

## Accomplice, patron, go-between?

### A role to play with poor migrant Qur'anic students in northern Nigeria

Hannah Hoechner

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#### Abstract:

What does it mean to conduct ethnographic research in a context where inequalities are pervasive? Drawing on experiences conducting research with poor migrant Qur'anic students (*almajirai*) in Kano in northern Nigeria, this paper explores the challenges of establishing productive and ethical research relationships with informants whose social and socioeconomic status is significantly lower than that of the researcher. The paper argues that large socioeconomic and educational inequalities demand a rethinking of the subject positions available to researchers in such contexts. In the paper, I consider in turn my roles as an 'accomplice' of exclusionary elite behaviour, as a 'patron' for my informants, and as a 'go-between' facilitating access for them to otherwise inaccessible 'social microworlds'.

**Keywords:** ethnography, inequality, Nigeria, Islamic education, poverty, patronage, positionality, research ethics, Qur'anic students, status differences

**Word count:** 7,874

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#### **Introduction: growing close where inequalities grow large**

It is 7.30am, and the knocking on the door to our compound, albeit somewhat timid, does not stop. I am fighting sleep, as well as the desire to just turn around and ignore Aliyu<sup>1</sup>. Getting enough rest is a challenge at *Sabuwar Kofa*, Kano city, Nigeria, where heat and mosquitoes make it difficult to find sleep in the evening, and where the morning call for prayer from the neighbouring mosque unfailingly wakes me at dawn. This is of course not Aliyu's fault, and I know the boy, whose schedule starts on some days with Qur'anic lessons before the morning prayer, is getting even less sleep than me. Nonetheless, this morning I wish he wasn't there knocking, waiting to be let in to start his three-times-weekly morning cleaning round. Once he starts work, I do, too. Not that there was necessarily any work awaiting me at 7.30am in the morning. But sitting down idly with a cup of tea or even breakfast, while Aliyu, maybe 15 years old at that time, sweeps up fallen leaves, bent over his straw broom, then mops the linoleum floor of the veranda, then takes out the rubbish? The mere prospect makes me uncomfortable. Which serious researcher with a minimum awareness of power relations employs their informants as domestics, minors of age at that? Knowing, in the abstract, that poor young people in poor countries probably cherish opportunities to work under decent conditions for decent wages – even if they are research subjects – does not assuage my unease. So I find myself something to do, wash dishes, sort papers that didn't need sorting until then, pretend to have urgent computer work – anything really. Sometimes I even help sweep and mop, which obviously defies the purpose of employing somebody to do that.

I had come to northern Nigeria to study the *almajirai*, as ‘traditional’ Qur’anic students are known in Hausa, the region’s lingua franca. Now I found myself living in a compound where they worked as domestic helpers. If I had had a choice, I would probably not have employed them. Having been brought up in a German middle class family with a leftist leaning, domestic service looked like servitude to me, and having domestics made me feel like I was betraying my fundamental belief in human equality. Why should someone else clean up my dirt, merely because I was lucky enough to have more money than him? Having my own privilege put on display this way made me feel very uncomfortable.

Yet, as far as Aliyu was concerned, I did not have much of a choice. He came as it were with the compound I moved into in Kano. The VSO (Volunteer Service Overseas) volunteers who had lived there before me had employed him, and the alternatives I faced were either to dismiss him or to come to terms with the unease I felt. Aware of the hole a dismissal would tear into his survival budget, I opted for the latter.

To ease into my role as employer and ‘patron’ would take me time, and became possible only after I developed a better understanding of how social relations work in northern Nigeria. It also required me to give up my initial hope that I could ‘befriend’ the *almajirai* and interact with them as status ‘equals’, as my own upbringing had made me hope. Gender was a first obstacle to this. Friendships don’t, or very rarely, traverse gender boundaries in northern Nigeria. In Hausa, the word used to refer to a woman’s close friend is *kawa* (female); a man’s friend is his *aboki* (male); friendship bonds between the sexes are not provided for linguistically. Men and women in northern Nigeria relate to each other as siblings, relations, spouses, (secret) lovers, and patrons and clients – but not as friends. ‘Befriending’ the *almajirai* and other male youths was thus not an option readily available to me. As a woman, moreover, I could not enrol as *almajira* myself nor even observe, let alone participate in, lessons taking place in a mosque.<sup>2</sup>

Differences of age complicated our relationship further in a context where status comes with age and where juniors are expected to show respect to their seniors. That I was white and non-Muslim in a context where Westerners are often suspected of pursuing an anti-Islam agenda did not help either (see Hoechner, 2016). Yet, more important still was the socioeconomic gap between us. The Qur'anic students are almost all precariously poor; their social standing is low; their future prospects are drab. What did this imply for our research relationship?

As researchers, especially if we decide to study the lives of poor people in the global South, we are often positioned on the upper echelons of socioeconomic and status hierarchies. Various authors, particularly in development studies, have reflected on the particular challenges of conducting research in contexts where the living standards and educational backgrounds of researchers and researched differ grossly (e.g. Devereux and Hoddinott, 1992). Methodological innovations have been called for to bridge such differences, and to reduce power differentials (e.g. Beazley and Ennew, 2006; Chambers, 1997). Within social anthropology, scholars have debated the political implications of conducting research with poor, marginalized or exploited populations, and weighed the pros and cons of an 'engaged' or 'militant' anthropology (e.g. D'Andrades, 1995; Scheper-Hughes, 1995). However, some notable exceptions aside (e.g. Bleek, 1979, 1987; Crick, 1992), ethnographic accounts of how individual researchers construct long-term research relationships across socioeconomic divides, and how they manage the challenges they encounter, are rare.<sup>3</sup> This is surprising, given the particular challenges such differences can pose.

It has been argued that the validity of research and its ethical acceptability benefit from a reduction of the power differentials between researcher and researched (e.g. Chambers, 1997; Edwards and Mauthner, 2002; Morrow and Richards, 1996). 'Informants' are more at ease and frank with people who don't have power over them. They can decide about their participation

in research more freely if they don't fear disadvantages from 'displeasing' the researcher, making consent to research more meaningful.<sup>4</sup> But what if it is not possible to reduce power differentials? Socioeconomic differences and the associated status and power differentials are particularly pernicious. Even if as researchers we decide to live in modest circumstances, this may not do much to alter people's perceptions of how wealthy we 'really' are.<sup>5</sup>

Socioeconomic differences moreover create their own dynamics in a way that other more immutable differences like those of gender, race, or age do not. After all, conducting research with people who are significantly poorer, often desperately so, repeatedly puts researchers in positions where they can (and have to) decide to what extent they intervene, share their wealth and privilege, and thus at least temporarily alleviate the plight of the respective other person. (Researchers are of course unlikely to make more than a fleeting difference to the lives of their informants.) What is more, socioeconomic differences often imply expectations from those who are poor towards researchers to whose livelihoods they contribute by sharing their information and their lives. Bleek explains such expectations and the ensuing frustrations if they are not met. Seen with the eyes of poor research participants, 'doing fieldwork is not only a privilege of the rich, in the long run it is also lucrative, since fieldwork experience is a prerequisite for most well-paid anthropological teaching jobs' (1979: 200-1).<sup>6</sup> Attempts to bridge the socioeconomic gaps through offering financial or practical assistance in his view do 'no more than reaffirm the existing inequality' (Bleek, 1979: 201). Is Bleek right to consider anthropological fieldwork amongst poor people a necessarily 'dubious activity' (Bleek, 1979: 201)? How – if at all – can we manage the dynamics resulting from large socioeconomic differences in a way that is productive for research and ethical at the same time?

This is the question guiding this paper. It draws on my experiences conducting research with poor male migrant Qur'anic students (*almajirai*) in urban and rural Kano State in northern Nigeria over 13 months between 2009 and 2011. Most of the *almajirai* live in deprived

conditions and have limited future prospects (see below). Many commentators of the northern Nigerian context believe that this turns them into angry youths antagonistic to ‘mainstream’ society, and who provide easy recruits for political and religious violence and radical Islamic movements like ‘*Boko Haram*’ (see Hoechner 2014a).<sup>7</sup> However, little empirical work backs these accusations up or explores on what terms the *almajirai* actually engage with other members of society. In my research, I sought to shed light on these questions by investigating how the *almajirai* position themselves in society, how they deal with poverty and exclusion and stunted future prospects, and how they relate to others in society, including the better-off. In this context, understanding the terms on which I could relate to them helped me develop a better understanding of how their relationships with other (privileged) members of society work, where sources of frustration may lay, and what arrangements the *almajirai* strive for.

I occupied several different subject positions in my relationships with the *almajirai*. I not only gradually learned to be an employer and ‘patron’ for them, as hinted at in the opening vignette; I also inadvertently found myself in the roles of ‘accomplice’ of elite behaviour, and of ‘go-between’ negotiating access for my ‘informants’ to spheres of society otherwise inaccessible to them. The following pages explore these positions, starting with that of ‘accomplice’. Firstly, I argue that occupying a different place in social and socioeconomic hierarchies than research participants can potentially be productive for research in that it can help us gauge how hierarchical relationships are constructed within society more widely. For example, by living as part of the local elite during part of my fieldwork, and by ‘complying’ to some extent with elite behaviour, I learned how northern Nigerian elites perceive the *almajirai*, and how status distinctions are maintained and justified in people’s daily interactions.

Secondly, I demonstrate that embracing socioeconomic and status differences as a central element of our research relationships may help us understand how poor people relate to richer members of society in their attempts to fulfil their daily needs. By being incorporated into the

*almajirai*'s survival strategies as a 'patron', I learned what patronage relationships entail more generally in northern Nigerian society.

Thirdly, I argue that we can use our privileged position to act as a go-between and to negotiate access for research participants to domains of society that they would otherwise be excluded from. By discovering what realms of society the *almajirai* would have remained left out from without my intervention, I learned to better gauge the nature of the exclusion they are living through within their own society. My role as a go-between involved not only negotiating access to particular spaces for the *almajirai*, but also making situations legible by way of translating (from English into Hausa, see below).

The next section introduces the *almajiri* system in more depth and the particular challenges I faced trying to construct ethical and productive research relationships with the *almajirai*. After that, I describe the context – fraught with inequalities – in which the young *almajirai* find themselves. The remainder of the paper then describes my role as researcher in this context. I conclude by reflecting on the implications of researchers' subject positions as potential 'accomplices', 'patrons' and 'go-betweens' for their relationships with research participants and for the insights they can gain.

### **The *almajirai*: at the lower end of socioeconomic and educational hierarchies**

To understand the intricacies of my relationships with my 'informants', it is important to understand their precarious position within society. Mostly poor rural families use the 'traditional' Qur'anic school system, which exists across Muslim West Africa. Such families often have few alternative educational choices as the 'modern' schooling accessible to them tends to be both poor in quality and financially burdensome. Whereas participation in the

‘modern’ education system makes it difficult for rural children to help their parents farm, the *almajiri* system is well adjusted to agricultural work rhythms, allowing students to return home during the farming season.

The *almajirai* live with a Qur’anic teacher, often for several years. The youngest students are of primary school age, the oldest in their early twenties. Many schools, which operate beyond the state’s purview and regulatory interventions, lack physical infrastructure beyond a canopied forecourt where the teaching takes place, compelling their students to cohabit other spaces like mosques or neighbours’ entrance halls (*soro*). Studying exclusively the Qur’an, they find themselves excluded from ‘modern’ forms of knowledge – including ‘modern’ religious knowledge – and the status that comes with it. Lacking alternative means of livelihood, many students beg for their food, which relegates them to the bottom of social hierarchies. Students also find employment as domestic workers. As many women live secluded (*purdah*), they depend on children as go-betweens for their transactions with the world outside their compounds. Yet, payment for such work is often minimal, and while some *almajirai* develop very close and symbiotic relationships with their employers, others report instances of abuse and condescending treatment.

Across West Africa, ‘traditional’ Qur’anic school students have become the subject of much public concern in the context of increased attempts to achieve universal primary education and concerns about child welfare. Children’s rights’ advocates tag them as ‘abandoned’, ‘trafficked’ and ‘exploited’ (see Perry, 2004). The push by Islamic reform movements for the formalisation of religious learning has put ‘traditional’ Qur’anic schools under strain to assert their legitimacy (e.g. Ware, 2014). In Nigeria, the presumed role of Qur’anic schools as recruitment grounds for radical groups has become a recurrent theme in the context of the ‘*Boko Haram*’ crisis.



Meanwhile, demand for *almajiri* education persists. Structural factors constraining the opportunities available to poor peasant households play an important role in fueling this demand. The decline of the rural economy due to the oil boom and structural adjustment combined with the onset of massive demographic growth in Nigeria, with the population more than quadrupling since 1950 (United Nations, 2009). This has contributed to the perpetuation of both poverty and educational disadvantage, especially in rural areas. Faced with such constraints, families make sense of their decisions to send their children to live as *almajirai* in the urban centres with reference to their high regard for Qur’anic learning, and the educational value of a certain degree of hardship for the social and moral training of their children (e.g. Last, 2000; Ware, 2014).

Reliable statistics on the total number of *almajirai* or the percentage of all young people they represent do not exist. The available data – published by the Ministerial Committee on Madrasah Education – estimate that more than 9.5 million children in Nigeria attend Qur’anic schools, 8.5 million of which in the northern part of the country (UBEC, 2010). However, as these data do not distinguish between ‘boarding’ students (*almajirai*) and day students (who live with their parents, potentially attend secular/*Islamiyya* education in parallel, and who include girls), it is difficult to determine the number of *almajirai* among them.

### **Northern Nigeria: inequalities and practices of exclusion**

Huge inequalities characterize everyday life in Nigeria today. According to World Bank estimates, over 38% of income in Nigeria was held by the richest 10% of the population in 2009 whereas the poorest 10% needed to make ends meet with less than 2% of income (World Bank, n.d.). Regional disparities are large, but also within regions the gulf between rich and poor is

growing wider (e.g. Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2010). Such massive disparities unfailingly leave their mark on people's everyday experiences and relationships. Northern Nigerian Hausa society is moreover very status-conscious and fairly strict rules about what constitutes status-appropriate behaviour hedge status distinctions. While material wealth is not the only determinant of high status (age, gender, caste origin and religious erudition also matter), often the two coincide.

Bit by bit, I came to understand during my time in Kano how status claims are constantly performed and negotiated in people's daily interactions. People's access to space probably expresses their social position most powerfully (see Robson, 2006: 669). Gender plays a crucial role for how people utilize space, as northern Nigeria is characterized by one of the strictest regimes of female seclusion/*purdah* to be found within the Islamic world. Most married women live in *purdah* and adult men rarely enter the compounds of other men. But wealth and origins also regulate people's access to certain spaces, and guarded gates have become increasingly widespread among the affluent.

While being hosted for several months by the household of the traditional ruler of a small rural town I call Rijiya, I had the occasion to learn about some of the practices and politics surrounding access to space. Whereas other people's compounds in this rural town were open to everyone who was female, young, or both, unwritten rules regulated access to the traditional ruler's house (which would potentially be sanctioned by whiplashes from the guard). *Almajirai* were not allowed to enter the compound to beg for leftover food (left-over food was however distributed before the gates). While men do not usually enter other men's compounds, visits to the entrance hall (*soro/zaure*) are common. Yet, entering the traditional ruler's entrance hall was a privilege reserved to select visitors.

Living with the traditional ruler also taught me about the politics of food. In Hausaland, often the language of food is used to express social relationships. 'Not to eat is to experience

what it is to lack power,' Last writes (2000: 374). Food preparation and distribution are highly political (e.g. Robson, 2006: 671). While living with the traditional ruler, I learned how status is expressed through access to food. Two different meals were prepared in the household at any time – a 'better' one for the inner circle of household members (including me), and a cheaper one for the household's entourage: its servants, clients and protégés. Visitors would be offered either the one or the other, depending on their status.

Language is another means through which hierarchies are fabricated, an insight I gained during my time in urban Kano. Many of the people I interacted with in Kano used language as a means of exclusion and differentiation. Language use – just like conspicuous consumption – has gained importance as a means to mark status in the context of urbanisation and demographic growth. Unlike in a village context where nearly everyone knows nearly everyone's family background, in an urban environment, anonymity characterizes many encounters. Being able to demonstrate one's social status through language comes in handy. One's use of language inevitably reveals one's educational and social background. For example, what is a '20 Naira' note in urban Kano is, with reference to the picture of General Murtala Muhammad on the obverse, 'one Murtala' amongst the largely innumerate inhabitants of rural Rijjya.

Access to knowledge of different languages is stratified. The children of the elite in Kano may be schooled in French, speak English with their mother, converse in Arabic with their father and learn Hausa from their nanny. This was proudly brought home to me by one of my elite interviewees. Hajiya Fatima Bello Aliyu, who was Special Advisor to the Governor on Child Welfare under the Shekarau administration (2003-2011) in Kano State, lamented how difficult it was to prepare one's children adequately for today's 'competitive world'. At the same time, a child attending primary school in a rural area in Kano State is likely to be taught by a teacher who himself hardly speaks English. Three out of four primary school teachers in Kano lack even basic English literacy (Johnson, 2011). Showing one's mastery of prestigious

and hard-to-attain forms of knowledge instantaneously creates a hierarchy. Despite me answering back in Hausa, some people would insist on speaking English to me despite the presence of others, including *almajirai*, who clearly did not speak enough English to follow the conversation. How could I as a researcher navigate such treacherous terrain?

### **Being an accomplice**

Being swiftly ‘adopted’ into the local elite in Kano meant that I inadvertently participated in power structures that I could not easily challenge. My wish to be a good and appreciative guest sometimes conflicted with my wish to interact with my informants and people I had grown close to in an egalitarian manner and to obliterate barriers of status. In my home culture, status differences are commonly considered legitimate only if some meritocratic (sounding) argument can be found to justify them. Open invocation of low birth, gender, or low income as a justification for status subordination is not usually considered acceptable.

In the household of the traditional ruler in Rijiya, as a generously hosted guest I accommodated myself to certain status distinctions, even though they made me feel uncomfortable at times. For example, the particular regime of access to this compound described above made it impossible for me to receive guests as I wished. One of the Qur’anic teachers who, I think, cherished my visits to his school and compound, told me that because I was part of their ruler’s household, it was impossible for him to reciprocate my visits. Sometimes, if they argued convincingly that they had good reasons to come see me, the *almajirai* I was teaching were allowed into the compound. For fear that they would be turned away, or that their presence would disturb my hosts, I preferred to arrange for us to meet outside of the compound though. Also, I was concerned about the potential inequalities and tensions I

might create among the *almajirai* by intervening on behalf of some (whom I knew better) and not of others. To smooth things over, I decided not to interfere with the prevailing space practices.

The same was true for the politics of food. Whereas I received the ‘better’ of the two meals that were prepared every day, the *almajirai* working in the traditional ruler’s household routinely received the cheaper one. Could I have invited them to share my plate without stepping on my hosts’ toes? My hosts would unfailingly have understood the message of such an act as a criticism of how they treated their employees, even if I didn’t mean it as such. In the end, I shared my food rarely, and was relieved every time a member of the traditional ruler’s family encouraged me to eat in the intimacy of the compound’s private rooms, where at least the *almajirai* would not see me eating my ‘better’ meal.

While I felt uneasy about complying with certain practices that my status as temporary ‘member’ of the local elite entailed, this status also offered me insights into how some northern Nigerian elites think about the *almajirai*, and helped me understand how treatment that the latter perceive as demeaning comes about. For example, the *almajirai* in my research lamented frequently that they were given food perceived as second-class or even on the brink of spoiling, including in the houses where they work. It was instructive to witness ‘from the other side’ of the wealth and power gulf the treatment that the young people in my research complained about. In one incident, for example, the 12-year-old son of a local elite family I visited frequently in Kano volunteered the proposition that rice leftover from the evening meal could be given to *almajirai* in case it had gone off the next morning (and thus become inedible for the household). His suggestion was apparently ingenuous and I do not think he meant any harm. Yet, it reveals how little he knew about the experiences of the boys to whom he wanted to give his food waste. It did not occur to him that the *almajirai* could feel disrespected if given food that others no longer considered apt for eating. To see just how far apart the reality and horizon of experience

of this local elite boy and that of the *almajirai* were helped me gauge the latter's sense of exclusion and misrecognition better.

To my relief, the *almajirai* I was close to did not necessarily consider me complicit with elite behaviour they experienced as unfair and demeaning (or at least they didn't tell me so), and on several occasions, such behaviour triggered conversations among us that allowed me to learn about their views. For example, after some *almajirai* had been turned away at the gate of the house of a well-off family in Kano without having been given a chance to explain their reasons for seeking access, we discussed the behaviour of Nigerian elites towards poor people more generally.

In sum, my proximity to local elites thus helped me understand their attitudes toward *almajirai*, which in turn helped me understand the *almajirai*'s experiences and frustrations about the treatment they receive from these elites. These insights were crucial for me to grasp the *almajirai*'s relative position within society and potential sources of tension between them and better-off members of society. However, the subject position of 'accomplice' always bore the risk that my informants perceive me as *actually* elitist – an attitude they looked upon critically.

What is more, it bore the risk that my behaviour inadvertently lend legitimacy to power structures I was ill at ease with, but which, as a guest, I did not feel entitled to criticize (cf. Lundström, 2010, who describes a similar dilemma using her own 'methodological capital' (a term she borrows from Gallagher, 2000), including her whiteness and heterosexuality, as means of getting access to the field). I thus tried to keep my public performances of this role to a minimum. The next role I consider is that of a patron.

### **Being a patron**

Readers have already met Aliyu, who worked as domestic in my compound, in the introduction to this paper. Like him, many *almajirai* relate to the women in the urban neighbourhoods of their schools as workers and ‘clients’.<sup>8</sup> Given that begging constitutes a rather fickle source of revenue, many *almajirai* work as domestics to ensure their daily survival.

As mentioned earlier, I had begun my fieldwork hoping I could ‘befriend’ the *almajirai*, and that we would somehow manage to bracket not only our gender, age and religious differences, but also the socioeconomic disparities between us out from our relationship. However, I soon came to realize that the *almajirai*’s hopes for our relationship were quite different from mine. If they sought me out, it was not only because they enjoyed our interactions, but also because I was a promising potential patron (cf. Crick, 1992: 177, who cautions against considering the relationships we engage in in the field as friendships. A ‘large range of pragmatic motives... might attract an informant to such a strange identity as an anthropologist.’ See also Rabinow, 1977: 34; Taylor, 2011). As they related in the same way to most other women in our middle/upper class neighbourhood, as they spoke very positively of some of these relationships, and as such relationships were crucial to their economic survival, I eventually gave up my resistance (see Author, 2014b, for a more extensive discussion of patronage relationships in the *almajirai*’s lives).

Over the course of my fieldwork in urban Kano, I employed not only Aliyu for long stretches of time, but also Ismaila (who became a particular close employee–‘informant’) and, on an ad-hoc-basis, various other *almajirai* from the neighbourhood, to fetch water for me or to run an errand. What kinds of insights can research relationships with such a blatant power differential built into them yield? Most prominently, employing *almajirai* taught me how patronage relationships work in northern Nigeria and in the lives of the *almajirai*. Over time my relationship with Aliyu and Ismaila developed into a familiar ‘protector’ – ‘protégé’ bond.

Within the Hausa cultural vocabulary, we became *uwar gida* (lit.: mother of the house) and *ɗan gida* (lit.: son of the house). Even though I was a raw recruit to patronage, from how the *almajirai* acted/reacted towards me, I could gauge more or less what such relationships within the Hausa cultural repertoire usually entail. Ismaila, for instance, would take me to his parents' house for the Muslim holiday *Sallah (Eid al-Fitr)*, visit me to chat if I had been away for some days, carry my bag if he met me on the street, ask for English lessons, and approach me for support for his education/business plans. He would also negotiate that he and his friends could sleep in our entrance room during the months of the rainy season. Being made part of the *almajirai*'s 'patronage network' in this way helped me understand the kinds of relationships *almajirai* develop more widely with women belonging to a different social class.

Of course, there were also downsides to embracing the socio-economic difference between us as central element of our relationship. For instance, in matters concerning money I wasn't always sure to what extent the *almajirai* were strategic with the information they shared with me to be sure I would not withdraw my own support or my promises of support in the future (cf. Crick, 1992). Aliyu for example, who had never attended secular education, wished to enrol in primary school. The first time we discussed the matter, he told me that the household in whose entrance hall he slept, and for whom he fetched water every morning, had agreed to pay for his expenses. Yet, as my departure approached and I enquired about the state of affairs, he voiced concerns about the actual commitment of his employers. 'Some people don't stick to their promises,' he declared. I couldn't help wondering whether Aliyu was being strategic with his comments to make sure I would pay for his schooling as I had once proposed.

Also in other instances, the *almajirai* withheld information from me – for example about their discontent about how I managed the finances of the participatory film project we pursued together (see Hoechner, 2014c, 2006). They were afraid to displease me, I learned later, and to thereby jeopardize my support for their future projects. While I cannot be sure that I have



grasped in all instances how money affected the dynamics between us, at least these experiences helped me understand how little trust the *almajirai* were accustomed to put in the commitment of their patrons, making it necessary for them to ‘strategize’ (cf. Bleek, 1987, who makes a case for analysing informants’ lies and their circumstances in their own right).

To summarise, as a ‘patron’, I learned from the inside about the rules and expectations underpinning patronage arrangements in northern Nigeria, one of the principal ways in which poor youths like the *almajirai* relate to wealthier members of society, and to older women in particular. The fervour with which the *almajirai* sought to enter into patronage arrangements – presumably their best bet for social advancement – brought moreover to light how few other opportunities there are for the *almajirai* to achieve upward mobility. While my role as a ‘patron’ prompted the *almajirai* to stress their needs in their interactions with me, and to carefully avoid creating any tension in our relationship, this behaviour brought home to me just how central patronage relationships are to their daily survival. The next section explores the third role I occupied in my relationships with the *almajirai*: that of a ‘go-between’.

### **Being a go-between**

Reflecting on his fieldwork experiences on the Zambian Copperbelt, James Ferguson (1999) challenges the idea that research participants are necessarily competent ‘insiders’ of their own society. ‘The locals’, he argues, do not unfailingly understand what is going on and in this resemble the researcher or ‘outsider’. Many fieldwork places are characterized by cacophony, by ‘diverse social microworlds, and discordant frames of meaning’. According to Ferguson, the question becomes then ‘not who is an insider and who is an outsider... but rather which of the bits floating in the swirl of events does any given social actor ‘get’...

Anthropological understandings must take on a different character when to understand things like the natives is to miss most of what is going on' (Ferguson, 1999: 208).

In a context where inequalities are as pervasive as in Nigeria, shaping people's everyday lives and horizons of experience, Ferguson's observations are particularly pertinent. There were various domains within Nigerian society that the *almajirai* were thoroughly excluded from, despite being 'members' of that society – but which were accessible to me thanks to my 'methodological capital', namely that I was white, 'modern'-educated, and at the upper end of the socio-economic spectrum. Paradoxically, in certain situations, I 'got' more of 'the bits floating in the swirl of events' than my *almajirai* 'informants'.

In several instances, my presence served to facilitate access for some of the *almajirai* to segments of Kano society that would otherwise have eluded them. I had rights of entry – and the power to negotiate access for *almajirai* – for instance to the Kano Ministry of Education (to which I was associated in 2009) to which some *almajirai* accompanied me when I presented my research findings. As discussed earlier, I could negotiate access to the traditional ruler's compound in Rijiyia if I decided to. As the traditional ruler and his family aroused the *almajirai*'s interest (What was his wife like? Was it true that his grandson...?), being allowed inside the walls of the grand compound was quite something. With the boys participating in the film project I went to the compound of a wealthy Lebanese friend whose imposing gate we filmed. I could be a bridge to transcend the geographical boundaries separating the lives of people from different socio-economic strata at least for a short time.

Finally, I could play a role as go-between and translator language-wise. Hammersley and Atkinson argue that '[e]xpertise and knowledge may... be of value in the field as a basis for establishing reciprocity with participants' (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007: 69). By speaking English, and enough Hausa to piece together, with the help of a dictionary, rough translations of most of the expressions asked of me, I assumed a strange position as outsider with insider

knowledge of and access to a different community of meaning, who could bestow, to some extent, meaning upon everyday experiences. I could be approached for help to decode messages floating in the *almajirai*'s social environments. After the English lessons I organised for *almajirai* in my rural fieldsite Rijiyi, for example, the *almajirai* regularly presented me with vocabulary lists assembling an eclectic mix of English expressions for which they wanted translations. These were words they pick up from various places: from the scribbled notebooks of friends attending secular school, from the imprint on the back of a Western-style second hand t-shirt, from bits of discarded newspaper, from scraps of conversation they overhear on the streets or on the radio, and from sentences thrown at them by secular-educated youngsters in the neighbourhoods of their schools. English has an ineluctable presence in everyday life in northern Nigeria today, even through many people are excluded from access to it. By helping out with translations, I was not so much granting access to 'my' world as making 'their' world legible to the *almajirai* and other people around me.

Yet, my presence may also have triggered experiences of exclusion: meeting me led various people to switch to English (and to stick to it even if I answered back in Hausa), be it to accommodate me, be it to make status claims. As far as accessing 'higher status' segments of society is concerned, the *almajirai* were, I think, quite aware that much of the access they were granted would be temporary and dependent upon my intervention. Did my interventions on their behalf raise their awareness of what it was they were missing out on? As I offered fairly early on to sponsor the secular education of the *almajirai* I was close to, they started indulging in quite high educational and professional aspirations. These carry the risk of being disappointed, as my means to support them in their plans are obviously limited.

To sum up, requests for translations and finding myself in the role of negotiating access for the *almajirai* to spaces and people they did not usually have access to made me aware of where the *almajirai*'s 'social microworlds' ended. This was an important insight as I was trying

to understand their relative position in society and horizon of experience. Moreover, their requests for translation / mediation made me understand what knowledge and spaces they were usually excluded from. As I was interested in understanding what being poor meant to them, it was important to understand which situations triggered experiences of exclusion. Finally, by acting as ‘go-between’ and making new experiences and knowledge possible, I could to some extent return the favour the *almajirai* did me by participating in my research. To what extent, however, my negotiations on their behalf have raised the *almajirai*’s awareness of other people’s privileges – and in turn their own sense of being left out – I do not know.

## **Conclusion**

How – if at all – can we manage the dynamics resulting from large socioeconomic differences between ourselves as researchers and our research participants in a way that is productive for research and ethical at the same time? This is the question I pursued in this paper. Recounting my experiences conducting research with *almajirai*, ‘traditional’ Qur’anic students in Kano, Nigeria, I explored the challenges of establishing research relationships with informants whose social and socioeconomic status was significantly lower than mine. I considered in turn my role as an ‘accomplice’ of elite behaviour, as a ‘patron’ for my informants, and as a ‘go-between’ facilitating access for them to otherwise inaccessible ‘social microworlds’.

Inequalities of social and socioeconomic status are a fact to contend with, for example because they may imply that ‘informants’ seek patronage from us rather than ‘friendship’ (or other forms of more coequal relationships conforming to local gender norms). By virtue of our social/socioeconomic status, as researchers we may be insiders of certain domains within

society that other members of society, including our research participants, are excluded from. We may be easily admitted to the local elite whereas this is impossible for our research participants. Thanks to our education, we may be able to decode situations that research participants fail to comprehend. This puts us in a privileged position. We may for example be able to act as translators for research participants, making otherwise incomprehensible situations legible. Also, we may act as go-betweens and negotiate access to domains within their society that participants of low socioeconomic status or without mainstream education would not otherwise be granted access to. Large socioeconomic and educational inequalities break down to some extent the conventional boundaries between ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’. They redefine the criteria for membership in particular ‘social microworlds’ within society.

What does this imply for our relationships with research participants? First of all it implies that certain power imbalances and inequalities between research participants and researchers may be inevitable. Patronage relationships are necessarily unequal. Being able to act as go-betweens also puts researchers in a position of power. We may use this power to facilitate new experiences for research participants, and to negotiate access for them to terrain that would otherwise be off limits. However, participants may experience such ‘temporary access’ ambiguously if it is removed from them after the researcher leaves. Finally, being close to (and potentially complicit with) local elites bears the risk that ‘by doing similarity’ (Lundström, 2010: 83), i.e. by imitating the behaviour of the locally powerful, we inadvertently lend legitimacy to exclusionary practices. It is important to ask, as Lundström (2010: 78) suggests, ‘[w]hose stories of exclusion are silenced’ – at least temporarily – when we use our ‘methodological capital in order to get access’ to the field.

What do inevitable status differences between research participants and researchers imply for the insights we can gain? My training as a ‘patron’ for my informants taught me what patronage relationships entail more generally in northern Nigerian society. Being an insider

within domains of society that my research participants were excluded from, and being able to act as a go-between for them, helped me gauge how hierarchical relationships are constructed within society more widely. It also helped me better understand the nature of the exclusions they are living through, not least because my subject positions as insider and go-between triggered conversations between us about the set-up of society and about the values held by different segments. A critical awareness of the place we occupy within status hierarchies may thus, in the end, be more beneficial for our research relationships than attempts to obliterate status differences, which are, moreover, likely to be futile.

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<sup>1</sup> I changed or removed the names of informants where I felt it necessary to protect their identity.

<sup>2</sup> While in certain respects, being a woman limited my options, in other respects, it was an asset. On balance, many more persons and spaces are considered off-limits for a man than for a woman in northern Nigeria. The ‘only’ restrictions on female mobility are those ordained by ‘shame’ (*kunya*) and those imposed by male ‘guardians’. Endowed with an imaginary *carte blanche* from my ‘guardians’ back home (who apparently had allowed me to come to Nigeria on my own), unmarried (and thus not bringing shame to a potential husband visibly not in control of my movements), and non-Muslim (and thus less bound by what people considered Islamically ordained), I could be close to a wide range of people (cf. Papanek, 1964).

<sup>3</sup> Hammersley and Atkinson’s reference work ‘Ethnography: principles in practice’ (2007) for example discusses researcher positionality thoughtfully and at length, but does not mention socioeconomic status with a single word (pp. 73-9).

<sup>4</sup> This is not to say, of course, that ‘informants’ cannot also exercise power over researchers. For instance, ‘informants’ can tell lies, give elusive or misleading information, cancel appointments, and make researchers wait (cf. Rabinow, 1977: 40 et seqq.).

<sup>5</sup> cf. Bleek, 1979: 202, who writes that to his Ghanaian informants “‘a poor European’ was too absurd a thought to be acceptable.’

<sup>6</sup> Given the massive cuts of funding for academic research in many Western countries, for many anthropologists this no longer holds true though.

<sup>7</sup> The name ‘*Boko Haram*’, which most commentators translate as ‘Western education is forbidden’, is widely used to refer to the northern Nigerian Islamist insurgency group, which gained notoriety for its repeated attacks on secular educational institutions, including the spectacular abduction of 276 schoolgirls from a secondary school in Chibok in April 2014. For a history/overview of the group, see e.g. Higazi (2015).

<sup>8</sup> Not all urban schools of *almajirai* are located in wealthy neighbourhoods, but most students come into contact with people from more privileged segments of society, not least because such houses are more likely to afford domestic workers.

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