



Laidlaw Scholars Undergraduate Leadership and Research Programme
Research Proposal

The Psychological Impact of the Almajiri System in Nigeria: A Comparative Study with the Daara and Madrasa Models in Senegal and Ghana

Aisha Adamu

Research Advisor: Roger Antabe

April 18th, 2025

Abstract

This research explores the psychological impact of Islamic educational systems in West Africa by comparing the Almajiri system in Nigeria with the Daara in Senegal and the Madrasa in Ghana. Using an Afrocentric lens, it investigates how these systems shape students' self-concept, emotional resilience, and cognitive development. The Nigerian component draws on prior research and literature to understand the Almajiri experience, while primary data will be collected through fieldwork in Ghana and Senegal using surveys and interviews. A historical case study on Nana Asma'u's educational model is also employed to inform culturally grounded reform proposals. This study aims to challenge misconceptions that portray Almajiri children solely as social burdens, offer insights into the psychological realities of students across these systems, and contribute to the development of context-sensitive educational policies that respect cultural and religious frameworks while prioritizing student well-being.

Introduction

The Almajiri system (derived from Al-Muhajirun in Arabic, translating to "migrant") is an Islamic educational system in Northern Nigeria where young boys from underprivileged communities are sent to study under Quranic teachers (Mohammed et al., 2023). Although this system was a historically respected means of education, recently, socioeconomic challenges have resulted in the Almajirai (students) experiencing poor living conditions, psychological distress, and stigmatization (Chukwu et al., 2016).

This topic resonates with me because I originate from Northern Nigeria. I have witnessed the gaps in educational and psychological support in the Almajiri system and the suffering of children within this structure. Approximately 10 million Almajiri children in Nigeria face hardship and systemic neglect (UNICEF, 2020). Research on the Almajirai has been conducted, but it focuses on educational disparities between Almajirai and traditional Western schooling, presenting the Almajirai as solely a social burden.

This study seeks an Afrocentric approach to understanding their cognitive and psychological realities. This is crucial, as comparison to Western models does not provide the depth in understanding the nuanced specifics that are culturally and religiously sensitive. To obtain this Afrocentric approach, this study utilizes a historical comparison to Nana Asma'u's model and modern-day comparisons to the Daaras in Senegal and the Madrasa in Ghana.

By addressing the cognitive basis of their experiences, this research aims to develop solutions that acknowledge the needs, cultural contexts, and realities of the Almajiri population. A proper understanding of their self-perception, emotional resilience, and social situation allows for culturally sensitive and communally implementable interventions rather than the imposition of external models.

This study aims to:

1. Provide an Afrocentric psychological analysis of Almajiri students' cognitive and emotional well-being using a historical comparison as well as modern-day comparisons to the Daaras and Madrasa models.

2. Challenge societal misconceptions that frame Almajiri children as solely a socioeconomic burden.
3. Propose community-based solutions that enhance well-being while respecting cultural beliefs.
4. Contribute to policy discussions on integrating psychological support within educational settings in Nigeria and Africa overall.

Research Objectives & Questions

Primary Objective:

To investigate the psychological impact of the Almajiri educational system in Nigeria, deconstruct challenges and misconceptions, and develop culturally relevant modifications through a comparative lens involving Senegal and Ghana.

Secondary Objectives:

1. To assess how the self-concept and identity formation (e.g., goals, beliefs about success) of Almajirai compared to students in other Islamic educational systems in Africa (Senegal and Ghana).
2. To evaluate cognitive and emotional development in each system, highlighting structural and cultural influences.
3. To understand parental motivations for enrollment across all three systems.
4. To explore social-emotional risk factors affecting student mental health.
5. To propose reform options for the Almajiri system informed by successful elements in Daara and Madrasa structures.

Research Questions:

1. How does the Almajiri system shape students' self-concept (beliefs about success/aspirations) and cognitive development compared to students in other West African Islamic educational systems presently and historically?
2. What are the key social and emotional challenges faced by students in all three systems?
3. What context-sensitive reforms could enhance student well-being while preserving the religious and cultural foundations of the Almajiri system informed by lessons from the Ghanaian and Senegalese models?

Background

Existing research on the Almajiri system has primarily focused on its Western educational shortcomings, public health implications, and corruption/governance failure roots. However, fewer studies touch on the psychological experiences of the students themselves, especially from a culturally informed and comparative perspective.

Magashi (2013) argues that the Almajiri system now violates basic principles of welfare, subjecting the children to legal and ethical neglect. His work highlights how the students suffer from a deprivation of healthcare, emotional care, shelter, and dignity. This shifted my own research from viewing the system as pedagogically outdated to understanding it as a

multidimensional crisis of child development, requiring analysis of cognitive and emotional well-being.

Abubakar-Abdullateef et al. (2017) conducted a comparative study on the psychiatric impacts of the Almajiri system. They used the K-SADS-PL diagnostic tool and discovered that 57.7% of Almajiri students had at least one psychiatric disorder, highly exceeding the 37% prevalence among public school pupils in the same region. Disorders included depression, PTSD, substance use disorders, and enuresis; the almajiri children were also much less likely to show separation anxiety due to long-term family detachment. This empirical evidence directly informed the focus of my research on mental health risks, cognitive/emotional development, and resilience within the system.

Zubairu et al. (2024) provide a psychosocial assessment of Almajiri children in Northern Kaduna. Their study revealed that 81.3% of the students reported feelings of persistent anger and loneliness. Furthermore, only 1.3% of the students described themselves as happy. These children also reported widespread exposure to drug use, poor hygiene, emotional neglect and hunger. This directly shaped my decision to explore self-concept, self-worth, and aspirations as variables of interest.

Gbigbidje et al. (2021) trace how colonial interference and government neglect eroded what was once a respected religious tradition, reducing it to a survival mechanism built on child labor and street begging. Their work is important for understanding the system's collapse, but it focuses mostly on political failure and poverty, not on the child's lived experience. This limitation pushed me to take a comparative route — to ask what we can learn from other Islamic models, like the Daara in Senegal or Madrasa in Ghana, that manage to preserve both religious purpose and the psychological well-being of students.

Present research has many gaps, including the absence of an Afrocentric framework that considers the cultural and spiritual nuances of the system, the lack of a comparative approach, no child-centered perspectives, and limited focus on reform. My research aims to fill these gaps producing data that could hopefully bring about informed, meaningful policy interventions to the systems.

Methodology

This research combines qualitative interviews, quantitative surveys, and historical-literature review to investigate the psychological impact of the Almajiri system in Nigeria and compare it to Islamic educational models in Senegal (Daaras) and Ghana (Madrasas). The goal is to understand the emotional and cognitive development of children in these systems and identify culturally rooted reforms that support student well-being.

1. Literature Review and Historical Framing

Before the formal research period begins, I will complete an extensive literature review. This includes a focused review of scholarly studies that document the psychological outcomes of the Almajiri system in Nigeria — including trauma, identity disruption, and resilience patterns. These studies will serve as a comparative foundation

for the primary data I will collect in Ghana and Senegal. Additionally, I will engage with historical material, particularly the educational philosophy of Nana Asma'u, to contextualize how socially integrative Islamic education has historically functioned in West Africa. This will help shape the cultural lens through which I assess and interpret modern systems.

2. Primary Data Collection

Ghana (Accra) – Weeks 1 to 3

The first three weeks of the research period will be spent in Accra, Ghana. During this time, I will visit various Madrasa institutions to conduct surveys and interviews. I am already in contact with the Islamic Education Unit in Accra, which is aware of this study and has agreed to support access to the schools.

Surveys: I will administer the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire to 200 Madrasa students to assess self-concept, emotional well-being, and basic cognitive perceptions.

Interviews: I will conduct semi-structured interviews with 20 selected students, as well as speak with teachers and administrators to gather insight into how these schools approach psychological development and support.

The surveys will be conducted first, followed by interviews and discussions with staff.

Senegal (Dakar) – Weeks 4 to 6

The second half of the research period will be conducted in Dakar, Senegal. There, I will focus on Daara schools, which serve as a traditional Islamic education model. The structure of research will mirror the Ghanaian phase:

- 200 Daara students will be surveyed using the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire.
- 20 students will be selected for in-depth interviews.
- I will also speak with teachers and school leaders for comparative insight.

In Senegal, I will be working with a translator, and I am currently coordinating with Institut Daara Moderne Yaye Adja Bineta Thiaw (International) to facilitate access to the Daaras. They are aware of my research and have expressed support.

3. Nigeria – Comparative Literature Analysis

Due to travel restrictions, I will not be conducting in-person fieldwork in Nigeria. Instead, I will perform a deep literature-based analysis of prior research studies that have assessed the psychological outcomes of Almajiri students — including prevalence of trauma, depression, substance use, and identity challenges. This literature-based analysis will serve as the Nigerian comparison group to the primary data collected in Senegal and Ghana.

Training/ Certifications Needed

I am working on improving my French prior to the research period. Although this is not necessary considering that I will be working with a translator, I believe that improving my French will be beneficial. I am taking classes on Preply.

Research Location

I will be in Accra, Ghana, for the first 3 weeks of the research period and Dakar, Senegal, for the final two weeks. In both places, I will be staying with family friends to reduce the cost of long term hotels.

Research Ethics Board

My research requires REB approval, and I have started the process for receiving it.

Timeline

April 2025

- **April 1–23:**
 - Finalize research instruments
 - Design and format survey (Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire)
 - Draft interview protocols (students and teachers)
 - Confirm participation and access to schools in Ghana and Senegal
 - Communicate with Islamic Education Unit (Ghana) and Institut Daara Moderne Yaye Adja Bineta Thiaw (International) finalize logistics
- **By April 23:**
 - Surveys finalized and ready for use
- **April 23–30:**
 - Prepare documentation for ethics application
 - Schedule virtual meetings with contacts in Ghana and Senegal if needed

May 2025

- **May 1:**
 - Submit and/or receive ethics approval
- **May 1–31:**
 - Literature review on historical Islamic education in West Africa, focusing on Nana Asma'u
 - Read:
 - *One Woman's Jihad: Nana Asma'u, Scholar and Scribe*
 - *Collected Works of Nana Asma'u: Daughter of Usman 'dan Fodiyo (1793–1864)*
 - Annotate and extract relevant themes (integration of psychological, educational, and gendered insights)
 - Begin mapping insights to inform comparative analysis with Daaras and Madrasas

June 2025

- **June 1–15:**
 - Conduct in-depth literature-based analysis of psychological outcomes in the Almajiri system
 - Review studies including Abubakar-Abdullateef et al. (2017), Zubairu et al. (2024), and Magashi (2013)
 - Identify and categorize psychological risks (e.g., trauma, depression, resilience)
 - Prepare this as the **Nigerian baseline** for later comparison
- **June 16 – July 4 (Weeks 1–3 of fieldwork):**
 - **Ghana fieldwork phase (Accra) – Madrasas**
 - **Week 1–2 (June 16–27):**
 - Conduct surveys: 20 students per weekday
 - Total: ~200 Madrasa students surveyed
 - **Week 3 (June 30–July 4):**
 - Conduct semi-structured interviews with 20 selected students
 - Conduct informal and/or structured discussions with teachers
 - Organize and clean survey data

July 2025

- **July 7–26 (Weeks 4–6 of fieldwork):**
 - **Senegal fieldwork phase (Dakar) – Daaras**
 - **Week 4–5 (July 7–18):**
 - Conduct surveys: 20 students per weekday
 - Total: ~200 Daara students surveyed
 - **Week 6 (July 21–26):**
 - Conduct interviews with 20 selected students
 - Interview teachers and administrators
 - Organize and clean data with translator support

August 2025

- **August 1–31:**
 - Correlate and analyze data from Ghana and Senegal
 - Compare findings with Nigerian literature-based psychological analysis
 - Integrate insights from Nana Asma’u into discussion of culturally rooted reforms
 - Begin drafting final research report
 - Structure: Introduction, Methods, Literature Review, Data Analysis, Comparative Discussion, Recommendations
 - Review with advisor and begin revisions

Resources & Support Needed

1. Mentorship: I will be working under the guidance of my research advisor, Professor Roger Antabe, who will provide the necessary support throughout the entire research process. No additional faculty involvement is needed.
2. Literature Access: For my literature review, I will be purchasing the following books:
 - *One Woman's Jihad: Nana Asma'u, Scholar and Scribe*
 - *Collected Works of Nana Asma'u: Daughter of Usman 'dan Fodiyo (1793–1864)*These will be ordered directly through Amazon to avoid any third-party legal or library issues.
3. Research Tools:
 - **Survey Instrument:** I will be using the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire to assess emotional well-being, psychological distress and self-concept among students. This questionnaire is widely available in French, English, and Hausa hence it can be used across Ghana and Senegal.
 - **Interview Guides:** Semi-structured interview questions will be developed for students and teachers in Ghana and Senegal.
 - **Data Analysis:** I will use Excel or Google Sheets for organizing survey results and basic analysis. Interviews will be analyzed manually or with simple coding techniques as needed.
4. Field Support:
 - In **Ghana**, I am already in contact with the Islamic Education Unit in Accra, which will assist in providing access to Madrasa schools.
 - In **Senegal**, I will work with a French translator to assist with communication during interviews and data collection at Daara institutions.

Potential Impact

This research centers on African educational models rather than imposing Western frameworks. It fills a critical gap in understanding the psychological realities of African faith-based education systems. The findings have policy implications for Nigeria and globally, addressing psychological effects on students and proposing culturally sensitive reforms. Improving student well-being and reintegrating them into broader economic and social systems offers long-term economic benefits, promoting sustainable, community-driven improvements in education.

Budget

[https://utoronto-my.sharepoint.com/:x/r/personal/aisha_adamu_mail_utoronto_ca/Documents/Cohort-2025-Budget-Template%20\(1\).xlsx?d=w00660ea9930f4304981d860c499dcb82&csf=1&web=1&e=kb3ZgH](https://utoronto-my.sharepoint.com/:x/r/personal/aisha_adamu_mail_utoronto_ca/Documents/Cohort-2025-Budget-Template%20(1).xlsx?d=w00660ea9930f4304981d860c499dcb82&csf=1&web=1&e=kb3ZgH)

References

- Abubakar-Abdullateef, A., Adedokun, B., & Omigbodun, O. (2017). A comparative study of the prevalence and correlates of psychiatric disorders in Almajiris and public primary school pupils in Zaria, Northwest Nigeria. *Child and Adolescent Psychiatry and Mental Health*, 11(29).
<https://doi.org/10.1186/s13034-017-0166-3>
- Chukwu, N. E., Ajaegbu, O. O., & Nwaoga, C. T. (2016). Social and psychological challenges of Almajiri system in Nigeria: The way forward. *Texila Journal of Public Health*, 4(4).
<https://doi.org/10.21522/TIJPH.2013.04.04.Art059>
- Chehami, J., & Stout, C. (2016). Families and daara in Senegal: The importance of macrosocial factors, collective strategies, and individual choices. *Afrique contemporaine*, 257(1), 77–89.
<https://doi.org/10.3917/afco.257.0077>
- Gbigbidje, D. L., Awoviebe, J., & Ayafou, Y. (2021). The phenomenon of Almajiri system of education in Northern Nigeria. *International Scholars Journal of Arts and Social Science Research*, 3(3), 243–247. <http://www.theinterscholar.org/journals/index.php/isjassr>
- Magashi, S. B. (2014). Education and the right to development of the child in Northern Nigeria: A proposal for reforming the Almajiri institution. *Africa Today*, 61(3), 65–84.
<https://doi.org/10.2979/africatoday.61.3.65>
- Mohammed, I., & Yusuf, D. (2023). The Almajiri educational system: Origin, dynamics, and challenges. *Journal of Political Science and International Relations*.
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/343976792_The_Almajiri_Educational_System_Origin_Dynamics_and_Challenges
- UNICEF. (2020). Children adjust to life outside Nigeria's Almajiri system. UNICEF Nigeria.
<https://www.unicef.org/nigeria/stories/children-adjust-life-outside-nigerias-almajiri-system>
- Zubairu, H. D., Yohanna, S., Abubakar, R., Usman, N., & Ige, O. (2024). The psychosocial consequences of Almajiri system of education among Almajiri pupils in two Tsangaya schools in Kaduna North metropolis, North-Western Nigeria. *Journal of International Research in Medical and Social Sciences*, 1(1), 1–8. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.108275122>
- Shea, N. O., & Boyd, J. E. (2003). *One woman's jihad: Nana Asma'u, scholar and scribe*. Indiana University Press.
- Boyd, J. E., & Mack, B. (1997). *Collected works of Nana Asma'u: Daughter of Usman 'dan Fodiyo (1793–1864)*. Michigan State University Press.