

1 example advances the view that through ‘conscientisation,’ ‘oppressed’ people can develop an
2 understanding of reality that enables them to fight for liberation.

3 A growing body of literature explores the opportunities offered by ‘participatory’ research
4 with social groups who are stigmatised. Many have lauded the potential of such research to
5 give ‘voice’ to people whose concerns are often ignored. Potentially, it can help tackle shame
6 and promote social change. It has been argued that by creating a platform for reflection and
7 discussion, such research may create conditions under which ‘members of a stigmatized
8 group can become aware of themselves as agents not objects’ (Buchanan & Murray, 2012, p.
9 41). Through the dissemination of research findings, members of the public may be prodded
10 to rethink their stereotypes (e.g. Moletsane, de Lange, Mitchell, & Stuart, 2007, on
11 HIV/AIDS related stigma in southern Africa). If nothing else, ‘participatory’ projects may
12 foster solidarity and mutual support amongst stigmatised participants (e.g. Wang, Cash, &
13 Power, 2000, on homeless people in the US).

14 Yet, the hype for ‘participatory’ research has been countered by critical scrutiny of the
15 actual practices declared to be ‘participatory’. For research to be ‘empowering’ it is not
16 enough to pick a method from the ‘participatory menu’ during data collection. Ideally
17 participants are involved not only in the creation of data but also in the formulation of
18 research goals and the interpretation and dissemination of findings (e.g. Byrne, Canavan, &
19 Millar, 2009; Cooke & Kothari, 2001). Power imbalances are particularly pronounced at the
20 analysis stage, from which participants are most often excluded (e.g. Hastrup, Elsass, Grillo,
21 Mathiesen, & Paine, 1990). ‘Participation’ may become a ‘more subtle form of manipulation’
22 if it bestows legitimacy upon otherwise illegitimate practices (Rahnema, 1992, pp. 125–126),
23 and ring hollow if it leaves structural inequalities unaddressed (e.g. Hart, 2008).

24 Research with stigmatised groups compounds the political and ethical challenges of
25 ‘participation’. Safety is a major concern as people suffering from stigma often lack social
26 power, which makes them vulnerable. For example, we have to ask whether it is safe for

1 participants to publicly disclose conditions that evoke shame, conditions which they may
2 otherwise prefer to keep secret (cf. Buchanan & Murray, 2012, on mental health issues). What
3 are the chances that a project contributes sufficiently to attitude changes that it is justified for
4 participants to risk disclosure? Participants may indeed prefer to de-emphasise, embellish or
5 disguise their disadvantage in their messages to the public (e.g. Lomax, Fink, Singh, & High,
6 2011, on poor council estate dwellers in the UK). This poses a dilemma for researchers. On
7 the one hand, they should respect their respondents' choices of how they wish to portray
8 themselves. Yet, 'on the other hand, by using a parallel discourse, the researchers may fail to
9 use the findings as a means to empower the participants through research' (Sime, 2008, p.
10 66). Portraying poor people as independent agents without contemplating the structural
11 constraints they face makes them vulnerable to accusations of creating a 'culture of poverty'
12 (cf. Lewis, 1959). Wang et al. (2000, p. 87) for instance warn that depicting homelessness
13 exclusively in the terms of those suffering from it 'may be seen to be casting [it] strictly in
14 terms of personal responsibility rather than community responsibility'.

15 This paper adds to the emerging body of literature that scrutinises 'participatory' research
16 with stigmatised groups. Drawing on experiences I made producing a 'participatory'
17 documentary film/docudrama with traditional Qur'anic students (pl: *almajirai*, sg: *almajiri*) in
18 Kano in northern Nigeria, I reflect on the limits of 'participatory' research as a tool for
19 'empowerment'. I describe the risks that young people whose social standing is low may
20 incur by participating, and consider to what extent, if at all, it can foster social change.

21 I collected the data in this paper during 13 months of ethnographic fieldwork carried out as
22 part of my masters and doctoral research in Kano State between 2009 and 2011. My
23 fieldwork included four months in Albasu, a small rural town in Albasu Local Government
24 Area (LGA) in the east of Kano State. For the remaining 9 months, I lived close to the city
25 gate Sabuwar Kofa within Kano's Old City. From July to October 2011, I facilitated the

1 production of a docudrama about the perspectives of *almajirai* on their lives and the
2 challenges they face.¹

3 Chalfen (2011) distinguishes between participatory ‘projects’, which aim primarily at
4 awareness-raising and social change, and participatory ‘studies’, which are geared first and
5 foremost towards creating academic knowledge. The film project described here combined
6 elements of both. We sought to publicise our film widely, and to sensitise the public through
7 it about the *almajirai*’s concerns. At the same time, I used the data I collected during the
8 production process for my academic work. The data, which the present paper is also based on,
9 include my fieldnotes, stories narrated or written down during the script writing process, and
10 discussions about the way the *almajirai* would like to see their lives and identities represented
11 on screen.

12 The next section introduces the *almajirai* and situates their schooling system and
13 educational trajectories in their historical context, including the crisis rhetoric surrounding
14 traditional Qur’anic schools. I then describe the experiences I made producing a docudrama
15 with and about *almajirai* in Kano. The final section of the paper discusses potential lessons
16 for ‘participatory’ research, including filmmaking, with stigmatised groups more widely.

17

18

19 **The *almajirai***

20

21 ***Who are the almajirai?***

22

23 The *almajirai* are boys and young men from primary-school age to their early twenties who
24 have come to live with a Qur’anic teacher in order to learn to read, write, and recite the Holy
25 Qur’an. Modern/secular subjects do not form part of their curriculum and Islamic subjects
26 other than the Qur’an are the preserve of advanced learners. Their schools are beyond the

1 state's purview and regulatory interventions and often lack even basic facilities. During the
2 lesson-free time, the *almajirai* earn their livelihood. In rural areas, they collect fodder and
3 firewood or work as farmhands. In urban areas, older students wash clothes, carry loads and
4 engage in petty trade or handicrafts. Younger students are employed as household helps, or
5 beg for food and money on the streets, which makes them a highly visible feature of the urban
6 landscape. Formerly, *almajirai* lived mainly in remote rural locales, but today they
7 increasingly populate the urban centres of the region – a development that has been
8 accompanied by a steep decline in respect for them.

9 The traditional Qur'anic school system is widespread in Muslim West Africa and used
10 mostly by poor rural families. Such families often have few alternative educational choices as
11 the modern schooling accessible to them tends to be both poor in quality and financially
12 burdensome. In the *almajiri* system, children are handed over to the teacher (*malam*) and
13 while many students return home at least once a year (for the major holidays or to help their
14 parents farm), others do not see their parents for years. Some teachers migrate with their
15 schools following seasonal agricultural patterns. Enrolment in Qur'anic schools all over
16 Nigeria is estimated to exceed 9.5 million, with more than 8.5 million in the northern part of
17 the country (UBEC, 2010). How many of these students are *almajirai* is, however, subject to
18 speculation, as the existing statistics do not differentiate between day-students (who stay with
19 their parents, potentially attend modern school in addition to Qur'anic school, and include
20 females) and 'boarding' students.

21

22 ***From prestigious avenue to power to reviled coping strategy for the poor***

23

24 Since the inception of Islam in the region, the religious knowledge possessed by traditional
25 Islamic scholars has been a political asset, as its Muslim rulers, by submitting to the restraints
26 of a written code, exposed themselves to the checks of intellectuals educated in that code

1 (Last, 1993). The introduction of modern education by the British, who conquered what is
2 today northern Nigeria at the beginning of the twentieth century, gradually undermined the
3 religious scholars' "monopoly over literacy" and thus their access to prestige, positions, and
4 resources (Paden, 1973). Upon independence in 1960, the first generation of modern-educated
5 Muslims inherited power from the British (Umar, 2001).

6 Socioeconomic change added momentum to the political transformation. Since the 1970s
7 the income of students and teachers declined as more affluent Muslims increasingly ceased to
8 support the *almajiri* system, and as those segments of society still endorsing it were hard hit
9 by the economic downturn in the aftermath of the oil boom of the 1970s and by structural
10 adjustment which began in 1986 (Ya'u, 2000). The push of the northern Muslim elites in the
11 late 1970s and 1980s to extend modern education to larger parts of the population strained the
12 *almajirai* competing for jobs in the urban economy (Lubeck, 1985). Meanwhile, those sources
13 of income that are the preserve of traditional religious scholars – commissioned prayers and
14 potions to strengthen one's charisma for example (see Last, 1988) – while providing a
15 profitable livelihood to some, can't sustain the bulk of the *almajirai*, and particularly not
16 those only beginning to acquire the requisite knowledge.

17 As economic restructuring accentuated income inequalities and impoverished large parts of
18 the population, the landscape of religious legitimacy was also reconfigured. New religious
19 movements – most prominently epitomized by the *Izala* movement (e.g. Kane, 2003) – began
20 to sprout in the formerly Sufi dominated region. *Izala*'s commitment to public enlightenment,
21 manifested through the establishment of a modern system of Islamic education marginalized
22 the *almajiri* system further. Additionally, in a context of increased anxieties about the
23 religious integrity of the Muslim community (*jama'a*), attempts to ensure its piety, and to
24 'purify' Islam by removing unlawful innovation (*bidi'a*), assumed a new urgency (e.g. Last,
25 2008). The *almajiri* system has attracted criticism in this environment as a Hausa cultural

1 accretion to Islam. Many object to the *almajirai*'s practice of begging which, in their view,
2 Islam permits only in acute emergencies (e.g. Bambale, 2007).

3 In the context of increased attempts to achieve universal primary education (see UBEC,
4 2010) and growing concerns about child welfare, the *almajirai* came to be perceived as a
5 'lost' generation (Abubakar, 2009). Young *almajirai* are tagged as 'quasi-orphans'
6 (COCFOCAN, n.d.) and 'street children' ('Almajiris: Towards Creating Brighter Future',
7 2012). *Almajirai* in their youth appear in the public imagination as 'ticking time bomb'
8 ('Almajiris – Nigeria's Ticking Time Bomb', 2011) and 'monsters' in the 'breeding'
9 ('Rehabilitating our almajiris', 2011). The *Boko Haram* Islamist insurgency since 2009 has
10 carried misgivings about the system to the extremes. In an article in Newsweek Magazine,
11 Nobel laureate Wole Soyinka for example propounded that the followers of *Boko Haram* –
12 the 'butchers of Nigeria' – had 'been deliberately bred, nurtured, sheltered, rendered pliant...
13 in madrassas and are generally known as the almajiris.' (2012).

14

15

16 **'Participatory' filmmaking**

17

18 ***Rationale and participants***

19

20 The idea of producing a documentary film about the *almajiri* system together with young
21 people living as *almajirai* was born after some months of fieldwork during which I
22 encountered negative stereotypes about the system again and again. Yet, readiness to listen to
23 the concerns and experiences of the young people enrolled in it seldom accompanied such
24 rejection of the system. I envisaged the project to offer a greater forum for *almajirai* to
25 publicise their views, and to add a new perspective to the debate in Nigeria about *almajirai*.
26 Moreover, as an adult, woman and non-Muslim, I was continuously on the lookout for ways

1 to spend time with *almajirai*. I had the chance to use ‘participatory’ methods including
2 photography and ‘radio-interviews’, conducted by the *almajirai* amongst each other with my
3 tape-recorder, during my first fieldwork phase in July – September 2009 in urban Kano (see
4 Hoechner, 2011). This was possible because I conducted research in a neighbourhood that had
5 been continually researched over the previous two decades. As a consequence, people were
6 fairly used to curious Westerners, and I was met with little suspicion. But in my rural
7 fieldwork site Albasu, for fear that people might perceive tape recordings and photographs as
8 an attempt to illicitly sneak information out, the District Head discouraged me from using
9 them (cf. Chalfen, who finds that ‘greater awareness of the politics underlying photographic
10 practices’, including their potential for misrepresentation and surveillance, has heightened
11 suspicions towards their use, 2011, p. 294).

12 I set up English classes for *almajirai* of various Qur’anic schools in both rural and urban
13 Kano, but my teaching was always confined to a few hours on their ‘weekend days’
14 (Thursday and Friday), and the inevitable authority attached to my position as teacher made
15 the classroom a difficult set-up for developing a close rapport. A film project promised
16 opportunities not only to spend time with *almajirai*, but also to learn about their experiences
17 and perspectives from what they would want to document and communicate (cf. Hwang,
18 2012).

19 The idea was to involve young people living as *almajirai* in every step of the project from
20 script writing to editing. Through training, so the idea went, they should not only be put into
21 the position to take control of the project as far as possible, but also learn skills potentially
22 useful to them in later life. The Kano branch of the Goethe Institute, a German cultural
23 institution, agreed to support and fund the project. Two professionals from the Kano film
24 industry, Nasiru Bappah Muhammad and Auwalu Indabawa, were in charge of training.

25 The director of the Goethe Institute and I had decided that nine *almajiri* participants would
26 be the maximum to have a manageable group, and that they should come from both rural and

1 urban schools. To work with three *almajirai* from three different schools seemed a good way
2 to make sure that we brought students with diverse experiences together and that the groups
3 from the different schools were big enough and balanced for students to feel comfortable. To
4 ensure a good and balanced working atmosphere, we aimed for students of roughly similar
5 age.

6 In both 2009 and 2011, I had taught English to some 10–15 *almajirai* at the *Child Almajiri*
7 *Empowerment and Support Initiative* (CAESI), an NGO aiming to extend support to *almajirai*
8 in urban Kano, amongst other things by offering modern education and meals to *almajirai*
9 from different Qur’anic schools in Sharada (Kano Metropolitan) on Thursdays, Fridays and
10 Saturdays. The CAESI provided catering during the film production process and made their
11 classrooms available for training. As the NGO was amongst the organisers, it was clear that
12 some of its students would participate in the project. Yet, there was much more interest than
13 places on the project. I therefore suggested participants should come from among the older
14 students. Incidentally, of the five *almajirai* falling into that age group, two were tied up with
15 work or family obligations, leaving the remaining three to participate (Abdullahi, Auwal and
16 Ismail).² As the CAESI’s younger students came to the project site on Thursdays and Fridays
17 for lessons, and as I was reluctant to exclude interested *almajirai*, some of them participated
18 in the initial training sessions, including script writing.

19 In Albasu I approached Malam Nasiru whom I knew best of all the rural teachers and
20 because I had started to befriend his students, whom I was teaching English. Out of the five
21 older *almajirai* in his school he chose three that would be allowed to participate (Buhari,
22 Kabiru and Anas). The third group of students came from a Qur’anic school that I lived right
23 next to during my stays at Sabuwar Kofa in Kano city. Two students of this school, Naziru
24 and Sadisu, were employed to work as household helps in the house I was staying in. I knew
25 them fairly well not only from home, but also from my first round of research in 2009, in

1 which they had participated. I invited them to be part of the project and left it to them to
2 choose a third person from their school. They opted for Sadiu's friend Ikiramatu.

3

4 *Production process*

5

6 For 12 weeks, we met every Thursday and Friday, first on the premises of the NGO CAESI
7 for training and to write the script, then at different shooting locations, including all of the
8 participating *almajirai*'s schools, and finally at the Goethe Institute to edit our footage.

9 We dedicated the first four sessions to the script. First came long discussions about the
10 topics the youths wanted to cover and messages they wanted to get across to the public. Next
11 we held sessions during which the youths wrote down how they wanted to translate the
12 messages agreed upon into filmed material, including acted scenes/drama, interviews, and
13 voice-over monologues. Based on the nature of the material produced so far Nasiru Bappah
14 Muhammad, the 'script advisor', proposed the film genre of a docudrama. Many of the
15 experiences – e.g. those of abuse by employers – would be difficult/impossible to capture in a
16 documentary. Many of the messages would be more immediate and emotive if acted out
17 rather than narrated, he reasoned.

18 To develop a structure for the film, Muhammad had the group think through an *almajiri*'s
19 typical trajectory from home to school including his parents' decision to enrol him, through a
20 typical school day from the crack of dawn till late at night, and through a typical *almajiri*
21 career, ending with his graduation. In the next step, we delved into each stage in this
22 trajectory in more depth. Muhammad had the participating *almajirai* re-tell and re-enact their
23 own experiences with respect to the different stages, pointing out to them what made for an
24 interesting and emotive story and captivating cinematographic material. From this collection
25 of stories and the material written down at the beginning, Muhammad then put together a
26 script skeleton, which put scenes in order and gave basic scene instructions. We then

1 discussed the script skeleton with the *almajirai* who added in some scenes they felt were
2 missing. The following example illustrates the format of the scene instructions:

3 *Scene 11: outside: street – daylight:* Aminu collected food, he laments to his friend that the
4 food is spoilt, and that it was given to him as a gesture of contempt. The friend advises him
5 that he is not at home and must have patience. They discuss the reasons why people treat
6 *almajirai* badly.

7 From the beginning it had been clear that the participating *almajirai* would act in as many
8 capacities as possible, and that we would try to cast minor roles with *almajirai* from their
9 schools and children from the neighbourhood, not least because we didn't have the funds to
10 engage many professional actors. The decision to still engage professionals was mainly
11 Muhammad's. He argued that finding and training lay actors for adult roles would take time,
12 and be difficult as those likely to perform best in the roles we needed (traditional Qur'anic
13 teachers and *almajirai*'s parents, who are often rather conservative; nasty employers, who are
14 by definition uncooperative) were least likely to agree to participate (cf. Buchanan & Murray,
15 2012, who faced similar difficulties recruiting people to interview them on camera about their
16 (mis)conceptions about mental illness). That the adult actors we eventually engaged were paid
17 turned out to complicate matters with the *almajirai* (see below).

18 During another four training days the *almajirai* learned the basics of handling the small
19 digital camera the Goethe Institute had made available for the project, and the fundamentals
20 of acting and directing. Muhammad talked them through the common composition of a film
21 crew, and had everyone state a preferred role. He then assigned crew as well as cast positions
22 based on the *almajirai*'s preferences and on whom he deemed fit.

23 Shooting took another five days. Since the *almajirai* mainly re-enacted their daily activities
24 and situations they were more than familiar with, acting came fairly naturally to most (cf.
25 Baena, Pérez, Sotelo, & Mateos, 2004). Somewhat trickier were the scenes involving

1 professional adult actors. Most were actors from the Kano film industry (*Kannywood*),
2 famous in Hausaland and known celebrities to the *almajirai*. The directors gave scene
3 instructions to the actors, but refrained from criticising the actors whom they held in high
4 regard. Muhammad, Indawaba or I would call attention to major divergences from the script.

5 Editing turned out to be a time-consuming and tedious process. As the participating
6 *almajirai* were very much computer-illiterate, it was difficult to impart more than some basic
7 computer skills and impossible to involve them to any meaningful extent at this stage. The
8 project culminated in a premiere screening at the Goethe Institute on 27 October 2011,
9 attended by some 300 people, including politicians, university staff, civil society
10 representatives, and Qur'anic teachers and *almajirai* from the three participating schools.

11

12 ***The 'end product'***

13

14 The film that we eventually screened and distributed bore fingerprints from a number of
15 people who weren't *almajirai*. The professional actors, the trainers, and myself had all shaped
16 the production process to some extent by designing scenes in the script, dramatising script
17 instructions, or editing footage in particular ways. Apart from being final touches rather than
18 major surgeries, I think these interventions are also defensible from an ethical standpoint.
19 They helped the participating *almajirai* produce a film that was taken seriously as an artistic
20 production, and while I am confident that their messages remained unchanged, such support
21 ensured that the form met the necessary cinematographic standards for their messages to
22 reach an audience (cf. Baena et al., 2004, who faced a similar trade-off between minimising
23 interference and ensuring the 'quality' of the production).

24 The finished film tells the story of Aminu, who is sent to Qur'anic school in the city
25 because his father reckons he would progress better in his studies away from home. Aminu
26 struggles to find a place to sleep, enough food to eat every day, and money to buy soap. He is

1 bullied by an older student in his school, abused by his employer, and denigrated by people in
2 his neighbourhood. But against the odds, he eventually manages to secure reputable
3 employment as shop assistant and succeeds in his Qur'anic studies. McCain (2011),
4 reviewing the film for the Daily Trust newspaper, summarises its message:

5 Although their hardships are highlighted here, this is a fairly positive portrayal of the life of
6 an *almajiri*, presenting arguments about their own worth made by the boys themselves...
7 The critique the boys make and the message they have are... for the communities in which
8 they live, to the people who assume they are thieves and rascals, those who sneeringly tell
9 them their parents don't love them, or those households who think of them only as nearly
10 free labour and not as people.

11

12

13 **Inevitable dilemmas?**

14

15 ***'Having voice' and competing concerns***

16

17 While it was I who had initiated the project, I felt that especially in the early stages, it was
18 spurred by the *almajirai's* enthusiasm, and feeling that they were part of something special
19 and meaningful. This was evident from the way they spent their free time writing down
20 stories they wanted to include in the script, or learning the English film vocabulary they had
21 noted down during the day. Also, as many more *almajirai* registered interest in participating
22 than we could 'admit', those involved, I think, felt quite privileged.

23 When conceiving of the project, the director of the Goethe Institute and I had planned to
24 compensate the *almajirai* with a small amount of money for the income they would forego by
25 participating in the project. Yet, after the first sessions, we dropped this idea; first, because we
26 felt it would unnecessarily commercialise the project, detracting from the idealistic

1 enthusiasm and curiosity for filmmaking skills sustaining it. While the *almajirai* should not
2 have any detriments from the project (food and transport costs were covered), ‘paying’ them
3 for participation seemed ill-advised (cf. Alderson, 2001). Second, we feared it would increase
4 inequalities amongst participants and ‘non-participants’ further; the boundary between them
5 was anyways fuzzy during the initial phases as other *almajirai* from the CAESI participated
6 in the training sessions, also contributing ideas to the script. Yet, imprudently, I had
7 mentioned to two of the *almajirai* a while before the project started, when I had just finalised
8 the agreement with the Goethe Institute, that they would be given something as compensation
9 for their foregone income. This was a remark I forgot about as the youths didn’t bring it up
10 with me again but which would catch up with me later.

11 As the project dragged on, the initial enthusiasm began to fade. Increasingly, the *almajirai*
12 came to realise how much of a time and work commitment their participation in the project
13 implied. It was difficult to gauge whether this was an inevitable sign of fatigue or more
14 fundamental discontent about the project. After some weeks, the youths from Albasu came
15 forth with their grievance: the project (and ‘weekend’) days Thursday and Friday were the
16 only days on which they as ‘rural *almajirai*’ had a chance of earning cash by hiring out their
17 farm labour. On the remaining days, they would have to attend classes or farm for their
18 teacher. We agreed that I would give them some money each week so as to cover their basic
19 expenses (soap etc.). As none of the urban-based youths approached me with a similar
20 grievance, I assumed ‘lacking’ Thursdays and Fridays was not a particular problem to them.

21 At no time did the youths tell me that they were discontented but after the project ended I
22 pieced together bit-by-bit that they had been debating amongst themselves for some time
23 whether it was fair that they contributed so much work and energy and weren’t paid just like
24 the professional actors. Rumours and gossip in their neighbourhoods/communities and
25 schools further spurred the disgruntlement some youths harboured. They were accused, I
26 learned, of being either dupes, agreeing to ‘work’ for free for me/the Goethe Institute (who

1 would presumably make a lot of money one day by selling the film), or liars, who hid the
2 money I presumably paid them so they wouldn't have to share it. The attendance of Kano
3 State's Commissioner of Information at the screening ignited such rumours further: if the
4 'manya' (the big and powerful) were there, surely there must have been money involved as
5 well!

6 Such reasoning makes immediate sense if one takes into consideration the socio-political
7 context. Politics in Nigeria have been characterised as 'spoils politics' (Allen, 1995),
8 suggesting that officials relate to their constituencies mainly through the redistribution of
9 resources. The NGO sector in Nigeria is viewed by many as a vehicle for personal enrichment
10 rather than the pursuit of the common good (e.g. Smith, 2007). In the northern part of the
11 country, interventions sponsored by Western donors frequently spark suspicion and trigger
12 questions about the motivations underpinning them. The campaign launched in northern
13 Nigeria from 2003 to eradicate polio for instance was interpreted by some as 'part of a plot by
14 western governments to reduce Muslim populations worldwide' (Yahya, 2006, p. 186).
15 Rumours, Yahya maintains, should be understood as 'commentary on broader political
16 experience' (ibid, p. 187). Seen in this light, the suspicions with which the film project and I
17 were met become intelligible. That the project moreover was not purely a 'project' in
18 Chalfen's (2011) sense, but that it also served my 'study' interests may have added to the
19 confusion about my underlying motivations.

20 To what extent could ill blood have been avoided? To what extent were people's
21 perceptions of my intentions predefined by their horizon of experience? Surely, it was a
22 mistake to mention a potential compensation to two of the *almajirai* before the project. It was
23 also unwise to jump to the conclusion that money issues weren't something to worry about
24 merely because none of the *almajirai* (the agreement with the youths from Albasu aside)
25 brought them up explicitly. Norms of respect tipped the scales in favour of silent anger. When
26 I asked one of the youths afterwards why he hadn't just told me that he was unhappy about

1 the situation, he said: ‘one doesn’t tell one’s superior – he could get angry.’ Also, our
2 relationships were further complicated by the fact that I had agreed to pay for the costs of
3 some of the youths’ secular education, which they had just started or intended to start briefly.
4 Maybe they were afraid I could change my mind if they upset me.

5 Yet, some quandaries I think were unavoidable: Had all the youths been paid
6 ‘compensation’, what (if any) amount would have been able to gratify those claiming their
7 labour was being exploited? Would ‘payment’ have entailed more suspicions by envious
8 bystanders? How could those doubting Westerners do anything not primarily self-interested
9 have been convinced that this was a not-for-profit project aiming to make *almajirai*’s views
10 and experiences public? I wonder whether involving the *almajirai* in the financial
11 management of the project would have solved or compounded such problems.

12

13 ***Reflections on ‘participatory’ filmmaking and ‘empowerment’***

14

15 What lessons can be drawn from this experience for ‘participatory’ film projects involving
16 stigmatised groups more widely? Several people stressed in their reactions to the film how
17 remarkable it was that *almajirai*, who come from communities commonly known to be poor,
18 rural, and ‘traditional’ / lacking ‘exposure’, could use this modern medium to communicate.
19 A film could potentially reach a relatively wealthy, ‘modern’, urban audience that would
20 otherwise rarely bother to listen to *almajirai*’s views. Their employers, and people in their
21 neighbourhood who thought negatively of them were the people the *almajirai* wanted to get
22 through to primarily. The statements they made in the end credits of the film make this plain:

23 *Isma’il*: My message to society, especially to the rich, is may you support the *almajirai*
24 generously, and take good care of those working in your house.

1 *Ikiramatu*: Through this film, I want to show people who think *almajirai* are hoodlums,
2 that this is not true.

3 *Naziru*: I call upon you to stop accusing *almajirai* of things they didn't do. Please inquire
4 first before you just accuse the *almajirai*.

5 The *almajirai* also felt that the finished film was capable of getting their messages across.
6 One of the youths for example took a copy of the film to his employers so they would 'learn
7 from it' and 'correct their behaviour' towards him. Another commented after the screening
8 that through the film people employing *almajirai* in his neighbourhood had 'understood
9 certain things'.

10 One of the strengths of film as a method/means of communication thus laid in
11 juxtaposing 'modern' and 'traditional'. Yet, its strength was also its weakness in that it
12 rendered the *almajirai* vulnerable in their own communities. For example, one of the
13 *almajirai* who acted as thief in a scene in the film, was afraid that people in his village, who
14 had little/no exposure to film, would not be able to tell reality and fiction apart. In written
15 representations, participants can be anonymised to protect their identity. In visual
16 representations, this is hardly possible (Chalfen, 2011).

17 Coming from likely the most conservative segment of society, some envisaged benefits
18 of the project – learning useful/marketable skills – may well fail to materialise. The film
19 industry as potential future employer is not necessarily on the cards for the participating
20 *almajirai*. One of the participating youths for instance said his parents would never allow him
21 to get involved in the film business. His mother even refused to watch the film. While
22 Indabawa planned to help interested youths enter the film industry by employing them as
23 helps on set, he envisaged problems as the *almajirai* are free only on Thursdays and Fridays.

24 I am quite convinced that the *almajirai* didn't doubt the film to be an efficacious means
25 to communicate some of their concerns to a larger audience. Yet, this didn't mean 'making

1 their voices heard' overrode other concerns, such as their hope/expectation to benefit
2 materially, or their desire not to feel fooled, and not to be regarded as foolish or be called a
3 liar. These concerns must again be understood in the context of their position within society
4 as well as their (realistic) future expectations: How well equipped were they to defend
5 themselves against accusations and suspicions in their communities? How likely was the film
6 to make a lasting change to their lives?

7 Most benefits for participants were immaterial. Wang et al. (2000, p. 86), who conducted a
8 'photovoice' project with homeless people in the US, describe how their participants took
9 pride in being met with curiosity and respect while taking photographs, and how the project,
10 while failing to change participants' material conditions, enhanced their self-esteem.
11 Similarly, there were many moments when the *almajirai* beamed with pride about their work
12 and responsibilities within the project (e.g. when giving press interviews; after shooting in
13 Albasu Buhari told me proudly that people now called him 'dairekta' [director] in town); or
14 reminisced about getting to know Hausa film celebrities personally. Since my departure from
15 Kano, our film was screened at national and international film festivals, and won an
16 AFRICAST 2012 Award, which its director Abdullahi was invited to accept at the prize
17 awarding ceremony in the capital Abuja. None of the participating youths had travelled that
18 far before let alone spoken in front of a comparable audience (cf. Baena et al., 2004).

19 I would not say that the project did as much as 'conscientise' the *almajirai*: firstly, they
20 had opinions before the project, and secondly, their opinions, as I will argue below, did not
21 necessarily 'liberate' them. Yet, the project created a space to verbalise and collate opinions
22 and grievances. At the end of the project, the participating youths held, and defended (e.g. in
23 media interviews), views on how society failed to do them justice that I have not heard in
24 such clarity and with such fervour from any other *almajirai* I have talked to during my
25 research. This echoes the findings of others working with stigmatised groups that
26 'participatory' research projects can create a forum for participants to bring together their

1 experiences, to affirm and consolidate one another's views and to validate one another's sense
2 of injustice (e.g. Cahill, 2004; Buchanan & Murray, 2012). Being taken seriously as the
3 *almajirai*'s flag bearers by the audiences of our film, was, I think, an 'empowering'
4 experience for the participating youths.

5

6 *Afterlife of the film: the pitfalls of representations*

7

8 Beyond personally 'empowering' experiences, how effective was the film project as a means
9 to promote the *almajirai*'s interests more generally? Concerns about stigma and how to
10 counter it had been at the core of the project. I had learned from the *almajirai* how widespread
11 prejudice against their education system affected their daily lives. In the end credits of our
12 film where the *almajirai* spell out their messages to the public, Kabiru (ca. 18 years), part of
13 the film production crew, proclaims: 'Either speak good about us or keep quiet!' Being
14 represented in a positive light was a major concern for the *almajirai* and *malamai* I became
15 close to, and a major motivation behind their participation in, and support for the film project
16 and my research more generally.

17 It has been widely documented that poverty can trigger feelings of shame and inadequacy
18 (e.g. Walker et al., 2013). Poverty connotes negatively in northern Nigeria and *almajirai* may
19 experience their own life histories as shameful as they are often shaped by a lack of support
20 from (supposedly responsible) social elders as a consequence of poverty, divorce or death.
21 Poor young people often seek to escape the stigma of poverty and reject being labelled 'poor'
22 (e.g. Sutton, 2009, on children on a deprived UK council estate). The *almajirai* I got to know
23 well went out of their way to deemphasise in statements made publicly the role poverty plays
24 for *almajiri* enrolment. For example, when the script advisor Muhammad suggested that
25 destitution was indeed a factor underpinning the enrolment of children as *almajirai*, the
26 youths nodded approval. Yet, they did not hesitate for a moment to take him up on his

1 suggestion to disregard this aspect of the system in their script, and invoked any number of
2 social, cultural, and religious arguments to justify enrolment as *almajiri*. They constructed
3 what Sime (2008, cited in the introduction) calls a ‘parallel discourse’ about their lives, which
4 reinterpreted deprivation as an active choice and necessary sacrifice for religious learning.
5 This raises questions about the potential of the film to draw attention to the roots of the
6 *almajiri* system in the political economy of rural poverty.

7 Narratives of a devoted search for sacred knowledge prioritise the cultural/religious aspects
8 of the *almajiri* system over its material bases. They may easily be turned into culturalist
9 explanations, which, changed into the negative, evoke ‘backward’ educational aspirations and
10 neglectful and ignorant parents, paving the way for victim blaming. Describing the *almajiri*
11 system in cultural/religious terms alone keeps off the table a debate about the structural causes
12 of the poverty afflicting the constituencies that opt for it.

13

14

15 **Conclusion: A mixed balance sheet as best case scenario?**

16

17 This paper has scrutinised my experiences producing a ‘participatory’ docudrama with
18 traditional Qur’anic students in Kano, who are both poor and stigmatised. What can we learn
19 from the experiences described here more generally about the potential of ‘participatory’
20 research, including ‘participatory’ video production, for working with groups who suffer from
21 stigma?

22 The project created a space for the *almajirai* to collate their experiences, and to confirm
23 one another’s sense that they deserve more respect than society currently accords them. Being
24 taken seriously as spokespersons of the *almajirai* was an ‘empowering’ experience for the
25 participating youths, I think. Also, the film proved to be an effective medium for transmitting
26 their messages to the audiences they wished to reach, namely the urban middle and upper

1 classes. That the *almajirai*, who are often considered ‘backward’ and clueless, could use this
2 modern medium so competently helped them get a hearing, which evidences the potential of
3 filmmaking for working with groups commonly believed to lack competence or ‘exposure’.

4 Yet, at the same time, their weak position within society made the *almajirai* participating
5 in the film project vulnerable to suspicions and accusations in their communities. They were
6 ridiculed as dupes working on the project for free, and suspected of hiding presumed
7 payments so they wouldn’t have to share them. As stigmatised groups by definition have little
8 social power, they are particularly susceptible to badmouthing and incriminations. For
9 research to be risk-free and a positive experience for participants, we must take ample account
10 of such pitfalls.

11 Furthermore, my experiences expose how crucial it is to be aware of the political context
12 of a research project, and of the specific connotations of photographic and film practices in
13 this context. Interventions sponsored by Western donors spur suspicion in northern Nigeria.
14 Pictures and video recordings raise questions about their potential for surveillance and
15 misrepresentation. To ensure a project is safe for all participants, we have to be aware of
16 potential misgivings and manage them carefully.

17 A further complication arises from the fact that, unlike in most written representations, it is
18 hardly possible to protect the identity of participants in visual representations. As the example
19 of the young actor who was afraid people might consider him an actual thief illustrates,
20 participating in a film project like ours may expose young people to unexpected risks. We
21 have little control over how people receive and interpret the representations we create (cf.
22 Mills, 1997; Nickerson, 1998).

23 All these factors suggest that to make participation in research safe for members of
24 stigmatised groups it is essential to address their lack of social power and to challenge the
25 roots of their weak position in society. Yet, is ‘participatory’ research up to this task? Our
26 film project offered a number of immaterial benefits to the participating youths, e.g. in the

1 form of enhanced self-esteem and recognition as the *almajirai*'s flag bearers. Yet, at the same
2 time, it could not remedy the structural inequalities that affect the *almajirai* negatively. What
3 is more, preoccupied with escaping the negative connotations of poverty, the youths drew a
4 picture of their education system that eschewed questions of poverty, and presented it instead
5 as a result of religious and cultural choices. This makes them vulnerable to victim blaming.
6 Does this imply however that we should – for fear of being misunderstood and misconstrued
7 – refrain altogether from engaging stigmatised groups in research, and from creating and
8 circulating representations that show their struggles? Certainly not. But it may be a reminder
9 that 'giving voice' alone is not enough to 'empower' such groups if the structural inequalities
10 that marginalise them remain unchallenged.

11

Acknowledgements

I thank the people in Kano and Albasu for hosting me and for sharing their lives so generously with me. I am grateful to my supervisors Dr Laura Camfield and Dr Abdul Raufu Mustapha for their guidance and support. Financial support from the German Academic Exchange Foundation (DAAD – Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst), the German National Academic Foundation (Studienstiftung des deutschen Volkes), the Green Templeton College travel fund, the QEH travel fund, and the Gurdev Kaur Bhagrath Memorial Research Fund is gratefully acknowledged. I also thank the reviewers for their helpful comments on an earlier version of this paper.

Notes

¹ The film is available online at <http://www.qeh.ox.ac.uk/research/video/video-hlg>.

² I have not anonymised the participants of the film project, who figure in the film under their proper names. As we publicised the film widely, it is easy to identify the youths who took part in it. While we sought to ensure as far as possible that the messages included in the film do not put the participating *almajirai* at risk (see discussion below), we considered it unethical not to give them the credit for their work. In this paper, I avoid making information directly attributable to specific participants where this could put them at risk or make them uncomfortable.

Bibliography

- Abubakar, A. (2009, November 21). Nigeria struggles to curb rise in child beggars. *The Telegraph*. Retrieved March 5, 2014, from <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/expat/expatnews/6596232/Nigeria-struggles-to-curb-rise-in-child-beggars.html>
- Alderson, P. (2001). Research by children. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 4(2), 139–153.
- Allen, C. (1995). Understanding African Politics. *Review of African Political Economy*, 65, 301–320.
- Almajiris – Nigeria’s Ticking Time Bomb. (2011, 23 April). *Nairaland Forum*. Retrieved March 5, 2014, from <http://www.nairaland.com/nigeria/topic-653197.0.html>
- Almajiris: Towards Creating Brighter Future for the Street Kids. (2012, April 22). *This Day*. Retrieved March 5, 2014, from <http://www.thisdaylive.com/articles/almajiris-towards-creating-brighter-future-for-the-street-kids/114304/>
- Baena, V.C., Pérez, A.M., Sotelo, R.M., & Mateos, M.O. (2004). Revealing the hidden: Making anthropological documentaries. In S. Pink, L. Kürti, & A.I. Afonso (Eds.), *Working Images. Visual Research and Representation in Ethnography* (pp. 120–134). London: Routledge.
- Bambale, A.J. (2007). *Almajiranchi and the problem of begging in Kano state: The role of Shekarau administration (2003–2007)*. Paper presented at the 7th BEN Africa Annual Conference, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. Retrieved March, 5, 2014, from http://www.benafrika.org/downloads/bambale_begging_in_kano.pdf.
- Barker, J., & Weller, S. (2003). “Is it fun?” Developing children centered research methods. *The International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy*, 23(1/2), 33–58.
- Buchanan, A. & Murray, M. (2012). Using participatory video to challenge the stigma of mental illness: a case study. *International Journal of Mental Health Promotion*, 14(1), 35–43.
- Byrne, A., Canavan, J., & Millar, M. (2009). Participatory research and the voice-centred relational method of data analysis: is it worth it? *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 12(1), 67–77.
- Cahill, C. (2004). Defying gravity? raising consciousness through collective research. *Children’s Geographies*, 2(2), 273–286.
- Chalfen, R. (2011). Differentiating Practices of Participatory Visual Media Production. In E. Margolis & L. Pauwels (Eds.), *The SAGE Handbook Visual Research Methods* (pp. 171–186). London: SAGE Publications.
- Chambers, R. (1997). *Whose reality counts? : putting the first last*. London: ITDG.
- COCFOCAN – Coalition of Community Based Organizations Focused on Child Almajiri in Nigeria. (n.d.). *The Child-Almajiri*. Kano, Nigeria: Coalition of Community Based Organizations Focused on Child Almajiri in Nigeria.
- Cooke, B., & Kothari, U. (2001). *Participation: the new tyranny?* London: Zed Books.
- Freire, P. (1972). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Hart, J. (2008). Children’s Participation and International Development: Attending to the Political. *International Journal of Children’s Rights*, 16, 407–418.
- Hastrup, K., Elsass, P., Grillo, R., Mathiesen, P., & Paine, R. (1990). Anthropological Advocacy: A Contradiction in Terms? [and Comments]. *Current Anthropology*, 31(3), 301–311.
- Hoehner, H. (2011). Striving for Knowledge and Dignity: How Qur’anic Students in Kano, Nigeria, Learn to Live with Rejection and Educational Disadvantage. *European Journal of Development Research*, 23(5), 712–728.

- Hwang, S. K. (2012). Home movies in participatory research: children as movie-makers. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 16(5), 445–456.
- Kane, O. (2003). *Muslim modernity in postcolonial Nigeria: a study of the Society for the Removal of Innovation and Reinstatement of Tradition*. Boston, MA: Brill.
- Last, M. (1988). Charisma and Medicine in Northern Nigeria. In D. Cruise O'Brien & C. Coulon (Eds.), *Charisma and Brotherhood in African Islam* (pp. 116–131). Harlow: Longman.
- Last, M. (1993). The traditional Muslim intellectual in Hausaland: the background. In T. Falola (Ed.), *African Historiography* (pp. 116–131). Harlow: Longman.
- Last, M. (2008). The Search for Security in Muslim Northern Nigeria. *Africa*, 78(1), 41–63.
- Lewis, Oscar (1959). *Five Families: Mexican Case Studies in the Culture of Poverty*. New York: Basic Books.
- Lomax, H., Fink, J., Singh, N., & High, C. (2011). The politics of performance: methodological challenges of researching children's experiences of childhood through the lens of participatory video. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 14(3), 231–243.
- Lubeck, P.M. (1985). Islamic Protest under Semi-Industrial Capitalism: 'Yan Tatsine Explained. *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, 55(4), 369–389.
- McCain, C. (2011, November 5). Duniya Juyi Juyi: Life from the eyes of the almajirai. *Weekly Trust*. Retrieved March, 5, 2014, from <http://weeklytrust.com.ng/index.php/my-thoughts-exactly/6465-duniya-juyi-juyi-life-from-the-eyes-of-the-almajirai>
- Mills, G. (1997). Is it is or is it ain't: The impact of selective perception on the image making of traditional African dance. *Journal of Black Studies*, 28(2), 139–156.
- Moletsane, R., de Lange, N., Mitchell, C., & Stuart, J. (2007). Photo-voice as a tool for analysis and activism in response to HIV and AIDS stigmatisation in a rural KwaZulu-Natal school. *Journal of Child and Adolescent Mental Health*, 19(1), 19–28.
- Nickerson, R. (1998). Confirmation bias: A ubiquitous phenomenon in many guises. *Review of General Psychology*, 2(2), 175–220.
- Paden, J.N. (1973). *Religion and political culture in Kano*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Rahnema, M. (1992). Participation. In W. Sachs (Ed.), *The development dictionary: a guide to knowledge as power* (pp. 116–131). London: Zed.
- Rehabilitating our almajiris. (2011, June 22). *234NEXT*. Retrieved July, 22, 2012, from <http://234next.com/csp/cms/sites/Next/Opinion/5716077-146/story.csp>
- Sime, D. (2008). Ethical and methodological issues in engaging young people living in poverty with participatory research methods, *Children's Geographies*, 6(1), 63–78.
- Smith, D.J. (2007). *A culture of corruption. Everyday deception and popular discontent in Nigeria*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Soyinka, W. (2012, January 16). The Butchers Of Nigeria. *Newsweek Magazine*. Retrieved March, 5, 2014, from <http://www.thedailybeast.com/newsweek/2012/01/15/wole-soyinka-on-nigeria-s-anti-christian-terror-sect-boko-haram.html>
- Sutton, L. (2009). 'They'd only call you a scally if you are poor': the impact of socio-economic status on children's identities. *Children's Geographies*, 7(3), 277–290.
- UBEC – Universal Basic Education Board. (2010). *National Framework for the Development and Integration of Almajiri Education into UBE Programme* (pp. 1–26). Abuja, Nigeria: Universal Basic Education Board.
- Umar, M. (2001). Education and Islamic trends in northern Nigeria: 1970s–1990s. *Africa Today*, 48(2), 127–150.
- Ya'u, Y. Z. (2000). The youth, economic crisis and identity transformation: the case of the yandaba in Kano. In A. Jega (Ed.), *Identity transformation and identity politics under structural adjustment in Nigeria* (pp. 161–180). Uppsala & Kano: Nordiska

Afrikainstitutet, Uppsala in collaboration with The Centre for Research and Documentation, Kano.

- Yahya, M. (2006). Polio vaccines – “no thank you!” Barriers to polio eradication in northern Nigeria. *African Affairs*, 106(423), 185–204.
- Walker, R., Kyomuhendo, G.B., Chase, E., Choudhry, S., Gubrium, E.K., Nicola, J.Y., Lødemel, I., Mathew, L., Mwiine, A., Pellissery, S., & Ming, Y. (2013). Poverty in Global Perspective: Is Shame a Common Denominator? *Journal of Social Policy*, 42(2), 215–233.
- Wang, C., Cash, J., & Power, L. (2000). Who Knows the Streets as Well as the Homeless? Promoting Personal and Community Action through Photovoice. *Health Promotion Practice*, 1(1), 81–89.