

Medico-social Problems of Itinerant Qur'anic Scholars in Kano

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Summary

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Background: Previous workers have reported several social and health problems faced by itinerant Qur'anic scholars in parts of northern Nigeria.

Objective: To describe the characteristics and medico-social problems of itinerant Qur'anic scholars in Kano.

Design: A cross sectional descriptive study

Methods: Structured interview questionnaires were administered to 115 Qur'anic scholars in Kano city in order to obtain information about their medico-social problems.

Results: All were males whose ages ranged between five and 26 years with a median age of 11 years. Ninety five percent of the scholars had not attended primary school. Their social problems included parental deprivation (100 percent), illiteracy (95 percent), food insecurity (61 percent) and sleeping in overcrowded conditions. Fifty eight (50 percent) of them were involved in fighting, five (4.3 percent) in rioting and two (1.7 percent) were engaged in stealing. Their health problems comprised mainly dermatological diseases and haematuria.

Conclusion: Serious efforts should be made by the authorities to reform the itinerant Qur'anic educational system.

Introduction

NIGERIA is a signatory to the United Nations Convention on the rights of the child as well as the Organization of African Unity charter on the rights and responsibilities of the African child.¹⁻³ Yet, in almost every nook and corner of the major cities and towns in northern Nigeria, one sees young, unkempt and homeless children as well as some adults roaming the streets begging for alms. These children who are mostly from rural areas, are sent by their parents at a young age, to urban centres for the purpose of Qur'anic education. A pupil undergoing education in this traditional way is referred to as Almajiri in Hausa language. They are sent to the cities and towns under the supervision of a teacher who is not responsible for the scholar's maintenance. A previous study of such

scholars in Sokoto found that most of the Almajiris are brought to the Qur'anic schools in a state of poor nutritional status. They are exposed to, and are at more than an average risk of contracting infections and infestations,^{4,5} abuse, reduced growth potential and are involved in criminal activities.⁶ The aim of the present study was to describe the background characteristics and medico-social problems faced by these itinerant Qur'anic scholars in Kano.

Subjects and Methods

Study location

Gwale is one of the six local government areas that make up the Kano metropolis. It comprises thirty wards and is inhabited predominantly by Hausa/Fulani muslims engaged mainly in trading and farming. Consent for the study was obtained from the Gwale local government officials and the traditional leaders of the study area. Permission was also obtained from the teachers in the selected schools before the commencement of the study.

Methods

This was a cross-sectional descriptive study. A

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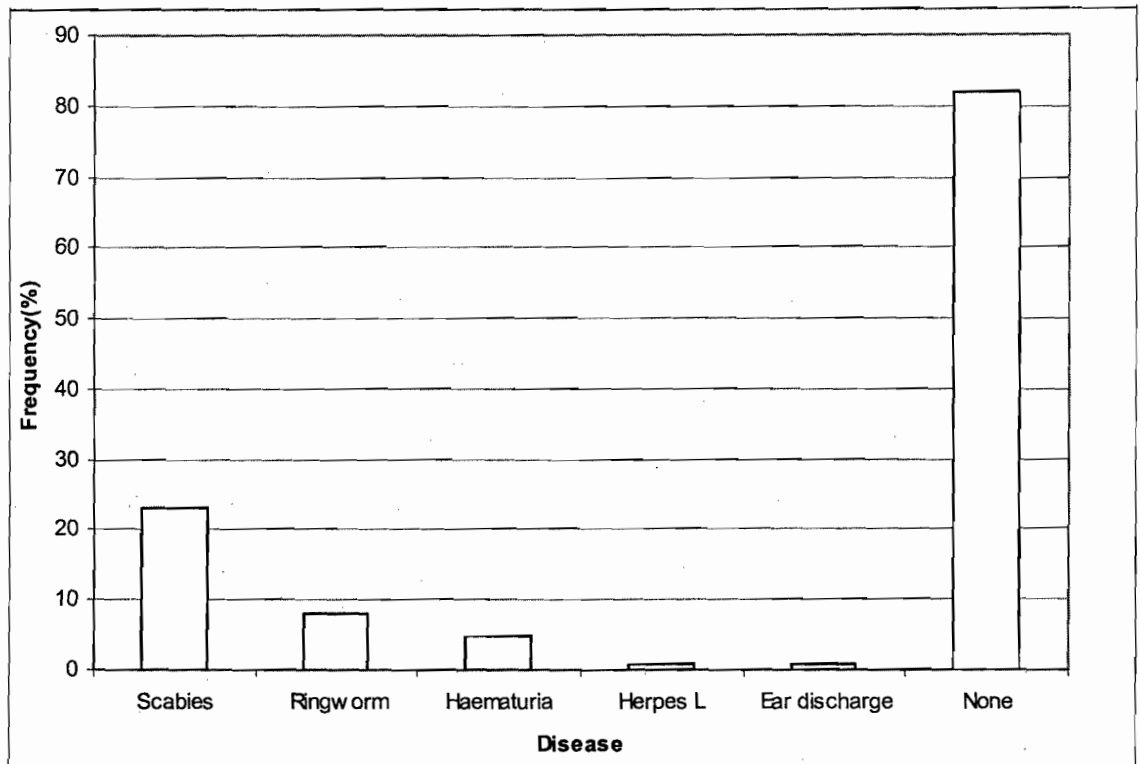


Fig. 1: Distribution of common diseases among the "Almajirai" in Gwale LGA Kano, 2002

multistage sampling technique was used in selecting five Qur'anic schools for the study. In the first stage, five wards were randomly selected using a random number table. In the second stage, one Qur'anic school was selected from each of the wards selected in the first stage using a random sampling procedure. A structured pre-tested questionnaire was then administered on all the 115 scholars in the five selected schools by final year medical students of the Bayero University medical school.

Statistical Analysis

Results were analysed using *MINITAB 12.21(USA)* statistical software. Median, range and percentages were used to describe quantitative and qualitative data, respectively. Microsoft Excel and Word in *Windows 98* were used for graphics and tables.

Results

Background characteristics

A total of 115 scholars were interviewed. All were males aged between five and 26 years with a median age of 11 years. The modal age group was 10-14 years. Table I shows the age distribution of the respondents. Table II shows that 109 (95 percent) of the scholars studied did not attend primary school.

Table I

Age Distribution of the Almajirai

Age Group (years)	No of Subjects	% of Total
5-9	18	15.6
10-14	57	49.6
15-19	31	27.0
20-25	7	6.1
26-30	2	1.7
Total	115	100.0

Table II

Primary School Attendance by the Almajirai

Attendance	No of Subjects	% of Total
Attended	6	5.2
Did not attend	109	94.8
Total	115	100.0

Table III

Antisocial Behaviour among the Almajirai

<i>Antisocial Activity</i>	<i>No. of Subjects</i>	<i>% of Total</i>
Fighting	58	50.4
Rioting	5	4.4
Stealing	2	1.7
None	50	43.5
Total	115	100.0

Medical problems

Figure 1 shows that 38 (33 percent) of the scholars had various medical problems; 23 (20 percent) had scabies, eight (7 percent) had ringworm, five (4.3 percent) had haematuria and one each had discharging ear and herpes labialis.

Social problems

The social problems encountered included parental deprivation (100 percent), sleeping in overcrowded conditions (100 percent), not being literate in western education (95 percent) and food insecurity (61 percent). They had no provision for sewage disposal and most of the time defecated on refuse dumps at night. They used stagnant ponds and public taps at night to have their bath. They had no provisions for personal hygiene, and had one or two sets of clothes. They were compelled to give part of the money earned and food obtained while begging to their teachers who also compelled them to work on their [teachers'] farms and perform household chores in their houses. The scholars however, exhibited no evidence of physical abuse.

The Qur'anic scholars were engaged in certain antisocial behaviour. As shown in Table III, 58 (50 percent) of them were involved in fighting, five (4.3 percent) in rioting, while two (1.7 percent) engaged in stealing.

Discussion

This study shows that the Qur'anic scholars were socially deprived, lacked good education and were exposed to various diseases. They were also at the risk of becoming social misfits. All the scholars studied were boys between the ages of 10 and 14 years. Children within a similar age group were also reported to constitute the majority of street children in Kaduna and elsewhere.⁶⁻⁸ This age group is usually regarded as the period in a child's life when learning in a conducive environment is at its best and can easily be facilitated. It

is also the age of formation of character and identity in the society. It therefore seems strange and inappropriate that it is at this age that the children are forced to fend for themselves and be separated from the tender love, care and protection of their families.

The study showed that 95 percent of the scholars interviewed were deprived of even primary education. This was also observed among almajiris in Zaria, and other street children in some West African countries.^{6,8} Such children are unable to benefit from the Universal Basic Education programme because neither their parents nor their teachers look forward to western education as a goal for them.

The commonest diseases found among the scholars were skin disorders. This is not surprising, considering the overcrowded living conditions and poor personal hygiene of these children. Surveys of the health and environmental conditions of street children in other developing countries reached similar conclusions.^{9,10} A large percentage of the scholars from this survey were involved in fighting among themselves or with other persons in the society. Some of them also took part in religious and political riots, while yet others were engaged in stealing.

The problems highlighted above indicate the need to take a critical look at the Qur'anic system of education. Three options could be considered; these are to ban it, integrate it into the western system of education or reform it. An attempt to ban the system will almost certainly evoke unfavourable reactions from the Qur'anic teachers and from a large section of the Muslim community. Previous attempts by some state governments in northern Nigeria to ban the system did not achieve any success. Integrating the system into western educational system may also not succeed because most of the people who send their children into this system of Qur'anic education are either unable to afford western education or are sceptical of it or distrust it. It would appear that reforming the system is the most feasible measure. Such reform should involve state governments, local governments and the traditional institutions. The problem should be attacked from its socio-economic roots, since these factors have been strongly associated with child neglect in Nigeria.² Governments should pursue rural development policies that will realistically improve the lives of rural people and discourage rural to urban drift.

The itinerant Qur'anic system of education in Gwale Local Government Area of Kano state has been shown to have tremendous negative effect on the health and social well being of their scholars. The innocent children in particular, have become victims of child neglect. There is thus a need to tackle the problem effectively by reforming the system.

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