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SCAPEGOATING THE USUAL SUSPECTS? PANDEMIC CONTROL AND THE SECURITIZATION OF QUR'ANIC EDUCATION IN NORTHERN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

While insights into the effects the COVID-19 pandemic has had on formal schooling are still patchy, even less is known about the pandemic's impact on nonformal education systems, including institutions of Islamic learning. In this paper, we explore the nexus between pandemic control and the securitization of Qur'anic education in northern Nigeria; that is, the framing of Qur'anic schools, teachers, and students as security threats that necessitate tough responses. Security concerns have long dominated perceptions of Qur'anic schools in this region, which has been plagued by sectarian and interreligious violence. Qur'anic students often have been cast as future hoodlums and easy recruits for radical groups and depicted as vectors of disease, even as epidemiological evidence remains scarce. In this paper, we argue that security framings have proven highly adaptable in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. We examine how perceptions of Qur'anic students as dangerous legitimized the forced clearance of schools and student deportations. Drastic interventions have also bolstered perceptions of COVID-19 as a hoax and a plot by politicians to further their own agendas. Data for this paper come from 14 verbal diaries recorded in Kano, Nigeria, from April to June 2020, nine interviews with Qur'anic teachers and students affected by school clearances, and our analysis of Nigerian newspaper reporting.

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INTRODUCTION

While insights into the effects the COVID-19 pandemic has had on “formal” secular schooling are still patchy, even less is known about its impact on “nonformal” education systems, including institutions of Islamic learning.¹ In this paper, we step into this gap to explore the nexus between pandemic control and the securitization of classical Qur’anic education in northern Nigeria; that is, the framing of Qur’anic schools, teachers, and students as security threats necessitating tough responses.²

To date, education scholarship has paid limited attention to Islamic education institutions. Scholars and policymakers often consider the students of Islamic schools, notably those schools whose curricula do not include secular subjects, as being “out of school” (d’Aiglepierre and Bauer 2018; Sanusi 2017).³ Moreover, their research efforts have concentrated primarily on how these students could be integrated into formal, secular education systems, rather than on understanding the Islamic education systems on their own terms (Hoechner 2018). The study of Islamic education institutions has mostly been the preserve of historians, anthropologists of religion, and scholars of Islamic studies, who have highlighted their dynamism and diversity (Hefner and Zaman 2007; Launay 2016). However, education scholars have increasingly recognized that faith-based schools can increase access to education by making education palatable to groups that are reluctant to engage with secular schooling, and by stepping in where states fail to make adequate provision for public education (Boyle 2019; Harber 2014). This makes Islamic education institutions highly relevant to education in emergencies, yet the existing literature on this topic has tended to focus narrowly on violent conflict and presumed questions of radicalization and militancy (Fair 2007; Winthrop and Graff 2010). This has contributed to the securitization of such schools, which we explore in this paper.

Health crises have been said to create “a special ethnographic window on the structural fault lines in the society and the nation-state” (Shepler 2017, 452), an insight applicable to the COVID-19 pandemic. Societal rifts are often reflected in the “profoundly political sphere” (Cohen et al. 2021, 368) of education, notably in times of crisis. It has been argued that responses to the COVID-19 pandemic not

1 The terms “formal” and “nonformal” have been criticized for propagating a false distinction while privileging the experience of the “industrializing West”, thus perpetuating ethnocentric biases (Froerer 2012, 370-71).

2 To avoid the loaded term “traditional” (see footnote 8), we refer to the schools we studied as classical Qur’anic schools or simply Qur’anic schools. We describe their characteristics in more detail below.

3 What counts as “school” and who counts as “in school” or “out of school” is contested and political.

only have been “imbued by...legitimizations and delegitimizations of particular knowledges” but also have revealed “whose futures and life opportunities we value and whose we do not” (368). In this paper, which is situated at the nexus of scholarship on education, medical anthropology, and securitization, we scrutinize how a long history of marginalization and stigmatization as a security threat has made Qur’anic students in northern Nigeria vulnerable to being framed, and treated, as a viral menace in the context of the COVID-19 outbreak.

Drawing from the notion of securitization, we explore how policymakers and the media have depicted Qur’anic students, *almajirai* (singular: *almajiri*) in the Hausa language, as vectors of disease and a threat to wider communities, even as epidemiological evidence to substantiate such a framing remains unavailable.⁴ The classical Qur’anic schools we focus on in this paper are patronized mostly by the rural poor in northern Nigeria, a predominantly Muslim region with Muslim political leaders. The schools have long been loathed by better-off urbanites and reform-oriented Muslims, notably those of a pro-Salafi leaning, and by many southern Nigerians, most of whom are Christian (Hoechner 2018). Against the backdrop of northern Nigeria’s history of sectarian and interreligious violence, the *almajirai* have frequently been cast as foot soldiers for violence and ready recruits for radical groups (e.g., Soyinka 2012). In the context of the COVID-19 outbreak, old anxieties about Qur’anic schools and their students have morphed into new shapes.

Perceptions of Qur’anic schools and their students as a viral threat have legitimized the forced clearance of these schools and the deportation of students back to their home states at the height of the pandemic. Misgivings about COVID-19 have been rife in northern Nigeria since the beginning, and many people suspect that politicians exaggerated the severity of the disease to further their own agendas (Hoechner 2020). In this paper, we explore how the securitization of Qur’anic schools and the resulting drastic actions taken against them have nurtured such suspicions in the Nigerian state of Kano and bolstered perceptions of COVID-19 as a hoax and a political plot.⁵ This again underlines the political nature of education interventions, which are intricately connected to the political histories and relationships on which they bestow meaning and in whose light they are read. Given their symbolic significance as markers of whose futures and life chances are—or are not—valued by the powers that be (Cohen et al. 2021, 368), education interventions are particularly significant for being able to win—or to lose—the people’s trust.

4 We gratefully acknowledge intellectual inspiration from Charles Nweke (2021), who pioneered the use of a securitization lens to understand the dynamics of Qur’anic education in Nigeria.

5 With a population of ten million, Kano is northern Nigeria’s most populous state.

PANDEMIC CONTROL AND SECURITIZATION OF QUR'ANIC EDUCATION IN NORTHERN NIGERIA

Data for this paper come from verbal diaries recorded by 14 individuals in Kano from April to June 2020 via WhatsApp, from nine interviews with Qur'anic teachers (*malamai* in Hausa, singular: *malam*) and almajirai who were affected by the forced school clearance, and from our analysis of Nigerian newspaper reporting. The Kano State government was not the only one to crack down on Qur'anic schools; in fact, the decision to close these schools and “repatriate” almajirai to their states of origin was also made by the members of the Northern Governors Forum, a consultative body composed of the governors of all northern states (*Daily Trust* 2020a).⁶ According to our review of newspaper reports, the measures taken in Kaduna State were at least as hostile toward Qur'anic schools as those in Kano State; the Kaduna governor Nasir Ahmad El-Rufai,⁷ for example, threatened parents who enrolled their children as almajirai with a two-year jail term (*Daily Nigerian* 2020). However, while the dynamics we observed in Kano likely reflect developments in other states, it is beyond the scope of this paper to explore them in depth.

The next sections situate this paper in the literature, describe the Qur'anic education system in more detail, outline our methodology, and provide an overview of the COVID-19 outbreak in Kano. We then turn to the Qur'anic school closures and what journalists and politicians have referred to as almajiri “repatriations” or “evacuations,” juxtaposing the rhetoric of supporters of such measures against the experiences of Qur'anic teachers and students. The final sections reflect on the implications of these episodes for the students concerned, the pandemic response, and the longer-term relationships between state authorities and society.

SECURITIZATION, ISLAMIC EDUCATION, AND THE PANDEMIC

The notion of securitization has been proposed as a way to draw attention to the powerful effect that framing a particular issue as a security threat can have. Buzan, Waever, and Wilde (1998) argue that an issue is securitized if it “is presented as an existential threat, requiring emergency measures and justifying actions outside the normal bounds of political procedure” (23-24). They say that an issue becomes a security matter “not necessarily because a real existential threat exists but because the issue is presented as such a threat” (24). In short, what counts as a threat is socially constructed. However, when powerful actors present an issue as a threat, the relevant audiences do not necessarily buy into such a framing. Recent

6 Several states, including Borno, Yobe, Jigawa, and Zamfara, later decided not to deport the almajirai.

7 El-Rufai was first elected governor of Kaduna State in 2015 and confirmed in office in 2019.

work has highlighted the idea that successful securitization depends on these audiences “subscrib[ing] to the threat image presented” (Balzacq 2019, 334), but the audiences may be fragmented and may not react uniformly to the arguments (Léonard and Kaunert 2011, 63). In this paper, we highlight how different members of the Nigerian public responded to efforts to further securitize Qur’anic schools, which reflected preexisting societal fault lines.

Scholars of securitization have traced the way security agendas have been broadening to include issues that historically had “fall[en] well outside traditional notions of what constitute security issues,” including those related to religion and health (McInnes and Rushton 2011, 116). Various authors have mobilized the notion of securitization to scrutinize the treatment of Muslims in a post-9/11 world, and to highlight how the framing of Islam as a significant menace has legitimized increased scrutiny and control (Croft 2012; Cesari 2013; see also Ghaffar-Kucher 2009). Fewer authors have explored how and why Islamic education has come to be perceived and treated as a security challenge, even though the presumed links between Islamic schools, radicalization, and militancy have preoccupied various scholars (Fair 2007; Winthrop and Graff 2010). An exception is Starrett (2006; see also Nweke 2021), who traces the conflation of Islamic schools with terrorism in the United States back to American “commonsense understandings of causality, rationality and the purposes of education” (122). These understandings assume that school experience, rather than broader political experience, defines people’s worldviews, giving credence to the notion that “they hate us because they teach their children to hate us” (122).

A range of authors have studied how security agendas have come to influence public health responses to infectious diseases. They demonstrate how socially constructed ideas about what constitutes a threat determine when, how, and to whom aid is provided (Benton and Dionne 2015; McInnes and Rushton 2011). Relatedly, medical anthropologists have stressed that narratives seeking to explain the outbreak of an infectious disease often piggyback onto longstanding social and political divisions and inequalities (Richards 2016), which helps us understand who becomes the object of securitizing discourse. Farmer (1992) highlights how Haitians were cast as major culprits in the spread of HIV infections in the United States, even though Western tourists had in fact brought the disease to Haiti. The false accusations built on “preexisting [racist] ‘folk models’ of Haitians” as being filthy, poor, disease-ridden cultists (187). These insights urge us to pay attention to the preexisting tropes from which threat narratives can be constructed. The next section introduces the classical Qur’anic education system and explores recurrent tropes about its students.

QUR'ANIC EDUCATION IN NORTHERN NIGERIA

The Qur'anic schools we explore in this paper cater to boys and young men from primary school age to their early twenties. The students go to live with a religious teacher, a malam, to study the Qur'an, sometimes traveling a significant distance to be with a particular scholar. Qur'anic schools operate largely outside the purview of the state and without any government support. Most almajirai are from poor rural families, and the Qur'anic schools do not have the means to provide for their upkeep. The older students do petty jobs or work as farmhands, but many young students instead beg for food and money. Many urbanites consider the begging almajirai a nuisance (Hoechner 2018).

Qur'anic schools rarely charge fees. Students are instead expected to reciprocate for the education they receive by contributing their labor and paying long-term allegiance to their teacher, which makes the schools accessible even to the poorest. Most teachers are themselves products of the Qur'anic education system, which includes similar schools across the West African Sahel. Girls may attend the Qur'anic schools as day students, but they do not leave home to live with a Qur'anic teacher. Threat narratives around Qur'anic schools have generally focused on the male students (Hoechner 2018; see also Nweke 2021).

In precolonial times, Qur'anic schools produced a literate elite. However, their prestige and political influence began to decline when secular education was introduced under British colonial rule, a trend that continued in the 1970s when Islamic reformers began to establish "modern" Islamic schools that taught a broader range of subjects in a more formal setting.⁸ Families that patronize classical Qur'anic schools today value them for the Qur'anic knowledge, character training, and life skills they believe these schools impart; they also often can't afford other types of education (cf. d'Aiglepierre and Bauer 2018).

Negative stereotypes about Qur'anic schools date back to colonial rule in the region (see, e.g., Ware 2014 on Senegal) and received a boost in the second half of the 20th century, when reform-oriented and pro-Salafi Islamic movements accused the schools of mixing culture and religion and called into question their religious credentials. In Nigeria, perceptions of Qur'anic schools have further deteriorated since the Maitatsine crisis of the 1980s, when members of an Islamic sect, widely believed to be Qur'anic students (Lubeck 1985), rose up against the police. Since

8 Launay (2016, 3) notes that categorizing "educational systems as traditional or modern is a feature of an ideology of modernity intrinsically tied to the kind of education that colonizers of whatever stripe tried to impose on their subjects."

2009, the rise of the insurgency group Boko Haram in northeastern Nigeria has frequently been linked to Qur'anic schools and their students (Hansen 2016). While it has been documented that some almajirai have joined the insurgency, Boko Haram, which opposes the government as well as secular education, has recruited members from a range of education backgrounds (Mercy Corps 2016).

For many southern Nigerians, and for many Christians across Nigeria, the almajirai have come to epitomize the perceived ills afflicting Muslim northern Nigeria, including rampant poverty, illiteracy, and alleged religious extremism. Similarly, many better-off urban Muslims in the North feel that the almajirai embody the supposed social backwardness and religious obstinacy of the rural poor (Hoechner 2018). Threat narratives often invoke the deprived conditions of the almajirai's upbringing and claim that these conditions compromise their ability to resist the presumed attraction of radical ideas, easy cash, or the opportunity to revenge past mistreatment (e.g., Soyinka 2012). Interestingly, during the pandemic, the deprived conditions in Qur'anic schools were also invoked to stereotype them as hotbeds of COVID-19 infection and vectors of disease transmission.

The almajirai were the only social group targeted for government-led mass removals, which built on a history of government attempts to keep such schools in check that began in the colonial period. In recent decades, several northern state governments, including that of Kano under Governor Abdullahi Umar Ganduje,⁹ have attempted to rein in Qur'anic schools by enacting bans on street begging (*Kano Focus* 2020). Supporters of the Qur'anic education system have condemned such measures as an attack on a centuries-old religious institution and cited them as proof of continued bias against Qur'anic study that dates back to colonial times. This again highlights the political nature of education.

METHODOLOGY

Hoechner and Salisu collected the data for this paper. Hoechner is a German woman, and Salisu is from Kano, where he lived during the data collection. Hoechner was based in the United Kingdom during the data collection and interacted with participants mostly via WhatsApp voice messages. She lived in Kano in 2009, 2011, and 2018 for a total of 15 months, where she conducted research on Qur'anic education. She met most of the verbal diary participants (see below) in 2009 and 2011. She is fluent in Hausa, the region's lingua franca. Salisu

9 Ganduje was first elected governor of Kano State in 2015 and confirmed in office in 2019.

is a native Hausa speaker and a Qur'anic school graduate. As such, he is conversant with the cultural and religious sensibilities of the more conservative segments of society, which can otherwise be difficult for researchers to access. He coordinated the data collection locally and liaised with the research participants via telephone and face-to-face.

Some of the data for this paper come from verbal diary entries recorded by 14 individuals in Kano State via WhatsApp voice messages from April to June 2020. Those who kept the diaries were invited to share their experiences and thoughts on particular topics related to the COVID-19 pandemic. The diaries were not designed to focus specifically on developments concerning Qur'anic schools but on capturing a broad range of experiences around COVID-19 and the measures taken to contain it. The 14 diaries contain more than 24 hours of recordings.

The sampling was informed by several considerations. First, we sought to capture the experiences of poorer members of society, whose perspectives are often less visible in the public domain and on social media platforms, due to their limited literacy in the Latin script, limited knowledge of English, and limited access to communication technologies. All participants self-identified as *talakawa* (Hausa) or poor commoners.

Our second aim was to ensure that data were collected across geographic locations, ages, genders, and households in order to capture an array of experiences. Our sample included participants based in rural parts of Kano State (three participants) and in various urban neighborhoods (eleven participants), including deprived areas in the city outskirts. We included women and mothers (four participants) and married men and heads of household of middle age (three participants), and young men in their twenties and early thirties (seven participants). All our participants belonged to different households.

Finally, we selected participants from among our close contacts to ensure trust, which was essential, given the politically sensitive nature of the research. Six of the young men participating in the research had taken part in a participatory film project Hoechner pursued in 2011 as part of her PhD research (Hoechner 2015) thus they knew her and her research well. Funding from the University of East Anglia COVID-19 Response Fund enabled us to buy smart phones, as well as regular phone credits and internet data for our participants.

We decided to conduct additional semistructured interviews specifically focused on the experiences of Qur'anic teachers and their students in the context of the forced school clearance taking place in April and May 2020. While our verbal diary

sample included two Qur'anic teachers, one Qur'anic teacher's wife, and seven recent graduates, none of them had been directly affected by the forced clearance. We therefore recruited additional respondents using our existing contacts as a starting point, and Salisu then used snowballing techniques to recruit further interviewees. Salisu, as an observer, attended four gatherings organized by Qur'anic teachers who opposed the clearance, and he recruited further respondents there. He conducted a total of six in-person interviews with teachers (lasting 20-30 minutes each) and three interviews with students (lasting 10 minutes each) directly affected by the forced clearance. All the students were male, in their late teens and early twenties, and from schools whose teachers Salisu also interviewed. Hoechner also conducted a phone interview with a human rights activist who had visited Karaye, a camp in Kano State where almajirai were held.

All the people from whom we collected data objected to the framing and treatment of the almajirai as a security threat. We relied on media accounts and government statements to document views of Qur'anic schools as a menace in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. We collated these sources by reviewing the press releases published on the Kano State government website and by collecting newspaper articles using the keyword searches "almajiri," "corona," and "COVID" from the websites of the *Daily Trust* (Abuja), *Premium Times* (Abuja), *Punch* (Lagos), and *HumAngle* (Abuja), which resulted in more than 130 hits. We also took social media posts into account in our analysis, including "trending" newspaper articles. We transcribed and translated the interview recordings and relevant WhatsApp voice messages from Hausa into English. Hoechner analyzed the data through repeated close reading and open coding in NVivo, paying attention specifically to perspectives on COVID-19 and related government measures, and to the ways Qur'anic schools and students were framed.

Our findings are limited in that we did not speak to government officials or members of the urban middle and upper classes, instead relying largely on the media discourse and government press releases to document the securitizing discourse. We were not able to observe repatriations firsthand or gain access to the camps where the almajirai were held. Our sample is fairly small and includes only respondents based in Kano State, with whom we spoke in the immediate aftermath of the evacuations. We hope that future research can shed light on the dynamics in other states and explore the longer-term implications of this episode, both for the relationships between Qur'anic students and teachers and state authorities, and for the more general perspectives on COVID-19 and related health measures.

FINDINGS

THE COVID-19 OUTBREAK IN NIGERIA

As of August 2022, Nigeria had not experienced particularly high rates of COVID-19-related morbidity and mortality, despite having a dense and highly mobile population; it had registered just over three thousand COVID-19-related deaths.¹⁰ As both testing capacity and people's willingness to get tested have been limited throughout the pandemic, the number of diagnosed cases is a poor approximation of the actual number. While the true toll is likely higher, during most of the pandemic the country has not seen overflowing hospitals or cemeteries (but, see below), which defies the racialized tropes about African societies' impending collapse that were circulating in early 2020 (Benton 2020). The reasons for Nigeria's resilience are not yet fully understood and the impact of new COVID-19 variants remains to be seen. It is likely that the country's youthful demographics—43 percent of the Nigerian population is age 14 or younger (World Bank n.d.)—played a role.

Nigeria experienced a first COVID-19 wave that peaked in June-July 2020, followed by a second wave that peaked in January-February 2021. While some protective measures remained in place well into 2021, such as working at home for some government officials, highly disruptive measures such as blanket stay-at-home orders and market closures were abandoned after the first wave, given their devastating economic impact (Human Rights Watch 2021).

During the early phases of the pandemic, many watchful eyes were on Kano State, northern Nigeria's economic hub and most densely populated state, which, as expected, emerged as an epicenter of the pandemic in April-May 2020. Its first case of COVID-19 was confirmed on April 11, 2020, before any in the other northern states.¹¹ Kano State experienced a brief period of excess deaths in April 2020, when deaths among the frail and elderly surged. Most of these deaths were not diagnosed as COVID-19, but it seems likely that community spread of the virus was at least a contributing factor, along with the intense heat, the emotional and economic stress caused by the lockdown, and the disrupted access to health care (Adebowale 2020). No further episodes of excess deaths have been reported, and many people in Kano have since come to view the virus as a minor threat compared to other infectious diseases, in particular, among young people. By August 2022, Kano had registered just over 5,000 confirmed cases of COVID-19 and 127 COVID-related deaths.

10 See <https://covid19.ncdc.gov.ng/>.

11 See <http://covid19.ncdc.gov.ng/state/>.

While the disease and death burden of the pandemic have remained comparatively small in northern Nigeria, the measures taken to contain COVID-19 during the first wave significantly disrupted social and economic life in Kano and created significant hardship. Interstate travel was suspended from mid-April 2020 through early July, although the borders remained somewhat porous (Kwaifa 2020). A stay-at-home order was in place for most of the period from April 16 to July 2, 2020; markets and places of worship were ordered to close on most days. In a context where more than 68 percent of the population lives in multidimensional poverty (OPHI 2018) and many depend on their daily earnings to feed themselves and their families, it was quickly apparent that the government could only see a strict lockdown through if it was prepared either to provide adequate help to all those in need (which it didn't) or to use significant force against its people (cf. Nnochiri 2020).

The lockdown in Kano soon stopped being enforced consistently, but it continued to disrupt economic activity and to create opportunities for the security forces to collect fines or bribes from those in breach of the regulations. A series of daylong suspensions of the lockdown resulted in vastly overcrowded markets, as everybody rushed to stock up on provisions. All this together suggests that the measures the state government implemented ultimately did little to stop the virus from spreading, despite the hardships they created. The surge in undiagnosed deaths mentioned above corroborates this conclusion.

PERSPECTIVES ON COVID-19 AMONG KANAWA

The participants of the verbal diary project felt the restrictions imposed on them were both erratic and injurious, as well as evidence of the government's callousness toward poor people's needs (cf. Human Rights Watch 2021). Their experiences highlighted the mismatch between the security priorities pursued by policymakers and politicians and ordinary *Kanawa*, the residents of Kano, many of whom are poor. COVID-19 did not manifest tangibly in most people's daily lives, the episode of excess deaths discussed above excepted, but this was relatively short-lived and limited to a few urban neighborhoods. Rumors soon spread about COVID-19 being fake, or at least exaggerated. Aminu, a diary project participant in his twenties, explained that people came to doubt the government's intentions, as it did little to alleviate the hardships inflicted on them by the stay-at-home order:¹²

12 We have changed the names of respondents to protect their identity.

PANDEMIC CONTROL AND SECURITIZATION OF
QUR'ANIC EDUCATION IN NORTHERN NIGERIA

Hunger is a disease for which there is no medicine apart from food, but the government refused to give people food, and refused to let them go out and find food, so then we understood: the government is pursuing a certain path because it has its own agenda. Until now people have doubts...some people say the government is doing this to get money, some people say this is done to reduce Nigeria's population, some people say it's the Europeans who have given a contract; you'll hear everybody [talking]. (Aminu, diary entry)

The suspicions Aminu described highlight the complex historical and political backdrop against which the COVID-19 pandemic unfolded in Kano, including a history of skepticism toward global public health measures. A controversial trial of the meningitis drug Trovan, which Pfizer carried out in Kano in 1996, left 11 children dead and several others disabled (Garba and Paquette 2021). This undermined the people's trust in the "big pharma" companies and in global health actors more broadly. The drive to eradicate polio in the early 2000s was troubled by widespread fear, fanned by religious and political leaders, that the vaccines were intentionally contaminated with antifertility agents and HIV in order to decimate the Muslim population (Renne 2010; Yahya 2007).

Also today, interventions seen to originate in the West or to be encouraged by non-Muslim outsiders, including the World Health Organization, rekindle memories of colonialism and trigger questions about the motivations underpinning them, especially those targeting diseases perceived to be minor in comparison to other neglected health risks, notably malaria and measles (Renne 2010). Several participants in the diary project noted that the response to COVID-19 was disproportionate to the actual threat it posed, which corroborates the point that audiences don't necessarily buy into the threat narratives presented to them (Balzacq 2019). Saidu, a participant in his early thirties, questioned why the government was focusing so much on COVID-19 and not doing more about malaria, which kills so many people.

Widespread perceptions that Nigerian politicians are self-interested and corrupt further hampered the public's receptiveness to particular threat narratives (cf. Human Rights Watch 2021). According to a 2018 Pew Research Center survey in Nigeria, 72 percent of respondents agreed with the statement that "most politicians are corrupt" (Tamir 2019). Such negative perceptions were also evident in our data. Several of our participants voiced the suspicion that the government deliberately

exaggerated the danger presented by COVID-19 in order to access relief funds.¹³ Hauwa, a female participant in her forties, explained that, in her view, politicians manipulate health information for their own gain:

When there is a cholera outbreak, or around the time when malaria harms people, you see, the government is using this as an excuse, because they will keep getting aid moneys... That's why you will see they will keep giving information until no one understands anymore what their truth is. (Hauwa, diary entry)

In the remainder of this paper, we will demonstrate how the government's rough handling of Qur'anic schools during the pandemic further fueled these suspicions. While certain audiences, including journalists and people commenting on the social media, embraced the framing of Qur'anic schools and their students as a viral threat that required a tough response, the poorer Kanawa represented in our research, many of whom have a strong affinity with Qur'anic schools, were not easily swayed by such tropes. The securitizing moves merely confirmed their belief that the government was taking advantage of the pandemic to pursue its own agenda.

QUR'ANIC SCHOOL CLOSURES AND REPATRIATIONS

Formal schools in all of Nigeria remained closed from late March until early October 2020 (Dundu 2020b). On March 25, the Kano State government also issued a directive for religious schools to suspend their operations (Ibrahim 2020), but it did not reach all Islamic teachers. After the governor announced an impending seven-day lockdown on April 14, many Qur'anic teachers were asked to send their students home immediately. Many malamai did so or at this point had already sent their students home, while others left the decision up to their students. Some malamai ignored the request and continued to operate within a context of suspicion about both the reality of COVID-19 and the government's intentions toward Qur'anic education.

On April 20, the Kano State government announced that it had "moved to decongest Almajiri schools, as arrangements have been finalized for the official evacuation of Almajiri pupils to their respective states/local government for onward reunion with their families" (Dundu 2020a). The next day, the Northern Governors Forum unanimously agreed that classical Qur'anic education in all

¹³ See Benton and Dionne (2015, 228), who describe rumors that circulated in Liberia about medical personnel spreading Ebola on behalf of politicians keen to receive foreign aid.

northern regions should be halted and students sent home to be enrolled in secular schools in their home towns and villages (Adebajo 2020). According to the Kano governor, more than two thousand students had been returned to their home states by May 1. Other northern states also announced the repatriation of a significant number of almajirai (*Daily Trust* 2020a).

In late April, the news broke that several of the almajirai deported from Kano, then the epicenter of the COVID-19 outbreak in northern Nigeria, had tested positive for the virus (*Daily Trust* 2020a). This resulted in states refusing to accept any new almajirai, leaving in limbo those already taken to holding centers or isolation camps. For several weeks afterward, newspapers and the social media were alight with commentaries on the repatriations. Some people voiced concern about the wellbeing of the young people being squeezed into buses and trucks and hauled across the country in the middle of a pandemic, when all but essential interstate travel was banned (Onyeji 2020). The dominant theme, however, was fear that the almajirai were carriers of COVID-19 and would now spread the disease to previously unaffected areas.

The timing of these positive test results is likely to have fanned people's fears. Community spread of COVID-19 was likely well underway in Kano State by the time of the repatriations, but no population group other than the evacuated almajirai was systematically tested. This reinforced the sense that infection rates among the almajirai were higher than in the average population. As a matter of fact, it is impossible to know whether the Qur'anic students were more likely to be carriers of the disease than, say, health workers or security staff, most of whom manned the checkpoints without any protective gear.

Eventually, a motion introduced in the house of representatives called on the federal government to stop northern governors from deporting almajirai (Ayitogo 2020). On May 12, Nigeria's Presidential Task Force on COVID-19 advised the governors to suspend the interstate movement of almajirai, arguing that it breached the travel ban (*The Citizen* 2020). In the next section, we explore in greater depth the media and political rhetoric surrounding the almajirai during the period described here.

VECTORS OF DISEASE?

Before COVID-19 even reached northern Nigeria, the almajirai were discussed as vectors of disease, as exemplified by Dahiru's (2020a) article published April 1 on the media platform HumAngle:

The risk of one Almajiri contracting COVID-19 is tantamount to infecting thousands of people in geometric progression...If one of the Almajirai contracts the deadly virus, that would be a kind of the *nunc dimittis* for the herd of the Almajiri pupils.¹⁴ Put also into consideration the number of cars in traffic they rub their skins on [when begging].

As hinted at before, such discourse gained traction when some of the almajirai sent back to their home states tested positive for COVID-19. Several media outlets, including major newspapers, carried articles with dramatic headlines, such as “COVID-19: An Almajiri Time Bomb Waiting to Explode in Jigawa” (Dambatta 2020) and “The Almajiri Invasion of Southern Nigeria” (Nwokeoma 2020). The latter headline refers to the alleged arrival of “truckloads” of almajirai in the southeastern states, which led to outcries over a presumed nefarious northern plot to “export coronavirus Almajiris index cases to the South-East” (Nnachi 2020), and points to ongoing regional and interreligious tensions. Security concerns pervaded even apparently sympathetic responses to the forced removals by endorsing the framing of the almajirai as a security issue and echoing notions of disenfranchised and mistreated almajirai being easy recruits for radical and violent groups. The *Daily Trust* (2020b) quoted a child rights advocate:

It was very wrong to ship these children out of the states. They should have rehabilitated them; it would have been an opportunity to do so and give them psycho-social and medical support...We are producing potential kidnappers and robbers; they have absolutely nothing to lose.

Older anxieties about Qur’anic schools and their students clearly lurked just beneath the surface, ready to be invoked to bolster specific positions in the ongoing debate about the “correct handling” of the almajirai during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Initially, the official rhetoric of the Kano State government presented the forced clearance of Qur’anic schools as a practical solution to a technical problem—that is, the crowding in Qur’anic schools and students’ difficulty accessing food during lockdown—and eschewed intimations of the political nature of this move. Government spokespeople struck a somewhat more combative tone after experiencing pushback over the forced school clearance and, notably, the

14 Presumably the author uses the expression *nunc dimittis* here in the sense of “go out and mingle.”

PANDEMIC CONTROL AND SECURITIZATION OF
QUR'ANIC EDUCATION IN NORTHERN NIGERIA

conditions in which the almajirai were kept after being removed from their schools (see below). Kano State's commissioner of education then went on the radio to reassert the government's position, referencing older fears about the almajirai being easily recruited to take part in riots and political violence:

These children, most of the ones you see, if there is an uproar, they are at the forefront as they have nothing to lose, this isn't their state, that's why I assure you there is no way of going back on this system that the Kano State government put in place. (Muhammad Sanusi Sa'id Kiru, translated from Hausa)

The commissioner went on to threaten with expropriation anyone who let almajirai stay on their property (e.g., in deserted or uncompleted buildings). He also warned that "every child's father whom we told to send his son to [government] school among these children, if he refuses to send him, we will take him to court and ensure that he goes to prison" (translated from Hausa). The next section offers accounts from insiders of the Qur'anic education system about the clearance of the schools, including descriptions of the harsh measures taken against the almajirai in the wake of being framed as a viral or security threat.

EXPERIENCES OF QUR'ANIC SCHOOL CLEARANCE AND ISOLATION CAMPS

I am crying like never before because of the way that the almajirai have been removed from their schools in the middle of the night. They come wake up the boy, telling him "corona," take him, throttle him, while he has only boxers and his shirt on him, some are taken away without their shoes, so hearing this kind of news is making me sad. (Gwani Abubakar, Qur'anic teacher, interview)

Salisu's interviews with other malamai and almajirai corroborated the description of the almajiri evacuations quoted here. In all the cases we documented, schools had been cleared by armed officers (identified by our respondents as either police or Hisbah, the religious police) in the middle of the night, when students, neighbors, and potential bystanders were asleep, presumably to avoid pushback. The students weren't given any time to dress or gather their belongings before being shoved into buses, in some cases at gunpoint:

When they came, they had guns ready in their hands, they wake you up from sleep, if you say you will not enter the car,

he will say he will shoot you or he will say, he will hit you with [the gun]. (Mustapha, Qur'anic student, interview)

The strong-arm nature of the school clearance described here brings to mind previous violent incidents in Nigerian schools, notably the middle-of-the-night mass kidnappings of students by Boko Haram insurgents in the northeast (Human Rights Watch 2016) and by bandits in the northwest (Yusuf 2021). It also echoes policing tactics more widely applied to presumed public enemies, such as suspected Boko Haram supporters (Amnesty International 2015).

All accounts from our participants concurred that no social distancing protocols were in place during the school clearance, and that neither hand sanitizer nor facemasks were made available to the students, even though officials said the evacuations were carried out to protect the almajirai from COVID-19 infection. Most of the almajirai evacuated from Kano were taken to one of three isolation centers set up in National Youth Service Corps camps in Karaye, Kuru, and Gabasawa in preparation for their planned return to their home states. Video footage that emerged from the Karaye camp, which is said to have held more than one thousand children at one point, shows children sitting close to one another on the ground, none of them wearing facemasks (Dahiru 2020b). While many of the children were reportedly tested for COVID-19 at the camp, it took several days for the results to come back, including positive ones. Given the absence of preventative measures, COVID-19 infections could easily have spread in the interval.

The picture that emerged from Karaye suggests that no proper arrangements had been made to accommodate such a large number of children. Food, water, and sleeping mats were at times scarce, and Gwani Ismaila, a Qur'anic teacher who went to visit the camp, in an interview expressed his frustration with the situation: "Since the government came all the way to our school to scoop up [the almajirai], it should look after them 100 percent, but at the place, food for the children is scarce."

Given the poor conditions and lack of clarity about what was to happen next to the almajirai, most notably after neighboring states had closed their borders to the repatriations, some children took matters into their own hands, climbed the wall, and ran away. However, given the remoteness of the camp (Karaye is some 45 miles from Kano City), some of them struggled to find their way home:

What disturbs us most with this problem regarding Karaye...
the workers don't look after the almajirai, they let some of

PANDEMIC CONTROL AND SECURITIZATION OF
QUR'ANIC EDUCATION IN NORTHERN NIGERIA

them climb the wall at the back and run away, doubtlessly a bit over one hundred people, and up till now that we speak, we haven't found some of our almajirai, we don't know where they are. (Gwani Ismaila, Qur'anic teacher, interview)

This troubled both the malamai and the almajirai's parents, as reported by one of our diary participants who was in close contact with teachers whose schools had been cleared:

The parents are worried...I know one man who came at least around seven days in a row, he always came from their town,... and he came to the malam's place here to find out what the situation is. (Gwani Bashir, Qur'anic teacher, diary entry)

When the federal government ordered that the repatriation of almajirai be suspended and the neighboring states shut their borders to them, the Kano State government soon found itself in a bind, as it could no longer return the almajirai to their home states. While there was no official communication about what would happen to the almajirai who had already been evacuated and were now in isolation camps, the malamai whom Salisu interviewed confirmed that some students were returned to their Qur'anic schools, some were taken to their parents (notably those living in Kano State), and some were missing for some time before they found their way back to either their malam or their parents. The whole episode, including the middle-of-the-night evacuations at gunpoint, the absence throughout of proper COVID-19 precautions, and the lack of proper care at the isolation centers, including feeding the students, raises stark questions about who—and whose interests—the government measures were meant to protect. Our respondents were in little doubt about the answer to these questions. This is what we turn to next.

FUEL FOR SUSPICION AND COVID-19 SKEPTICISM

After decades of fraught relationships with state authorities, insiders of the Qur'anic education system and their sympathizers had little confidence that the government was acting with their best interests at heart, and they refused to be compliant with government securitizing messages. Our respondents were unequivocal that the Kano State government was taking advantage of the COVID-19 pandemic to pursue an existing agenda regarding Qur'anic education, as Gwani Abubakar, a Qur'anic teacher, explained in an interview: "So, honestly, as we see it, the

government made use of this opportunity because anyways it wants to destruct the Qur'anic schools where the Qur'an is studied altogether."

Hauwa, the mother and wife of a Qur'anic teacher, also questioned whether foreign actors had a hand in the developments:

There are those who don't want to see people studying the Qur'an, that's why they advise the governments in northern Nigeria to prohibit Qur'anic education. The governments then accepted this advice, maybe they were given money, we don't know, and then they seized this opportunity to prohibit Qur'anic education. (Hauwa, diary entry)

While skepticism about the threat of COVID-19 preceded the forced clearance of the Qur'anic schools, it was likely exacerbated by the evacuations among the poorer Kanawa, notably those affiliated with the Qur'anic schools, as Aminu, a participant in his twenties, pointed out:

Especially now, people have started voicing suspicion that maybe our leaders have invented this disease, they exaggerated it, maybe their intention is to see by what means they will be able to bring about the end of almajiri education in our region here, northern Nigeria. (Aminu, diary entry)

In addition to critically questioning the government's intentions, some of our participants who accepted that COVID-19 did pose a real threat also questioned how sensible the adopted measures were in terms of the wider pandemic response. Hauwa, quoted above, argued that by focusing on the almajirai the government was missing the point:

See, the thing that disturbs people [is that] people are going hungry, and look at the deaths that are happening, they are always increasing [referring to the surge in undiagnosed deaths in April 2020]. The help that they are giving, it doesn't reach those in need as it should...They should focus their attention on what they should do to resolve this disease, not on the issue of the almajirai. (Hauwa, diary entry)

Sani, one of the almajirai Salisu interviewed, pointed out the flawed logic of assuming that only the almajirai were potential carriers of COVID-19: "This is not just. If they

PANDEMIC CONTROL AND SECURITIZATION OF
QUR'ANIC EDUCATION IN NORTHERN NIGERIA

wanted to protect everyone, then they would also evacuate the city dwellers [*yan gari*], or they should get the testing kits and test everyone at his place.”

Government rhetoric about the presumed benefits their measures would bring to the almajirai was met with skepticism. Aminu, himself a former almajiri, doubted that the almajirai would indeed be able to access quality secular education after reuniting with their rural parents:

This thing will give rise to many problems...the government doesn't keep the secular schools that it has in the villages in a good state either, it doesn't support them, they study in wretched conditions, especially now that they say they have removed more [almajirai] and brought them, so you see all of this is adding problems and worry. (Aminu, diary entry)

One of the malamai was similarly critical of government announcements of a special school designed to accommodate 900 almajirai in Kano:

They said there are three million almajirai in Kano...However many they said, we know that they are many, they are more than 900, so now if they take these 900 and put them in this school, what will become of all the others?...If they will prevent them [from studying in Qur'anic schools], they should tell them what will become of them. (Gwani Abubakar, Qur'anic teacher, interview)

Finally, our research participants said that getting rid of the almajirai would have negative consequences for the wider community, notably by preventing them from doing collective supplications, which many Kanawa consider an important source of protection, including against disease:

If they really wanted to find a solution for this pandemic, they would not be scooping up almajirai and taking them back home, they would come and distribute some money to buy food or provide food so they stay and keep making *du'a* [purposive prayers]. By God, this pandemic would have become history...But you see, our leaders, they have adopted the Western system and think this is what will help them out, but for us Muslims, there is a system Allah set out for us. (Gwani Shu'aibu, Qur'anic teacher, interview)

This account highlights the fact that some knowledge systems have been given precedence over others in the pandemic response (Cohen et al. 2021, 368).

CONCLUSION

To date, little is known about the impact the COVID-19 pandemic is having on nonformal faith-based education institutions, which have received limited attention in the scholarship on education in emergencies. In this paper, we have explored how Qur'anic schools and students were perceived and treated in Kano, northern Nigeria, during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, using the notion of securitization as an analytical lens. Although Islamic education has been framed as a security threat in both policy discourse and academic scholarship since 9/11 at the latest, the social and political dynamics that have facilitated these securitizing moves have rarely been studied explicitly. We have argued that Qur'anic students in northern Nigeria have been cast as vectors of disease and a biological threat, even in the absence of epidemiological evidence. A securitized framing has been aided by longstanding misgivings about Qur'anic education in the region, which build on prejudice against the rural poor and are furthered by sectarian, interreligious, and regional tensions. Rightly or wrongly, Qur'anic students have for decades been associated with religious and political violence in Nigeria. We have explored how framings of Islamic education institutions as a security threat have proven both tenacious and versatile in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has allowed drastic action to be taken against Qur'anic students. By engaging the securitization literature in conversation with the Islamic education scholarship, we hope to encourage further debate about the role security agendas play in the perception and treatment of Islamic schools.

In empirical terms, we have explored the implications of the interventions that targeted Qur'anic schools in Kano State for the students concerned, for the pandemic response, and for the longer-term relationships between state authorities and society. Today, almajiri education is still officially banned in Kano, but this ban has not been enforced since June-July 2020. In fact, more than two years on, Qur'anic education in Kano State has returned to its prepandemic state. However, this does not mean that the whole episode was inconsequential. Teachers, students, and their parents and communities will likely remember how those involved with Qur'anic schools were treated, thus further undermining an already fragile trust in politicians and state actors. Weakened trust jeopardizes not only the prospects for education reform and the integration of Qur'anic schools into the public education system, it also bodes ill for the response to future health emergencies. As we have demonstrated, the

harsh treatment of the almajirai boosted existing suspicions about the government's agenda around COVID-19. What emerged clearly from our study in policy terms is that governments are ill advised to treat acute health emergencies as an opportunity to settle highly political questions in a top-down way.

What is more, our study confirms other scholars' finding that, while "trust is crucial" (Enria et al. 2021, 2) for a successful pandemic response, it is not won in an instant: "citizens' experiences of specific interventions and their perceptions of the institutions delivering them are shaped by social, political and economic structures and historical trajectories." In this paper, we have highlighted the fact that education interventions are tightly entwined with longer political histories and relationships that imbue them with meaning, and on which they bestow meaning in return. Given the symbolic importance of education as a space where priorities are expressed about whose future counts (Cohen et al. 2021, 368) and where societal and political fault lines are laid bare, education interventions may indeed constitute a particularly sensitive domain in which governments may want to tread carefully. As we emerge from the pandemic, an important lesson to carry forward is that building trust requires "a commitment to care that extend[s] beyond the emergency context" (Ryan, Giles-Vernick, and Graham 2019, 7). This is critical, most notably for those who, like the almajirai, are routinely excluded from such care.

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