

Essay

## **Conscientization and Education Reform: Applying Paulo Freire's Pedagogy to Al-Majirci in Northern Nigeria**

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### **Introduction**

*Al-Majirci* refers to a system of Islamic education in many parts of Northern Nigeria, where children, often from disadvantaged backgrounds, are sent to Qur'anic schools to receive religious education. The system, deeply embedded in the region's history, has faced numerous challenges. Attempts at reform have been met with resistance, leading to limited progress. To address this complex issue, this essay is proposing the application of Freire's pedagogical principles, particularly conscientization, as a means of raising awareness and fostering dialogue among critical stakeholders, especially parents, mallams (teachers), *Al-Majirai* (Qur'anic child scholars), and governmental authorities. The discussion explores how applying Freire's pedagogy can empower stakeholders to critically examine and challenge the *Al-Majiri* system's norms, responsibilities, and rights. By fostering a culture of dialogue, rooted in love, humility, and mutual trust, the essay aims to break down barriers of oppression and enable learners to become active, critically thinking participants in their own education and society, paving the way for sustainable reforms.

Freire's understanding of conscientization offers us a new perspective on the education of the *Al-Majirai* (pl) children. Instead of imposing external solutions, this approach would involve revolutionary leaders working towards mobilizing and empowering the *Al-Majirai* and their communities. This could involve continuous community dialogues, workshops, and educational programs that raise awareness about the social, economic, and political conditions, which would

help people develop a critical consciousness of their world. They would understand their challenges, question existing narratives, and identify the structural issues contributing to their disadvantaged situation. This might include recognizing the need for improved education, advocating for better living conditions, and understanding their role in shaping their future. Providing access to quality education, including secular education, is crucial. This will empower the *Al-Majirai* to navigate the world beyond religious education, opening opportunities for broader personal development. Notably, the leaders would facilitate a process of conscientization, helping the *Al-Majirai* and their families become aware of their own agency. This approach aligns with Freire's vision of education as a pathway to liberation and empowerment, transcending the limitations of traditional educational models.

### **The *Al-Majiri* System**

The *Al-Majiri* Qur'anic education system is reminiscent of the Borno Empire's Sangaya school and the Sokoto Caliphate's Birru system. The system provides both boarding and day options. The boarding school is favored by students from rural areas or those interested in advanced and higher Qur'anic education and professionalism, whereas the domestic option (often called *Makarantar Allo*; Slate School) is typically attended by girls and boys from host communities (Maigari, 2017, p. 400; National Council for the Welfare of Destitute NCWD, 2001:70).

Education in Islam is not merely for acquiring intellectual knowledge but it is a means of molding the nature and character of individuals so that they can collectively represent Islamic values, behave as *khalifatullah fi al-ard* (vicegerent of Allah on earth)- (Mahmood, n.date, p. 6). Mallams are obliged to teach and improve the pupils morally and also to exemplify the importance of Islamic culture and discipline as demonstrated by the Prophet's (peace be upon him) Sunnah: "Verily Allah has sent me [as a Prophet] with the perfection of noble morals and completion of

good deeds" (Al- Mu'jam Al- Awsat 7073). Therefore, the mallams are obliged to emphasize communal life, solidarity, and the development of positive habits and manners, urging pupils and students to fully embrace these ideals (NCWD, 200, p. 72).

The boarding *Al-Majiri* schools enroll pupils as young as age three. Regardless of the weather, the pupils beg for four to six hours daily, adhering to a specific begging schedule set by their mallams. They walk through the scorching sun from their "homes" to markets, restaurants, residences, and car parks. They get drenched when it rains and risk the biting cold during winter. Sadly, given the current harsh economic condition in the country, the *Al-Majiri* may not be able to obtain leftovers, they may return with empty bellies until the next *bara* session if they are lucky (NCWD, 2001 p. 74). Teke, Khalid, and Katami (2022, p.15) add that in relation to the activity of begging, the *Al-Majirai* may face modern slavery and are often linked to the insurgency in the country due to their vulnerability- though research is yet to prove these accusations.

NCWD argues that the intellectual aspect of the *Al-Majiri* system has endured over the years, but it expresses concern on other critical dimensions such as the welfare of the students, their exposure to social problems, the absence of parental involvement, moral degradation, harsh disciplinary methods, overcrowding, the shortage of qualified instructors, insufficient learning materials, and an outdated curriculum. International and private organizations, the federal and some state governments have attempted to reform the system and its population of 69% of the 13.2 million secular school children (UNICEF 2019 estimate), with the aim to restore it to an honorable status, but research has shown that it has yielded little results.

### **Conscientization**

The English term "conscientization" is a translation of the Portuguese term "conscientizacao," also translated as "consciousness raising." The word "conscientizacao" was coined by a group of

professors at the Advanced Institute of Brazilian Studies (a center devoted to the study of Brazil's development problems), among them Philosopher Alvaro Pinto and Professor Alberto Guerreiro, it was then borrowed by Freire and implanted into his *Pedagogy* (Cortina & Winter, 2021, p. 10) to mean, the process of raising awareness and critical consciousness among individuals, particularly those who are marginalized or oppressed, "but consciousness that is understood to have the power to transform reality" (Taylor, 1993, p. 52). Freire believed that education should go beyond traditional methods of transmitting knowledge and instead empower learners to critically analyze their social and political realities. In Corbett & Guilherme's view, Freire's goal is to promote change, defined as a deep social transformation, not by imposing a linear model of progress but by offering everyone the opportunity to discover the distinct contribution they can make to the overall improvement of their lives and that of their societies (2021, p. 447). Freire (1970) defines conscientization as "the process in which men, not as recipients, but as knowing subjects, achieve a deepening awareness both of socio-cultural reality that shapes their lives and of their capacity to transform that reality."

From a Freirean perspective, human beings should become active participants who engage critically with their environment by delving deeper into the complexities of their socio-cultural realities (social norms, economic structures, power dynamics, and cultural influences) that define and influence their lives. However, meaningful interaction and an exchange of ideas between the educator and learner is crucial for fostering and nurturing these critical thinking skills, as Freire points out: Only dialogue which requires critical thinking, is also capable of generating critical thinking. Without dialogue, there is no communication, and without communication, there can be no true education. Education, which is able to resolve the contradiction between teacher and

student, takes place in a situation in which both address their act of cognition to the object by which they are mediated (2018, p. 92- 93).

Dialogue, as a form of interactive communication, enables individuals to engage with information, challenge assumptions, analyze concepts, and construct new knowledge through thoughtful conversations. Dialogue is a form of communication that goes beyond the one-way transmission of information; it involves a reciprocal exchange of thoughts, perspectives, and insights between persons. If dialogue is absent, communication breaks down. It becomes limited to the mere transmission of information. This has implications for the quality and depth of education. Dialogue helps the learner to "know thyself," become aware of the forces that have hitherto ruled their lives and especially shaped their consciousness, and help set conditions for producing a new life (Macedo, 2018, p. 17). In Joseph's (2020, p. 165) opinion, Freire advocates for cooperation that "Seeks a more dialectical relationship through which I and thou are transformed into two thous who meet together to name the world that is shared."

In addition, Freire proposes love and humility as the foundation for dialogue, with mutual trust as the logical consequence. As genuine dialogue is essential for meaningful education and liberation from oppression, nevertheless, this dialogue should be rooted in love; a deep sense of care, respect, empathy for others, and humility- recognizing that both the educator and the learner possess valuable knowledge and experiences, hence no one should assume a position of superiority. As educators and learners engage in open conversations characterized by the latter's unique experiences, perspectives, and insights, the educators, in turn, acknowledge the learners' contributions and adapt their teaching method to incorporate these perspectives, demonstrating respect and empathy, trust is established. Therefore, if reforms in the *Al-Majiri* system would yield results, it must foster love, humility, and faith in the potential of each learner and move away from

the existing relationship of dislike, pride, resistance, and mistrust between the communities, mallams, and *Al-Majirai* on the one hand, and the Nigerian government on the other. The government should move away from a one-way reform and aim at building mutual trust by creating opportunities for open conversations and promoting a positive collaborative learning atmosphere where both parties feel comfortable participating and expressing their thoughts and ideas.

Freire's pedagogical approach, though criticized by some, has a profound impact not only on educationists but also on scholars and practitioners in the fields of theology, philosophy, sociology, politics, feminism, and many more (Roberts, 2017). It continues to be reinvented and reclarified according to changing political and intellectual thought and social movements (Leslie Bentley, 1999). On his emphasis on the importance of recognizing the humanity of all participants involved, valuing their voices, and cultivating an environment of collaboration and shared learning, Garavan (2016: 3) states, "The intrinsic value of giving the poor and oppressed their own voices, their own words I believe has enormous modern potency and value." This is because "The process of liberation is never complete; it always demands new investigations, thematization and problematization" (Collins, 1977, p. 16).

In the era of globalization, Freire writes, "Narratives of liberation must not ignore the cultural particularism of their roots, yet at the same time they must not abandon the opportunity to coordinate on a global basis" (xi). This is what the *Al-Majiri* system, as well as those advocating for it to be banned, have failed to comprehend. It only needs to be improved by making some adjustments.

### **Applying Paulo Freire's Pedagogy in *Al-Majiri* Reforms**

It is pertinent to note that participants who attend the *Al-Majiri* dialogues are often drawn from academia, civil society organizations, policymakers, renowned Islamic scholars, officials of

the Ministry of Education, Northern Governors Forum, traditional rulers, and members of the legislature. They often utilize the same methods and same policy of integrating the *Al-Majiri* system with secular education. Critical stakeholders like the Alaranmas, Mallams, parents, and the *Al-Majirai* are often left out of the discussion. Consequently, their voices are unheard. These groups often resist the decisions of policy makers and as such, little progress is recorded over the years. Therefore, the importance of Alaranmas, Mallams, *Al-Majirai* and parents to a sustainable *Al-Majiri* reform cannot be overemphasized. Lewis (2020) foresees a successful reform as one which valorizes the work of the Mallams, incentivizes the parents, listens to the *Al-Majiri* needs and preferences, and engages Northern elites, religious and traditional leaders, else the story remains like in folk tales, will-o-the-wasp. Hon Dukku posits, "Respect, engage and reform."

Raising awareness is critical to the success of the *Al-Majiri* reform project. For Freire, "Revolutionary leaders cannot think without the people, nor for the people but only with the people" (Freire, 2018, p. 131). The role of revolutionary leadership is not to impose their visions onto the citizenry, but to mobilize and empower the people to a conscious realization, recognition, and identification of their psychological, social, political, and economic conditions; conscientizacao. This means that to address the situation of the *Al-Majiri*, the government and concerned individuals should embark on a comprehensive and rigorous campaign in Northern Nigeria to eliminate all religious misconceptions. For example, they could start by sensitizing all stakeholders on:

1. The actual interpretation of seeking knowledge from Islamic perspectives, demonstrating practical examples from the Prophet's (pbuh) traditions, the lives of his companions, and those of other eminent Islamic scholars who never sent their wards to *Al-Majirci*.

2. Mallams should be enlightened on their responsibilities. The Prophet (pbuh) is reported to have said, "Each of you is a shepherd and each of you is responsible for his flock; the amir [leader] of a people is a shepherd and he is responsible for his flock..." (Al-Adab Al-Mufrad 206). Like the shepherds they are, the mallams should be responsible for their flocks (*Al-Majirai*) such that none goes astray.
3. The widespread assumption that teaching the Quran is voluntary and too noble for a monetary reward, which has led to mallams not being paid, should be challenged (NCWD, 2001, p. 112).
4. Parents, as critical stakeholders, should be enlightened on parental responsibilities according to Islamic injunctions and encouraged to enroll their wards in Qur'anic schools within their vicinity. If they choose otherwise, like every other scholarship, *Al-Majirci* requires provision.
5. Parents should also be sensitized on the dangers of putting their wards at risk as they beg for sustenance "in nooks and crannies" of towns and how mallams commodify the system, which often leads to child abuse.
6. Critical stakeholders should know that the *Al-Majiri* system is "Compared to a typewriter in an era of computers." Restricting the *Al-Majirai* to one form of education may limit their participation at the helm of the nation's affairs. How else can they be involved in changing policies that could favor the *Al-Majiri* System in the future?

Most importantly, meaningful dialogue between educators and learners is crucial for nurturing these critical thinking skills, as it fosters the exchange of ideas and challenges assumptions. Freire also emphasized that this dialogue should be rooted in love, humility, and mutual trust. If critical stakeholders recognize their agency, understanding their ability to shape



their lives, contribute to their culture, and reject authoritarian relationships comes naturally. By establishing these sustainable principles in the context of addressing *Al-Majirci* in Northern Nigeria, revolutionary leaders can break down barriers of oppression, create spaces for mutual trust, and enable learners to become active, critically thinking participants in their education and society.

On 24 November 2022, *The Sun News* reports that the National Orientation Agency (NOA), in collaboration with UNICEF, inaugurated a 4-day media and community dialogue at Zaria, Kaduna state, to reform the *Al-Majiri* system and prevent family separation- pioneers to this effect. The aim was to develop an action plan to obtain a statement of commitment from the community and religious leaders to reform the *Al-Majiri* system and increase Western school enrollment. They engaged critical stakeholders on the menace of street begging, child labor, and neglect. Three thousand six hundred community members participated, including the *Al-Majirai*, who were sensitized to their rights and how to seek help; the parents of *Al-Majirai*, who were sensitized to parental responsibilities, traditional rulers, and religious leaders. This is commendable; however, the described initiative limits itself to engagement with community members, focusing on education, awareness, and sensitization. In contrast to these developments, Freire's pedagogy and conscientization often involves a more comprehensive and ongoing process of critical dialogue and participatory education. The approach also emphasizes the importance of local context and the specific needs and aspirations of the community in the educational process. In Freire's approach, learners are encouraged to critically examine their social and political realities and actively engage in transforming them. The news report describes the initiative, but it is not clear whether it represents a sustained and ongoing commitment to these principles.

## **Conclusion**

The *Al-Majiri* system has deep historical roots and has resisted reform efforts for decades. However, applying Freire's "emancipatory pedagogical process" to *Al-Majirci* could be a robust approach to establishing a more proactive, sustainable, collaborative, and engaging strategy for reform. Freire's emphasis on conscientization, critical consciousness, and transformative dialogue aligns with the need to empower critical stakeholders in the *Al-Majiri* system to reshape their traditional educational structure. The pedagogy underscores the importance of recognizing the humanity of all participants, valuing their voices, and creating an environment of collaboration and shared learning. By establishing love and humility as the foundation of dialogue, leaders can break down the barriers of oppression that have persisted within the *Al-Majiri* system. Nevertheless, it is crucial to acknowledge the complexity of the *Al-Majiri* issue and the challenges that lie ahead. Achieving meaningful reform will require the active involvement of all stakeholders; it will also demand a commitment to sustained dialogue, ongoing awareness campaigns, and the integration of modern educational approaches. It would be a slow-moving yet accomplished project.

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