

# Arabic and Islamic Education in Nigeria: The Case of Al-Majiri Schools

Abdul Ganiy A. S. Oladosu

**Abstract**—The AL-MAJIRI school system is a variant of private Arabic and Islamic schools which cater for the religious and moral development of Muslims. In the past, the system produced clerics, scholars, judges, religious reformers, eminent teachers and great men who are worthy of emulation, particularly in northern Nigeria. Gradually, the system lost its glory but continued to discharge its educational responsibilities to a certain extent. This paper takes a look at the activities of the AL-MAJIRI schools. The introduction provides background information about Nigeria where the schools operate. This is followed by an overview of the Nigerian educational system, the nature and the features of the AL-MAJIRI school system, its weaknesses and the current challenges facing the schools. The paper concludes with emphasis on the urgent need for a comprehensive reform of the curriculum content of the schools. The step by step procedure required for the reform is discussed.

**Keywords**—AL-MAJIRI, Arabic and Islamic schools, Nigeria.

## I. INTRODUCTION

NIGERIA is a Federation of 36 States with Abuja as the Federal Capital Territory (FCT). Each of the 36 state capitals doubles as a commercial centre. The country, located on the West Coast of Africa, has a population of over 140 million people based on the last national census conducted in 2006 [1], page [20]. This population consists of about 250 ethnic, linguistic and cultural entities including the Hausa, the Igbo and the Yoruba [2], page [1]. Nigeria became an independent sovereign country on the 1<sup>st</sup> of October, 1960 and a Federal Republic on the 1<sup>st</sup> of October, 1963 [2], page [5]. Christianity and Islam are the country's major religions, with some pockets of pagans, atheists and free thinkers. The diverse cultural, linguistic, ethnic, social, political, religious and educational background of the citizenry constitutes the nucleus for most of the challenges facing the country since independence. Currently, Nigeria is going through a general mood of insecurity, instability and uncertainty, occasioned by a spate of killings resulting in the loss of innocent lives and destruction of invaluable property. Incidentally, the situation has serious political, religious and educational undertones. The educational undertone of the current Nigerian crisis is the focus of this paper, with particular emphasis on the Arabic and Islamic education dimension of the crisis.

## II. THE NIGERIAN EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM

### A. The Formal Educational System

The Nigerian Federal and State Governments operate a formal western style educational system which has undergone

several reforms and reviews since independence. Currently, a 9-3-4 system is operated, connoting a 9 year basic education, including the primary and junior secondary education; a 3 year senior secondary education; and a 4 year tertiary education offered at the University, the Colleges of Education for teacher education and the Polytechnic or Monotechnic for technical education [3], pages [14] – [36].

The duration of tertiary education differs according to areas of specialization. The minimum is 4 years for the Arts and Social Sciences, 5 years for Engineering and Law and 6 years for Medicine. The Colleges of Education, Faculties of Education, Institutes of Education, and Schools of Education cater for the professional training of teachers at the various educational levels [3], page [40].

### B. The Non-Formal Arabic and Islamic Educational System

Apart from the formal educational system, a non-formal Arabic and Islamic Educational System operates among the Nigerian Muslims, through Quranic and Islamiyyah schools. The quality of these schools differs from location to location. A particular type of such schools is the AL-MAJIRI School system.

#### 1) The AL-MAJIRI School System

The word AL-MAJIRI has its root in the Arabic term AL-MUHAJIR, which connotes a migrant. The word was borrowed into the Hausa language, adjusted to fit into its structure and has now become part of its repertoire of words.

Semantically, AL-MAJIRI means an individual who moves from one place to the other in search of knowledge. The relevance of this connotation in the context of this paper is that pupils and teachers of the AL-MAJIRI system of education go from one location to the other. This system had been firmly rooted in the northern part of Nigeria before the country was colonized by Britain in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. The AL-MAJIRI schools, also called Quranic schools, abound till today in most of the northern villages and cities, including Sokoto, Gwandu, Kano, Katsina, Zaria, Bornu, Nupe and Ilorin [2], page [42].

According to Taiwo [2], the system “has produced rulers, religious reformers, judges, administrators, clerics, scholars and a sequence of men literate in the Arabic language” page [176]. It is however disheartening to note that the system was left to itself during the British colonial administration. While the western style educational system was funded and promoted by the colonial authorities, the AL-MAJIRI and Qur'anic schools were neglected and left to the administrative and managerial whims and caprices of their proprietors who lacked the intellectual and professional competencies and skills required for a successful administration of the schools.

A. G. A. S. Oladosu is with the Department of Arts and Social Sciences Education, University of Ilorin, Ilorin, 234 Nigeria (phone +2348033768610; fax:031-221937, +234-(0)31-222561; e-mail agasdosu@unilorin.edu.ng).

Thus, the schools have hitherto lost their past glory and now tend to constitute a major source of embarrassment for the Muslim UMMAH. Some of the inherent weaknesses of the schools are highlighted in the next section.

## 2) The Inherent Weaknesses of the AL-MAJIRI Schools

The AL-MAJIRI system is lacking in many respects. Its characteristic weaknesses include the myopic scope of its aims and objectives since these are no more than the ability to read and write the Glorious Qur'an along with some knowledge of TAFSIR, HADITH, TAWHID and other branches of Islamic Studies for students who continue their studies to the advance level.

The shortcomings also include the narrow content of the Arabic and Islamic studies programme since the curriculum does not cater for the acquisition of science-oriented courses and modern entrepreneurial skills. Consequently, graduates of the system can hardly dream of becoming medical doctors, engineers, lawyers, agricultural experts, etc. Other areas of the system's weaknesses are the limited range of the learning experiences to which the pupils are exposed; lack of modern infrastructural methods, strategies and facilities; lack of highly qualified teachers to handle the school academic programmes; lack of uniformity in the curricular offerings of the schools, including uniformity in recommended textbooks, teachers' qualification, duration of specific educational level and evaluation of pupils' learning outcomes; lack of a healthy and a conducive environment; negligence on the part of parents, government and the society, among many other weaknesses.

Arising from these shortcomings, many stakeholders have abandoned the system in favour of formal education. Moreover, globalization, advancement in science and technology as well as other dynamics of the contemporary age has also demoralized the products of the system, forcing them to roam about the streets in search of money and food. In fact, the term AL-MAJIRI now interchanges easily with a beggar, as pupils of the system are often seen literally begging from one place to the other and doing menial jobs.

Commenting on the above phenomenon, Prof. Idris, A. A., at the 21<sup>st</sup> convocation lecture of the Bayero University, delivered in 2003, observed that the current AL-MAJIRI system of education is a bastardized version of the original form that was in operation during the pre-colonial period. He added that "begging was never involved and certainly the pupils were not reduced to doing menial jobs before they could eat".

Consequent upon the deterioration of the AL-MAJIRI schools, its pupils have been accused of being exploited and used by the politicians as thugs and hoodlums to foment trouble, cause riot, disrupt peace and achieve selfish political interest. In fact, it has been alleged that most of the terrorist attacks involving suicide bombings, setting places of worship ablaze, killing innocent souls and destroying property were masterminded by jobless pupils of the AL-MAJIRI schools. Commenting on the menace of the pupils recently, the Compass Newspaper observed that:

The AL-MAJIRIS have become a danger to society and provide a fertile breeding ground for a terrifying army for anti-social conduct. This constitutes huge security challenges to the country. Intelligence reports continue to indicate that the current terrorist movement in the Northern parts of the country, get its recruits basically from the ranks of those who grew up in the AL-MAJIRI sub-culture [4].

One of the effective ways out of the challenges facing the system is a comprehensive reform of the school curriculum. The procedure for achieving this is discussed below.

## 3) The Need for Urgent Curricular Reforms for AL-MAJIRI Schools in Nigeria

Curriculum has been defined in many ways: Wheeler [5] refers to it as "the planned experience offered to the learner under the guidance of the school" page [11]. Kerr [6], defines it as: "all the learning which is planned and guided by the school, whether it is carried out in group or individual, inside or outside the school" page [16].

According to Onwuka [7], curriculum is "the deliberate, systematic and planned attempts made by the school to change the behaviour of members of the society in which it is situated" page [5]. It may be concluded from these definitions that:

- i. A Curriculum is concerned with learning experiences.
- ii. The experiences are usually planned, guided, systematic and deliberate.
- iii. The planned, guided, systematic and deliberate experiences are designed for learners.
- iv. The learners are expected to effect behaviour change as a result of exposure to the experiences.
- v. The experiences are offered under the auspices of the school but not necessarily within the school premises.

From the curricular point of view, these experiences must satisfy specific requirements:

1. Presumably, they should be capable of helping to attain spelt-out educational objectives
2. They should be translated into specific subject matter (content)
3. They should be integrated with the subject matter (method).
4. Finally, they should be assessed to determine their effectiveness in bringing about the spelt-out educational objectives (evaluation).

This is what Wheeler [5], calls the five phases of the curriculum process. For convenience sake, Wheeler's model has been used below as a framework for a uniform curriculum proposed for AL-MAJIRI Arabic and Islamic schools in Nigeria and probably in other Muslim countries with similar educational system.

### a) Selection of Aims, Goals and Objectives

Traditionally, distinctions are made among the terms goals, aims, and objectives: Goals are said to be more general. They refer to the ends set by a society for its educational system [8], page [21]. For example, statements like "education for national unity", "education for democratic society" and "education for an egalitarian society" are broad educational

goals subject to different interpretations under different circumstances and achievable probably only at the end of a given educational level. As for aims, these are more specific than goals. They refer to precise direction to be followed within a given educational context and are attainable during a specific period like a semester, a term or a quarter. Finally, objectives are the most specific of the three. They narrow down educational goals and aims and translate them into manageable behavioural activities achievable by the end of a presentation, a lecture or a lesson. For instance, expressions like “at the end of the lesson, students should be able to define Hadith, cite three examples and identify examples of authentic Hadith” are statements of behavioural objectives.

Viewed from the standpoint of Wheeler [5], goals are of three types: Ultimate goals, mediate goals and proximate goals. Ultimate goals are “statements of desirable acts, feelings, activities and knowledge integrated in a pattern and exhibited in appropriate situations” [5], page [32]. Mediate goals are derived behaviours in classes of situations at given stages” of the curriculum process [5], page [32]. Finally, proximate goals are “the most specific statements of intended behavioural outcomes possible in the first phase of the Curriculum process” [5], page [33]. Wheeler’s three-tier goals tend to correspond to the concepts of educational goals, aims and objectives discussed earlier.

From the perspective of AL-MAJIRI Arabic and Islamic Schools, they all share a common ultimate goal of producing individuals who will recognize the existence of one God and devote their whole life, self and resources to His service. However, the schools need to have a common forum to derive mediate goals and determine specific behavioural objectives. The present situation, in which each school arbitrarily goes about its educational aims and specific behavioural activities, does not conform with educational norms. Given the far-reaching effects of this first phase of the process of designing a curriculum, and given the crucial need for specification at this stage, AL-MAJIRI Arabic and Islamic Schools cannot afford to be operating in isolation without an initial common agreement on precise objectives interpretable from the general ultimate goals of Arabic and Islamic education.

#### b) Selection of Learning Experiences

The second phase of the process of designing a curriculum concerns itself with the selection of learning experiences capable of bringing about the goals spelt out in the first phase. Here, the experiences correspond neatly with ultimate, mediate, and proximate goals. This means that general experiences must be considered for ultimate goals, less general experiences for mediate goals and specific experiences for proximate goals.

At this stage too, cognizance must be taken of experiences drawn from the three educational domains; the Cognitive, Affective and Psycho-motor. In other words, suggested experiences must satisfy the intellectual, spiritual/emotional and physical needs of the learner.

Within the content of AL-MAJIRI Arabic and Islamic Schools, learning experiences are not arrived at through a

joint consultative board. And any common learning experiences identified among the schools are incidental and not the outcome of adequate curriculum planning. For a uniform curriculum design therefore, the schools need a common forum to decide learning experiences consonant with their educational goals, aims and objectives.

#### c) Selection of Content

At this third phase, decisions are taken about various school subjects into which learning experiences are embedded and through which desirable educational objectives are achieved. As with learning experiences which should correspond with the three levels of educational goals, content as reflected by school subjects should be selected to correspond with ultimate, mediate and proximate educational goals. In this regard, school subjects tally with general educational goals in terms of helping to attain them.

At a less general level, basic themes or topics within a subject matter correspond to mediate goals while “alternative samples of content” correspond to specific educational objectives. In this context, topics in Hadith, Tafsir, Sirah, etc., must be selected in a way that correspond to specific educational objectives [5], page [41].

With regard to AL-MAJIRI Arabic and Islamic Schools, subjects, like learning experiences, are selected without formal consultations among the various schools. What is seen in practice, as features of common school subjects, are not the deliberate making of the schools but an educational accident. Consequently, essential school subjects like English, Mathematics, Biology, Chemistry, Physics and Nigerian Language(s) are excluded from the syllabus of AL-MAJIRI Arabic and Islamic Schools. In the South West of Nigeria, some proprietors of Private Arabic Schools like Alhaji Abdul Baqi (Iwo) in Osun State of Nigeria, Alfa Lanase (Ibadan) in Oyo State of Nigeria, and Alhaji Bamidele (Ibadan) subscribe to the view that the primary level of secular education is sufficient for the Muslim child and that any secular education beyond that level should not be encouraged [9], pages [101] – [118]. These groups of Muslim “educational reformers” believe that any form of western education would have adverse effect on Islamic education because it might divert the attention of learners from their original area of interest in favour of a different area [10], pages [57] – [70]. Again, as emphasized in the previous phase of the curriculum process, proprietors of AL-MAJIRI Arabic and Islamic Schools need to come together to decide on specific school subjects capable of helping to realize spelt-out educational goals and objectives. Specifically, these schools should be cognisant of the individual and social needs of the learners. For example, given the status of English as the official language of Nigeria, learners should be exposed to learning experiences capable of imparting in them, the ability to communicate fluently and intelligibly in the language. Given also, the importance of the Mother Tongue in the education of the individual, learners should enjoy sufficient exposure to their respective Mother Tongues. Within the context of this paper, Hausa shall be the relevant mother tongue in Hausa land; Yoruba in Yoruba

land; Igbo in Igboland; etc. Moreover, Mathematics and the other science subjects should be emphasized with other school subjects particularly for learners who have no previous formal education. The observation that some AL-MAJIRI Arabic and Islamic Schools do not offer English, Mathematics, Science, and Nigerian Language(s) is not in line with the Nigerian National Policy on Education which classifies these subjects along with some others as "CORE" subjects [3]. It is also not in line with the principles and practices of Islam which encourages the acquisition of all branches of knowledge as much as possible. . While the private status of these schools is noted, it is in the interest of learners to have adequate exposure to these subjects for them to function effectively and without unnecessary embarrassment within the Nigerian and global context. At this phase of the curriculum process therefore, adequate steps should be taken to design a uniform content for AL-MAJIRI Arabic and Islamic Schools and the most effective way to achieve this is to establish a formally recognized common forum.

#### d) Organization and Integration of Experiences and Contents

At this phase, the learning experiences suggested in the second phase are organised and integrated with the content proposed in the third phase. Usually, three major curriculum organisational and integration patterns are identified:

i. The Subject Curriculum Design which compartmentalises cultural heritage into distinct school subjects. This is otherwise known as the Subject-Centered Curriculum.

ii. The Activity Curriculum Design which structures curriculum content and experiences according to the needs of the individual. This is also otherwise known as the Learner or Child- Centered Curriculum.

iii. The Social Function Curriculum Design which structures the curriculum according to the social needs of the learner. This is alternatively referred to as the Society-Centred Curriculum.

Decisions about any of these organisational and integrational patterns have implications for the scope and sequence of the school subjects. They affect the areas to be covered in each subject and the order in which they should be presented to learners. Since this phase concerns classroom practices, decisions taken about it also affect teachers, their syllabus, scheme of work and methodology.

In AL-MAJIRI Arabic and Islamic Schools, crucial curricular issues are left to the imagination of individual schools with the attendant results of using various curricula, syllabi, teachers' schemes of work and methodology, where these are available at all. For a healthy instructional atmosphere, these schools need, again, to ensure uniformity in terms of employing qualified teachers with professional teaching orientation and adequate acquaintance with the principles and practices of education. At this phase too, the schools should adopt a uniform approach as to the salaries and incentives given to teachers at various salary scales to be worked out by any evolving common forum of interaction. Such a forum should also take a uniform decision on

recommended textbooks, duration of each educational level, admission requirements at each level, minimum educational standard and length of each academic year.

#### e) Evaluation

This is the fifth and final phase of the curriculum process. It is the stage at which the learning experiences, the content and their organizational and integration patterns are assessed in the light of the educational goals stipulated in the first phase. And since education is concerned, among other things, with behavioural changes, the evaluation is directed towards the learner's behaviour. Ideally, his initial behaviour is measured in advance and compared to actual educational outcomes and intended educational outcomes [5], page [49]. This is the objective of testing and examining students at regular intervals during the school or academic year. In the current practices of AL-MAJIRI Arabic and Islamic Schools, no formal or informal examination body coordinates this phase of the curriculum process. Again, this phenomenon is not educationally adequate or healthy and calls for urgent action towards a change for the establishment of a joint examination board to coordinate the educational practices of AL-MAJIRI Arabic and Islamic Schools in Nigeria.

### III. IMPLICATIONS FOR URGENT CURRICULAR REFORMS

The clarion call for urgent curricular reforms implies, among other things, that there should be uniformity in, and integration of, the educational objectives, experiences, content, and evaluation procedure of AL-MAJIRI Arabic and Islamic Schools in Nigeria. This further implies that a joint body should be evolved to coordinate the curriculum activities identified above. The body would have the opportunity of approaching the Federal and State Ministries of Education for formal recognition of the schools, for government's involvement in their activities and for commitment to their survival. This would also pave the way for the schools to improve their financial position through annual and regular subvention to be received from the government.

All these would raise the status of the schools, encourage proprietors, boost students' morale and assure them of a more promising future. But to get to this stage, the school authorities should take the necessary initiative and hold the bull by the horn. The current move by the Federal Government of Nigeria to fund the AL-MAJIRI Arabic and Islamic Schools is a very welcome development.

In specific terms, the proposed curricular reform process must emphasize the sanctity of human lives, property and places of worship, regardless of religious affiliation. It must also encourage comparative religious studies as well as the virtues of mutual understanding, mutual respect, tolerance, love, patience and all the values that could promote peaceful co-existence among the various religious groupings or denominations in Nigeria. Meanwhile, the curriculum content of the schools should be expanded to capture the core content of the curriculum of the formal school system. This is to eliminate possible inferiority complex among the graduands of the AL-MAJIRI school system and to ensure that they are not,

in anyway, disadvantaged when compared with their counterparts in the formal school system.

When the above reforms and other similar proposals had been implemented, the way would have been paved for an effective running of the AL-MAJIRI school system in Nigeria.

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