged us to think creatively about what methods can allow us to adjust to young people's preferred forms of communication so as to reduce inevitable power differentials (e.g. Boyden and Ennew 1997; Morrow 2001; Barker and Weller 2003) and to let them direct the research towards their most pressing concerns (e.g. Alderson 2001). This work has sought to overcome inevitable access challenges through both long-term ethnographic fieldwork and the use of 'participatory' methods, including the production of a 'participatory' film with and about *almajirai*.

A later part of this introduction gives an account of how these methods produced detailed insights into the lives and concerns of the *almajirai*. In the following section, I explore in more depth how I bring insights from education studies, poverty research, and childhood and youth studies to bear on the study of Qur'anic education in northern Nigeria. This is followed by a discussion of what the anthropology of Islam can contribute to our understanding of the *almajiri* system, situating the present study within these wider bodies of literature.

The (re)production of disadvantage through education

Education studies inform this book in that they put questions about the production and reproduction of inequality and disadvantage through education at the centre of the analysis. Early Western-based studies have

focused primarily on how class inequalities become entrenched through schooling, for example by legitimising a skewed appreciation of (class-based) cultural styles, or by creating '"failure" as a social label' (Jeffrey et al. 2008: 9; see also Willis 1977; Bourdieu 1984; Bourdieu and Passeron 1990 [1977]). Education, in this reading, is a means through which the powerful can bolster their dominant position, not least because dominated groups end up taking an active part in their continued subordination, for instance by developing oppositional attitudes towards schooling or by curbing their aspirations for educational success (e.g. Willis 1977: 175). Bourdieu proposes the notion of 'habitus', which he defines as 'a system of durable, transposable dispositions' (1990a: 53), to capture the ways in which subordinated groups eventually 'cut their coats according to their cloth' (ibid.: 65) and stop pursuing 'what is already denied to them' (ibid.: 54).

Whereas an emphasis on class inequalities prevailed in the early works of Bourdieu and Willis, against the backdrop of changing social realities, with Fordism and blue-collar employment on the decline in Western countries and various forms of 'identity politics' gaining prominence, later authors have broadened the focus of their enquiries. They have stressed that various axes of social division operate simultaneously. These include not only class and race/ethnicity, but also gender and religion, which are crucial markers of difference in the context of the present study (see Gewirtz and Cribb 2003; Levinson and Holland 1996 for historical overviews; Starrett 1998: 12 on religious differences).

Furthermore, calls became louder to leave behind the grand theorising and latent determinism of the early approaches, and to acknowledge instead local variation, the indeterminacy of outcomes, and people's 'agency'. Levinson and Holland (1996), for example, propose to analyse educational practices as geared towards producing a locally and historically defined 'educated person', and emphasise that educational institutions are at best 'a contradictory resource for those who would fit the young to a particular vision of society' (ibid.: 1), as within them even hegemonic definitions of the 'knowledgeable person' can be challenged. Taking these criticisms on board, I contend that some of the concepts developed to explain the tenacity of class inequalities can nonetheless productively be transposed to other contexts of inequality/disadvantage. In this work, I draw, for example, on the Bourdieusian notion of 'habitus' to understand how families come to desire forms of education that appear to reproduce their own disadvantage (see Chapter 4).

While the insights offered by the anthropology/sociology of education can help us understand the political nature of what it means to be 'educated' in particular contexts, and draw attention to unevenly distributed chances of acquiring such knowledge (Chapters 3, 4 and 8), I argue that it is not enough to look merely at the processes surrounding