

THE PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPACT OF THE ALMAJIRI SYSTEM IN NIGERIA: A COMPARATIVE STUDY WITH THE DAARA AND MADRASA MODELS IN SENEGAL AND GHANA

University of Toronto Laidlaw Scholars Cohort 2025-2026

Author

Aisha Adamu



Research Advisor

Roger Antabe

Introduction

The Almajiri system is an Islamic educational system in Northern Nigeria where young boys who are predominantly from low-income communities are sent to study the Quran. However, due to post-colonialism and socioeconomic challenges, millions of Almajirai (students) experience poor living conditions, systematic neglect, psychological distress, and stigmatization. Studies that have been done on the Almajiri system examine it from a Western perspective. This study seeks a culturally and religiously sensitive Afrocentric approach to understand the cognitive and psychological realities of the almajirai.



Objective

Using Nana Asma'u and pre-colonial West African Islamic education as a conceptual framework, this study aims 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 two other West African Islamic systems: Ghana's madrasa system and Senegal's daara system.

Methodology

- 01 This study combines qualitative interviews, quantitative surveys, desk reviews, and case studies to investigate the psychological impact of the Almajiri system.
- 02 Data for Senegal and Ghana were collected through semi-structured interviews with students and teachers and surveys with students. For Nigerian present and historical data, desk reviews and case studies were used.
- 03 The sample size consisted of a total of 400 students surveyed, 40 students interviewed, 9 teachers interviewed, 6 articles desk reviewed, and 3 case study books. All students were 16 years old and over.
- 04 Data analysis techniques included thematic analysis, content analysis, and statistical analysis.
- 05 Older students were selected because they had been in the system for longer, so they would have more extensive reports on the experience. For Nigeria, to ensure reliability, a variety of sources were examined for relevance before selection.

Results

Well-being is high where pre-colonial values of communal care, moral identity, and inclusion are maintained (Boyd & Mack, 2013; Mack & Boyd, 2000/1997). Ghana shows partial continuity where there is a hybrid curriculum, teacher attentiveness, and faith-centered aspirations. Senegal shows uneven continuity where the communal identity and divine purpose are maintained, but a lack of parental involvement, disciplinary measures, and socioeconomic factors weaken the system's integrity. Nigeria's system shows a disconnection where there is structural abandonment and care-network collapse. Differences in the systems are likely due to colonial disruption, state policy neglect, and community adaptation capacities. See tables for graphical representations of raw data

Recommendations

As a result, to improve the systems, particularly for the Almajiri system, moral-spiritual cultivation, emotional care, and guidance should be central in education, with Islamic education strengthening faith and cultural identity while also preparing students to find careers and contribute meaningfully to society. There should be control within the systems, and reform should continue the West African Islamic heritage, improving the systems from within, not through the enforcement of external ideologies.

Conclusion

Ghana shows more balanced outcomes, Senegal demonstrates uneven legitimacy, and Nigeria faces the most severe challenges. Findings echo decolonial scholarship that focuses on valuing the African Islamic traditions, improving them from within; successes in Ghana and Nana Asma'u's system show that this can be done. Reforms must protect children's safety and rights while ensuring that the cultural values of the system are upheld. Future research should look into how culturally rooted models can be adapted to meet the needs of a rapidly globalizing world.

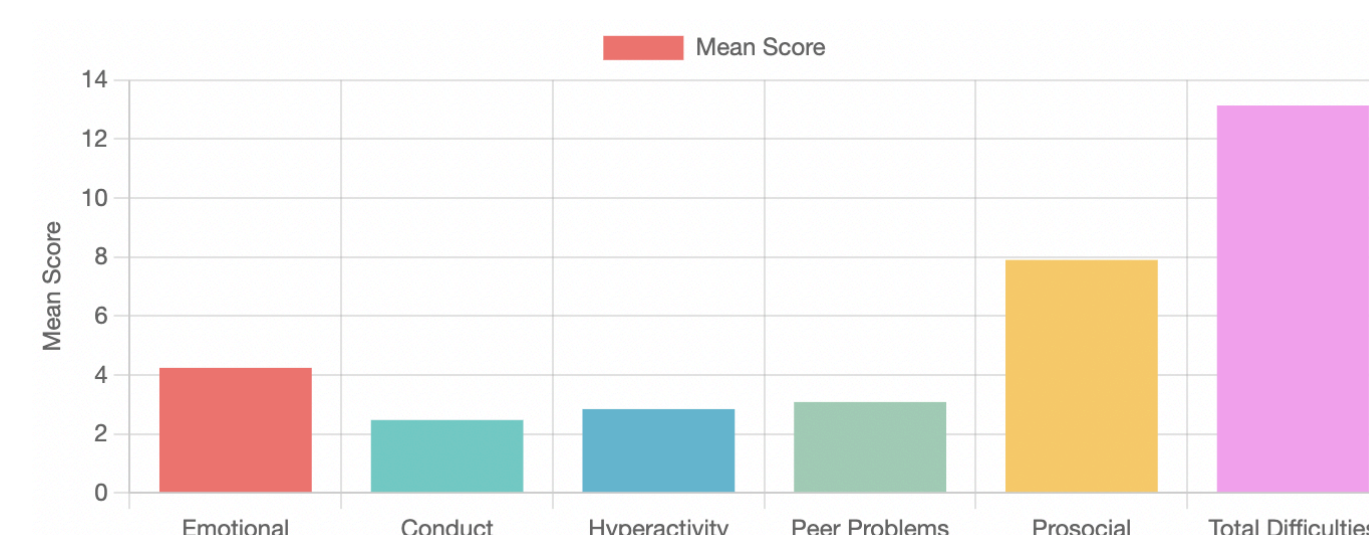


Figure 5: SDQ Subscale Mean Scores for Ghanaian Madrasas

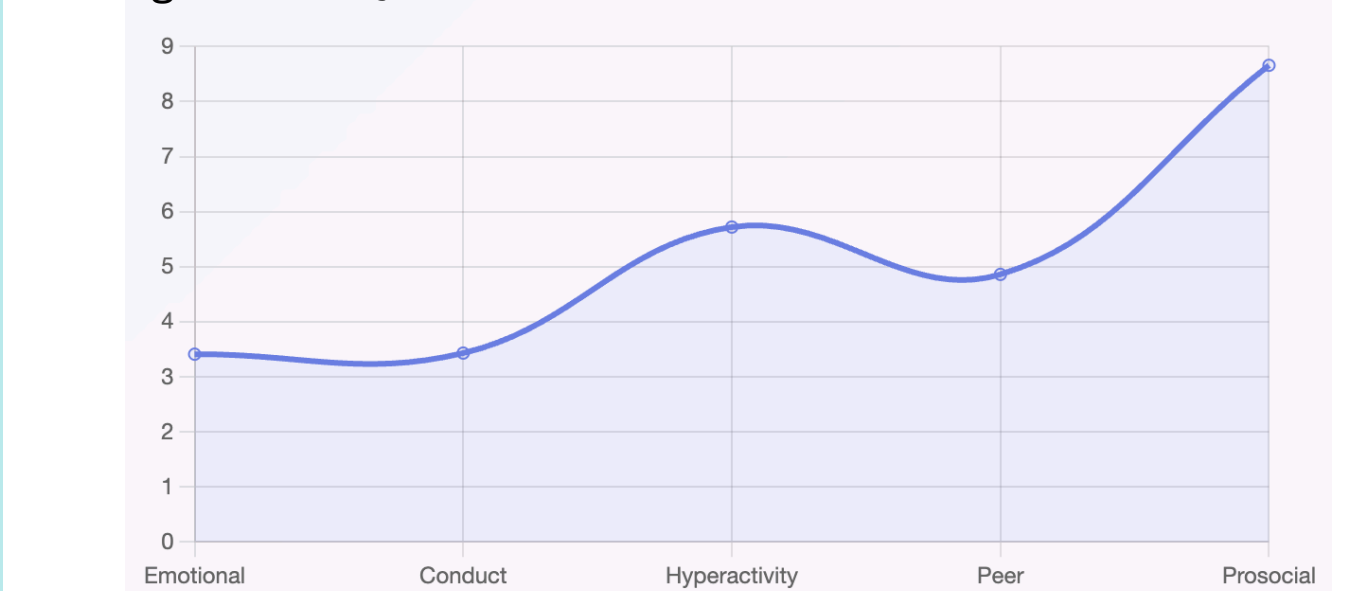


Figure 16: SDQ Subscale Mean Scores for Senegalese Daaras



Figure 6: Student Responses to Question on Presence of Difficulties in Emotions, Concentration, Behavior, or Being Able to Get on With Other People in Ghanaian Madrasas

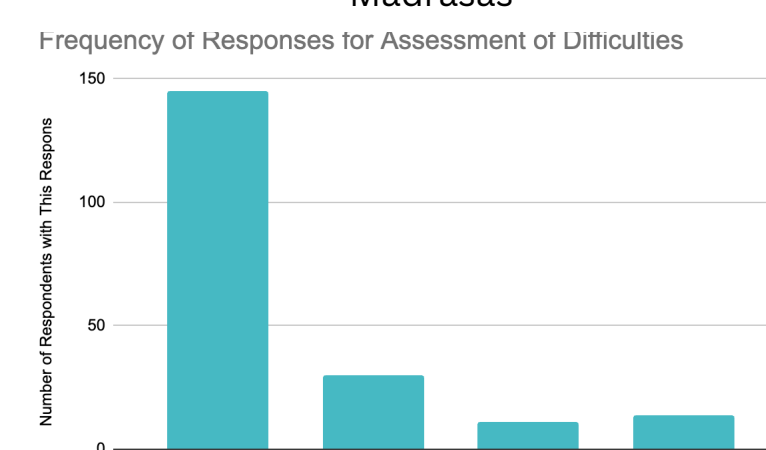


Figure 17: Student Responses to Question on Presence of Difficulties in Emotions, Concentration, Behavior, or Being Able to Get on With Other People in Senegalese Daaras

Acknowledgements

I am deeply grateful to Professor Roger Antabe for his expertise, steady guidance, and unwavering support throughout this project. I thank the Laidlaw Foundation for the opportunity and resources that made this research possible. My sincere appreciation goes to Shradha Prasad, Tyler Thom, and Jia Lee, and to my Deep Dive group, whose consistent encouragement, motivation, and thoughtful feedback sustained me.