

THE PARADOX OF EDUCATIONAL DIARCHY: QUR'ANIC SCHOOLS AND THE DELIVERY OF BASIC EDUCATION IN NORTHERN NIGERIA

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Abstract

This paper examines the issue of dualism or diarchy in the educational structure of Northern Nigeria and how various Nigerian governments have grappled with the problem of forging a workable synthesis between Qur'anic school system and western education without much success. The paper asserts that in recent times, the deplorable conditions of these schools, cases of child abuse/neglect associated with them and the need to expand access to education for all have forced a second look at the future of Qur'anic schools. It examines the attempts to integrate Qur'anic school into the Universal Basic Education (UBE) programme and raises some conceptual questions on the feasibility and likely consequences of this arrangement.

Introduction

The 'core north' comprising the North West and North East geopolitical zones have the worst socio-economic indicators in the country. Citing statistics released by United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the United States Agency for International Development (USAID, 2003a) reported that the North West and North East have the highest poverty rates in the country with 77 % and 70 % respectively in the two zones. According to National Planning Commission, NPC/UNICEF (2001) as at 1999 literacy rates were also lowest in the two zones with 40 % and 22 % for male and female in the North West and 42 % and 21 % for male and female in the North East. At the foundation level of primary education, Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS) data for 1999 show that school attendance in the North West was 28 % and 39 % in the North East as compared with 79% in the South East and 81% in the South West (USAID, 2003a). There is a large percentage of school age children in the north who are not benefiting from formal primary schooling. A study of secular and Islamic educational systems in 12 Muslim countries, including Nigeria, conducted by USAID (2003b, p.7) show that the trend described above is not peculiar to Nigeria as the report noted that "all of the countries studied, even those that have achieved near universal primary education, have large numbers of school-age

children who have never enrolled in primary school". The problem may not only be that of parents' reluctance to enroll their children, it is one of access as well. This access, according to USAID (2003b), is in terms of the number of schools available and the capacities of parents to bear the hidden costs (e.g. cost of textbooks, uniforms, transportation, etc) and opportunity costs (loss of child's labour at home) of education.

Therefore while there are low ratios for pupil enrollment into formal primary schools, enrollment in Traditional Qur'anic Schools (TQS) and Islamiyya schools is very high in this part of the country. For instance, according to USAID (2003, p.4) "as at June 1995, three times as many children were attending traditional Qur'anic schools or 'makarantar allo' and Islamiyyah schools than primary schools" in Sokoto and Zamfara states. A similar trend was also depicted in a baseline survey of Qur'anic schools in four states in the North West (i.e. Katsina, Kebbi, Sokoto and Zamfara) conducted by UNICEF (1999) which show that there were 16,648 Qur'anic schools in these four states with a total enrolment of 1,145,111 pupils: 63.2% of this number were boys, while the remaining 36.8% were girls. The survey further show that out of the total number of students enrolled only 177,592 or 15.5% were attending primary schools; the remaining 967,519 or 84.5% were not attending primary schools. For this larger percentage of children traditional Qur'anic schools could be the only form of schooling they ever experience.

Northern Nigeria has two traditions of education both of which are external i.e. the Islamic and the Western, and they are not simply alternatives: they are parallels, in many cases opposed to each other. This is educational diarchy which Husain & Ashraf (1979, p.52) define as "the operation of two systems of education, one traditional and the other new, which are in many respects opposed to or at least inconsistent with each other...". What the statistics cited above tell us is that TQS are still very popular among people of northern Nigeria particularly among the rural populace and the urban poor (Sule-Kano 1997 & Khalid, 1997), but their relevance in today's Nigeria is being questioned (Khalid, 1997 & Umar, 2001). TQS had been the only form of formal schooling known in pre-colonial northern Nigeria. But the impact of colonisation and long years of official neglect have rendered this school system crises-ridden characterised by limited curricula, poor learning conditions and the child abuse/neglect in the form of child street begging among the boys commonly referred to as *almajiranci* and child street hawking among the girls called *talla*. Hence, pupils of the TQS are generally considered to be 'children out of school'.

In recent times, the crises situation of the TQS in the context of the need to universalize access to education for all has forced various governments in

northern Nigeria, international donor agencies, non-governmental organisations and the Federal Government of Nigeria to consider using these schools as avenues for the delivery of basic education to this teeming number of 'children out of school'. This paper examines the implications of using the TQS for the delivery of basic education in northern Nigeria.

Western Education, Colonisation and the Transformation of the TQS

Muslim populations that have gone through the experience of colonial occupation have also to contend with two parallel school systems: one traditional, religious and deprived of state support; the other modern, secular and fully supported by the state. Although neither Islam nor Qur'anic schools are indigenous to Nigeria, both predated Christianity and the attendant western education in northern Nigeria. In fact, by the time Christian missionaries introduced Christianity and western education, both Islam and Qur'anic schools had become firmly entrenched in many parts of northern Nigeria (Ozigi & Ocho, 1981).

In the pre-colonial times therefore, Qur'anic schools served the early education needs of children in this part of the country. They also provided literacy in Arabic language to a predominantly non-literate society and triggered the indigenisation of the Arabic language for the purpose of writing Hausa i.e. *ajami* form of writing (Adamu, 2003). The *ajami* later became the official script of communication among city states in northern Nigeria.

The activities of early Christian missionaries and the subsequent colonial conquest of states and cities of the present day northern Nigeria led to the gradual decline of the Qur'anic schools. With their traditional support systems/intellectual base destroyed, deprived of state support and their medium of instruction i.e. Arabic language and the *ajami* script reduced to irrelevance (Bobboyi, 1997), the Qur'anic schools were naturally stunted of any further growth. Attempts during the colonial and post colonial periods to forge a working synthesis between Qur'anic schools and western education only resulted to further denigration of the Qur'anic schools. This because what emerged from this attempted synthesis were schools which either only taught Islamic knowledge as a subject (with less emphasis on the knowledge of the Qur'an) or Islamiyya schools which though Islamic in their orientation essentially copied the organisational structures of public schools. According to Bobboyi (1997) this development did not do much to allay the fears of the local people who were suspicious of any form of western influence on their children and for whom the few Islamiyya schools were either inaccessible or unaffordable. To make matters worse, increasing poverty levels

among the populace (Sule-Kano 1997 & Khalid, 1997) coupled with decline in quality and relevance in the education provided in public schools since the 1970's (USAID, 2003 & Umar, 2001) make the TQS cheaper alternatives for mass education, exclusion centres from a state sponsored education that is generally considered irrelevant, or as escape routes for families torn between survival needs and the need to educate their children.

TQS are very popular in many parts of northern Nigeria, but they are also schools in serious crises. Their curricula are generally too narrow to serve the basic education needs of a growing child in a fast changing environment; their learning environments are to say the least defective and some of their methodologies of instruction and their organisational practices are in serious need of reform. But by far the most disturbing aspect of the TQS is the phenomenon of child street begging (*almajiranci*) associated with some pupils of these schools. According to Umar (2001, p.14):

Instead of educating their pupils and giving them skills and knowledge necessary for functioning effectively in society as they used to, Qur'anic schools have deteriorated to the extent that many people regard them as no more than breeding ground for street-beggars.

However, the beggar children form only a small percentage of pupils of TQS. In the real sense, there are four categories of pupils in these schools:

- i. Pupils of the Qur'anic schools who are resident at home and attend formal primary schools. These pupils (of both sexes) attend Qur'anic schools after school hours or on non-school days.
- ii. Pupils of the Qur'anic schools who stay with their parents and are therefore not in the streets begging, but who are also not attending any formal school. Fafunwa (1991) called this category "the stay outs". This category of pupils (of both sexes) is in the majority as UNICEF (1999) baseline survey quoted earlier showed.
- iii. The female pupil (or girl child) who in addition to sharing the same fate as those in the above category (ii), also engages in street hawking (called *talla* in Hausa) to support her family and to save for her marriage expenses. The girl child spends fewer years in the Qur'anic school than the boys (USAID, 2003), as she is most likely to be given out in marriage early in life.
- iv. The male pupils of the Qur'anic schools, who having been separated from their parents at an early age and lacking any support, resort to begging for

their sustenance. Although they are in the minority (UNICEF, 1999), they are the more visible products of Qur'anic schools. This group faces the triple tragedy of destitution, abuse and lack of access to any meaningful education. When reference is made to *almajiri* (as child beggar), it is the child in this category that is often referred to.

The pupils in category ii, iii and iv raise very serious concern in the effort to provide access to basic education for all.

Basic Education: An Expanded Vision

The resolutions made at the World Conference on Education for All held at Jomtien, Thailand, commonly called Jomtien Declaration (1990) while re-echoing that education is a fundamental right of all, asserted that "every person – child, youth and adult – shall be able to benefit from educational opportunities designed to meet their basic learning needs". It further defined basic learning needs to include:

- a. Essential learning tools (e.g. literacy, oral expression, numeracy and problem solving); and
- b. Basic learning content (such as knowledge, skills, values and attitudes)

Conceived this way, basic education is not simply the number of years spent in school or the subjects exposed to students in school. According to Hawes (1979) and Okam (2002) it refers to a set of basic skills, knowledge and attitudes designed to meet the 'minimum survival needs' of learners enabling them to be self-directing and equipping them to continue learning. This expanded vision of basic education is not something that can be exclusively provided in formal schools. This is because it is either that there are no enough resources to do that or some learning needs cannot be adequately met by the kind of experiences provided in formal schools. In other words, "most school curricula are not tailored for the many who fail, dropout or only reach a basic level of primary education" (Okam, 2002, p.121). For these types of learners there must be alternative arrangements for them to benefit from basic education.

According to Philips (1975) when applied to the needs of children and adults, basic education can either be predominantly educational or predominantly social. It is predominantly educational when it provides an adequate preparation for life and for further education and tailored to the needs of *the average citizen*. In Nigeria, this provision corresponds to the full cycle of nine years of basic education which covers primary education and junior secondary schools which every child is normally expected to pass through (Federal Ministry of Education,

FME, 2000). However, for a large number of children and youths, who for one reason or the other have not been to school or have dropped out of school before attaining literacy, the formal arrangement may not be suitable. For them therefore, basic education becomes predominantly a social imperative i.e. "basic education is a minimum social requirement like the number of calories needed to secure freedom from hunger ..." (Philips, 1975, p.126). In practice this may entail provision of the first part of the primary cycle of a limited duration of 3 to 4 years. While in developed countries, the two imperatives are a seamless continuum; in many developing countries unavailability of resources for a full blown basic education for all makes the second alternative the only feasible way to provide at least functional literacy to a vast majority of children out of school and school dropouts. In fact, according to Philips (1975) doing this may not only be a social imperative but "the right economic and educational solution as well... (p.126)" The third component scheme of Nigeria's UBE falls under this category i.e. "literacy and non-formal education for out-of-school children, youths and illiterate adults" (FME, 2000). Basic education for all is such an ambitious programme that can only be realised through a combination of different delivery approaches both the formal and the non-formal; the new and the traditional.

Delivering Basic Education through Qur'anic Schools: Some Basic Questions

Traditional Qur'anic Schools are still attractive to parents and children in many parts of northern Nigeria. According to Boyle (2002) these schools "are valued for things that public schools do not do or are not perceived to do well" e.g. religious and moral training; and they are relatively cheaper. Therefore Qur'anic schools are good starting places for taking basic education to the poor and other reluctant populations. According to Anzar (2003, p.21)

in countries where large Muslim populations either do not have access to schools or do not want to send their children, especially girls, to schools imparting literacy through Koranic schools would be a good start.

In an attempt to utilise this strategy, the Federal Government of Nigeria inaugurated a committee of experts in December 2002 on the integration of Qur'anic schools into the Universal Basic Education programme. In its report, the committee seem to have subscribed to the view of a distinct but reformed system of the Qur'anic education when it said "the committee recommends for the integration of the system into the UBE programme by introducing some elements of basic education and expanding the curriculum of the Qur'anic school system"

(UBE, 2002). The same report also identified the following as the aims of the integration:

- a. To integrate elements of basic education into the Qur'anic school system *without interfering with the goals of Qur'anic school system*. This shall be with the view to improving their capacities and empowering them.
- b. Equip the Qur'anic school pupils with knowledge and skills that will *enable them integrate into the UBE programme*;
- c. Enhance *social mobility* of the Qur'anic school products; and
- d. Make the products of the system useful and acceptable members of their communities. (Emphases added).

In an earlier document the FGN/UNICEF (1999) said this of the proposed integration:

It is noted that each Qur'anic school operates its own curriculum on a set of topics, objectives, content, activities, teaching materials and evaluation procedures unique to its traditional design of Qur'anic education. Therefore, *it is recommended that these schools should continue to make use of their different curricula to teach the components of Qur'anic education*. (Emphasis added).

The key elements of this intended integration that can be gleaned from the above objectives and statement are:

- a. Qur'anic schools will retain their identity, organisational patterns and objectives with some attempts made at reforming them.
- b. Qur'anic schools will have two distinct components i.e. the basic education component and Qur'anic education component.
- c. Efforts will be made to enhance both educational and social mobility of the products of these schools with the other mainstream educational and socio-economic structures.

This arrangement conforms to Philips' (1975) definition of basic education as predominantly social: it is a 'recuperative action' designed to address the learning needs of special group of learners who may not benefit from or have limited or no access to formal basic education. It is also consistent with the assertion in Jomtien Declaration (1990) that:

supplementary alternative programmes can help meet the basic learning needs of children with limited or no access

to formal schooling, *provided they share the same standards of learning applied to schools, and are adequately supported* (Article V, paragraph 1). (Emphasis added).

The 'integration project' as it has come to be known is without doubt a genuine attempt to find a working relationship between two systems of education that are different in their philosophies, curricula and organisational settings. But at the same time, it raises a number of questions:

1. How do we ensure that these integrated Qur'anic schools share the same standards of learning with public schools? This is because the problem with separate schooling is that if care is not taken recipients of one form of education may end up receiving education that is not only different but of lower standards from the rest of the population (Philips, 1975 & Thompson, 1981). This raises the question of equity.
2. How do we ensure both educational and social mobility of the products of the Integrated Qur'anic schools? How do we build what Philips calls 'bridges' so that learners who benefited from one form of education can cross over to the other form of education or can occupy a social position commensurate with their levels of education?
3. How do we resolve the conflict in language of instruction i.e. Arabic for the Qur'anic education component and Mother Tongue/Language of the immediate environment and later English for the basic education component. If a learner develops functional literacy in Arabic, will he/she be able to cross over to the mainstream system and fit in? In Morocco, for instance, which had also gone through the experience of colonisation but where Arabic is both the official language and the language of instruction, Boyle (2002) reported that Qur'anic schools were beginning to serve a new mission as pre-schools i.e. that of preparing children for public schooling.
4. Where the performance of public schools leaves much to be desired and where Qur'anic schools begin to copy some of the methods and organisational patterns used in public schools, will this not amount to simply having 'more of the same'? When this happens will the Qur'anic schools not lose some of the pedagogical and organisational advantages they have over formal schools e.g. group work, peer tutoring, independent work, mastery learning, coaching/apprenticeship model of teaching (Boyle, 2002), flexibility and cheapness (Thompson, 1981)?

5. There is a worry in some quarters (Thompson, 1981 & Nwachukwu, 2004) that separate schooling particularly when based on ethnic, cultural or religious orientation is likely "to create misunderstanding, encourage dysfunctional loyalties and exacerbate political tension" (Thomson, p.57). How will separate schooling impact on Nigeria's quest for national integration? Can the separate curriculum experiences provided impart common values in pupils or inculcate respect for and tolerance of different values which are the bases for national integration?

Some of these questions are necessary for further research and debate on the issue of integrating Qur'anic schools into the UBE programme.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are made in the search for workable integration of Qur'anic schools into the UBE:

1. Integration should not attempt to swallow up the Qur'anic schools: these schools should be encouraged to develop as distinct but reformed institutions of learning. The reform could be in the form of expanded curriculum, improved learning environments and adequate support.
2. There is need for a provision in the educational system (i.e. the National Policy on Education) for an official recognition of Integrated Qur'anic schools within the framework of the nation's primary education system. Without this recognition, the products of this school system may not be able to have mobility. Such attempts are being made by some state governments in the north, but the consequence is that these schools normally transform into modern Islamiyya schools far removed from the traditional mandate of Qur'anic education.
3. Many states in northern Nigeria have Arabic and Islamic education boards. These boards should be charged with the responsibility of harmonising the curricula of Qur'anic schools in their domains. Comparable standards and mobility will be difficult if each school operates a different curriculum.
4. There is need for improvement in the learning conditions of the public schools and also making them relevant to the needs of their immediate clients. For instance, state governments in the north can intensify the teaching of Qur'anic education in public schools. If parents perceive the education provided in public schools as qualitative and relevant, they may be encouraged to enroll more of their children.

Conclusion

Qur'anic schools have been a recurring feature of the education and socialisation process in most states of northern Nigeria. Limited curriculum, the impact of colonisation and long years of official neglect have been the bane of this system of education. It has been thrown into deep crises as a result, but it is system that has lingered on because of its attachment to Islam which for many people of northern Nigeria is not only a religion but a complete way of life as well. But Qur'anic school system as presently practiced cannot deliver on its traditional mandate of laying the foundation for Qur'anic education and the learning of Islamic etiquettes not to talk of taking on the inevitable task of preparing its pupils for the challenges of living their lives as Nigerian citizens in a world that is increasingly shrinking into a global village. These schools are in need of reforms. What this paper has done is to examine the reform currently contemplated and practiced in some states of northern Nigeria, and raise some theoretical questions intended to guide further discourse and research on this area.

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