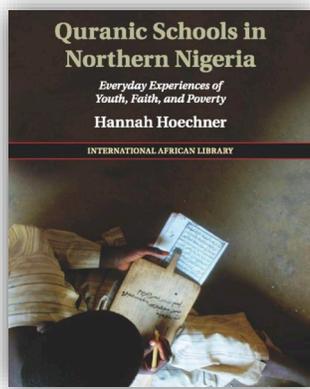


BOOK REVIEW

Qur'anic Schools in Northern Nigeria: Everyday Experiences of Youth, Faith, and Poverty

By *Hannah Hoechner*

Reviewed by *Adriana Myland*



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I commend Hannah Hoechner for her commitment to represent the almajirai of Kano and her excellent in-depth understanding of their experience in Qur'anic education. The almajirai derives from Arabic describing the pursuit of young boys and men who come into the urban areas to study the Qur'an under a religious teacher (1). Hoechner tackles a pervasive and longstanding issue that significantly affects Hausaland or the northern region of Nigeria. Above all, she turns our attention to the almajirai's narrative to understand their experience of faith, poverty, and reasons for this system of education that has incredibly negative stereotypes throughout Kano.

One of the main concerns for the almajiri education system is the assumed risks and vulnerabilities the boys endure. Often the almajirai fend for themselves begging on the street and must find support because they are indebted to their religious teacher (3). Hoechner clearly differentiates the educational options in Kano that include secular schooling often only available for the wealthy, or Islamiyya that combines teaching on religious practice and secular subjects, which is becoming the norm (72, 79). However, almajiri

education is accessible to the poorest, and by understanding how the almajirai make sense of who they are dispels the negative assumptions (4-5). Most significantly Hoechner helps restore the almajirai's sense of personhood by deciphering the Hausa standards of valuable character traits. A common trait, "hakuri," meaning patience, describes the upbringing of the young almajirai in their experience of extreme poverty while they pursue their search for knowledge (5). Although Hoechner does not examine the standardization or teachings of the almajiri education, she does illuminate the underlying emotional expressions and the almajirai's development of personhood. Hoechner draws much needed attention to this vulnerable population with emphasis on their "poverty-related shame," which is a pertinent issue in Hausaland (8).

Hoechner's uses creative methods to engage the almajirai and Hausa women through film and teaching English. However, I think the potential for growing challenging power dynamics or dependency by becoming an employer and patron for the almajirai is real and risky. I do relate to Hoechner's challenges as a single woman in Kano building trust with informants, but I disagree that the most "natural way of fitting [in]" involves creating a film. Although it is an effective medium to communicate a vital message, it does not depict the lived experience of the almajirai.

On the other hand, Hoechner effectively engages in the epistemological framework across the Muslim Hausa community in Kano about the almajirai. This clears the air by understanding the common misconceptions about this enormous group of young boys who are often seen on the streets begging. For example, society believes the almajirai are "backwards," and that they will prevent society from flourishing because they are most certainly engaged in radical Islamic groups such as Boko Haram (51, 53, 55). In contrast, Hoechner found if you are against the almajirai you may be accused of being a "bad Muslim" (64). This indicates a level of complexity, confusion,

and need for open intra-faith discussions among the Muslim community.

By focusing on the almajiri education system, Hoechner brings much to light. The inequality in educational options for boys in Kano emphasizes how much the almajirai are constantly “othered” (67). It is helpful that she elaborates on other demographics in Kano such as females who endure a different experience in Islamiyya and face more disparities in education (79). Further research could explore how women especially in purdah (seclusion or *matan kulle*) view the almajirai in a changing urban centre, since Hoechner found, “Having an ‘*almajiri* past’ did not seem to mark a man’s adult identity in any decisive way” (215). Surely the wives must be affected by the attitudes and personal development of the almajirai, perhaps the character of “*hakuri*” endures?

Hoechner’s observations about faith and the value of religious knowledge and the notion of a “high culture of Islam” is interesting (89, 193). Applying Pierre Bourdieu’s “habitus” is helpful to make sense of the layers of influence in the lives of the almajirai. For example, “*tarbiyya*” is how the Hausa would describe moral and social training of a child or the notion of “proper personhood” (113). I have observed *tarbiyya* in the lives of my informants’ children who attend Islamiyya, which humanizes the almajirai as they too endure similar training, striving to become acceptable in society and their faith community.

Another excellent observation Hoechner makes regards the intricacy of the patron-client relationships in the Hausa community. She notes this is very relevant to the lives of the almajirai, denoting the sense of “backwardness” they are often associated with (139). Hoechner explores the domestic work by the almajirai for the wealthy and how this closes the social gap or distance between these two seemingly opposite groups, emphasizing the vital role of patron-client relationships (124, 128).

The common traits the Hausa deem as acceptable expressions of personhood that Hoechner encounters among the almajirai include: *hakuri*, *tarbiyya*, and *kunya*, meaning shame, embarrassment, shyness, or sense of modesty. Hoechner points out that poverty is often concealed and she recognizes the Hausa characters or virtues that are acceptable, which raises an important question: how do the almajirai face dire poverty, yet maintain their sense of self (143, 144, 146)? This question humanizes the almajirai by acknowledging their sense of devotion and resilience because they work hard to maintain what the Hausa community deems as acceptable, pious, moral and evidence of devout Muslims who seek truth.

Next, Hoechner examines the future of the almajirai within spiritual services or what she calls the “prayer economy.” She observes what is considered

valuable or expected within their faith community and discovers that few of her informants’ desire to become Qur’anic teachers (198). The prospects for the almajirai are low and this emphasizes the systematic poverty in which the students often become entrapped (201). I think Hoechner’s language and description of the “prayer economy” and “prayer market” based on financial transactions misses the point (199). Although the embedded patron-client relations among the Hausa may influence their spiritual relationship, her choice of words downgrade the spiritual life of the almajirai and degrades their pursuit of truth.

Overall Hoechner’s representation of the almajirai brings clarity to this complex issue that touches every aspect of Hausaland. I appreciate Hoechner’s lament with the almajirai, and the space she gives them to voice their narrative within a bigger picture. She acknowledges the almajirai’s desire to maintain their sense of self, purpose, and dignity while honouring religion and saving face (223). The almajirai’s longing for survival, belonging, and fighting stigmas surrounding their poverty weigh heavier than their desire to change social hierarchies or systems (225). The almajirai’s poverty determines their enrolment in this educational system, but their longing for acceptance and pursuit of faith defines and shapes who they are. Perhaps the almajirai will influence the rest of the Hausa community to honour personhood beyond socioeconomic status and support their pursuit for truth as fellow Muslims.



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