

## The Phenomenon of Almajiri System of Education in Northern Nigeria

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**Abstract:** *The practice of Almajirinci as “street begging” often done by children in the name of seeking Islamic education has featured prominently in discussions, particularly in the north of the country. It has been a subject of great concern to the authorities. Almajiri system of education started from time immemorial in the Northern Region of Nigeria. The rumpiled street children, mostly young boys between the ages of three and twelve, have become a terrible blight in Nigeria. The study adopts the qualitative research model using a phenomenological case study approach. This paper seeks to examine how the process started; the various dimensions the system took overtime and how government came in to rescue the deteriorating state of the system by integrating the system with the modern system, thereby making the beneficiaries (Almajirai) learn both the Almajiri education and the modern educational system simultaneously. In the end, the paper offers suggestions as to how the system could be improved so as to meet the standard set by National Policy on Education and subsequently attain Education for All (EFA).*

**Keywords:** Northern Nigeria, Almajiri Educational System, National Security , Violent Extremism

## **Introduction**

Most sprawling cities and squalid seminaries in northern Nigeria are populated by itinerant Qur'anic pupils known as almajirai. The rumpled street children, mostly young boys between the ages of three and twelve, have become a terrible blight in Nigeria. Generations upon generations, there is no end to the sight of young children of school age roaming the streets in a quest for survival. As an age-old tradition, these kids are popularly called 'Almajiri' - children from poor homes usually sent to Islamic boarding schools. Formal education remains a far cry for thousands of these children (Nextier SPD, 2020, para. 1). Almajiranci connotes the state of being almajiri (plural almajirai); and almajiri refers to a disciple of the Islamic knowledge. Today, almajiranci has taken a different dimension compared to the original concept behind the practice. Instead of the disciples seeking knowledge; they are conditioned to engage in undesirable acts which mold them into criminality. Consequently, quite a number of almajirai became violent with obvious hate for the larger society (Abdullahi & Mohammed, 2020).

The Almajiri system of education as practiced today in northern Nigeria is a completely bastardized system compared to the form and conditions under which the system was operating and its output during the pre-colonial period. The system has been forced, especially with the coming of the British, to its present pitiful state. During the pre-colonial era, begging was never involved and certainly the pupils were not reduced to doing menial jobs before they could eat (AbdulQadir, 2003).

Put into perspective, Nigeria has about 13.2 million out of school children. In West Africa, Nigeria accounts for 45 per cent of out-of-school children. 69 per cent of the out-of-school in Nigeria are from Northern Nigeria, with 60 per cent of them comprising girls. The number of out-of-school children in Nigeria has increased from 10.5 million in 2010 to 13.2 million in 2015. Some of the contributive factors to this issue is the protracted violent conflict in Northeast Nigeria. The destruction of schools by insurgents, forced displacement, and the volatile nature of the region that has grossly impacted accessibility to primary education in the area (Nextier SPD, 2020).

The almajiri system requires collective action. This should involve both the federal and state governments to map out a holistic policy action to address the issues around almajiri system. Also, traditional and religious institutions have a vital role to play, considering that the practice is deeply rooted in cultural and religious sentiments. Governmental actions can only provide the capacity for reforms; it will require the collaborations of relevant stakeholders, including the Northern elites, for meaningful impact to be achieved and sustainability guaranteed. Without a comprehensive policy initiative, the almajiri children remain the evidence of dearth of social security for citizens of the country (Nextier SPD, 2020).

## **Conceptualizing Northern Nigeria**

The north of Nigeria is an area rich in natural solid minerals and agricultural potential. It is home to around 60 per cent of the country's population (National Census, 2006). It covers nearly two-thirds of Nigeria's landmass – approximately 711,828 square kilometers (NBS, 2011) and is twice the size of Germany. Until the first cycle of state creation in 1967, this area was officially designated the Northern Region. However, the history of Nigeria's regions and states is sensitive and complex, and therefore the current classification of 19 of the 36 federal states as 'northern', specifically those lying in the middle of the country, is not without contention. The inclusion of the region's southernmost parts under the label 'the north' has periodically been

resisted by the mostly non-Hausa communities living there. There is a preference for the term 'Middle-Belt' to describe the area that runs from Kwara, through the Federal Capital, Abuja, and down to Benue State (Hoffmann, 2011).

The Hausa, Fulani and Kanuri are the largest groups in northern Nigeria and are predominantly Muslim. The Muslim population is concentrated in the far northern states but significant numbers of Christians also reside in these states. There are about 160 smaller ethnic groups across northern Nigeria that are mainly Christian along with a considerable percentage that follow traditional religious practices. Most of the northern population, about 70 per cent, lives in rural agrarian communities but historically significant urban centres such as Kaduna, Kano, Maiduguri, Sokoto and Zaria have attracted diverse people from all over the country (Hoffmann, 2011).

Northern Nigeria continues to display some of the worst human development indicators in the world. In northeast Nigeria, 71.5 per cent of the population lives in absolute poverty and more than half are malnourished, making it the poorest part of the country. Insecurity, desertification and flooding have interrupted farming activities, the main source of income for most northerners. Forty per cent of Nigerian children aged 6–11 do not attend any primary school, and it is northern Nigeria that has the worst school attendance rates, especially for its girls (DFID, 2012). The literacy rate in Lagos, Nigeria's bustling commercial capital is 92 per cent while in Kano, the north's commercial capital and Nigeria's second biggest city, it is 49 per cent. In the northeastern state of Borno, the epicentre of the Boko Haram insurgency, it is under 15 per cent (UNESCO, 2012).

### **The Almajiri Educational System**

The term Almajiri (Itinerant Qur'anic School Pupils) is derived from the Arabic word Al-Muhaajirun which connotes a migrant from Mecca (Abubakar & Agyeno, 2020). It has its root with Prophet Mohammed and his companions who migrated to Medina, running away from persecution in Mecca. Prior to colonial era in West Africa, the term evolved to refer to a traditional method of acquiring Islamic education through memorization and recitation of the Qur'an (Umar, 2013). Consequently, it became associated with young boys and young men who live under the tutelage of a Muslim teacher popularly known as Mallam to learn to recite the Qur'an. This meaning found its root in Northern Nigeria (Hausa/Fulani land) where young boys, at their tender ages, are sent out by their parents or guardians to other communities to acquire Qur'anic education under the supervision of a Mallam (Hoechner, 2018). It was considered a reliable and prestigious system of acquiring Islamic knowledge until the emergence of colonialism which brought alternative system of education. Since the post-colonial era, Almajiri system of education has continued to decline as the children are let loose to freely move around on the street to beg and engage in menial jobs. From the foregoing, it can be deduced that the Almajiri refers to migrant pupils usually between the ages of 6-18 from a Makarantar / Tsangaya that roam about the street in search of means of livelihood.

Northern Nigeria, specifically present day Borno State had contact with Islam as far back as in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. In history, Kanem, Bornu, Bagermi, and Wadai empires were part of the area called the Bilad Al Sudan stretching south to the northern rain forest in the sub-Saharan, east to the coast of the Red Sea and West to Senegal River (SIHA, 2015). As the peoples engage in trade, the religion was spread which created legitimate concerns for establishment of Qur'anic schools (AbdulQadir, 2003). The Northern communities in Nigeria considered the Almajiri

system of education as continuation of the tradition of the Prophet of Islam and a fulfillment of their religious obligation (Sadiqi, 2006). The Mallams survive from the benevolence of the rich people in the community as the schools were not tuition fee paying schools. Then, the Almajiri system of education was so successful that it produced revered scholars who became imams, mediators, Khadis (judges), counselors etc in the traditional Hausa/Fulani communities in Nigeria (Paden, 2005). This system of education flourished until the emergence of colonial rule in Nigeria.

Colonization era began in the early 1900 in Nigeria which saw a gradual diversion of colonial government interests towards Western education. AbdulQadir quoted in Kathleen et al (2019), aptly described the scenario when he noted that “the demise of the old Almajiri system in Northern Nigeria began with the supplanting of Koranic education with Western education”. Even at post-independence in 1960, several committees were instituted in Northern Nigeria to address the issues surrounding the decaying Almajiri system of education. One of the recommendations made by most of the committees was to include the system in the mainstream state education programme. Unfortunately, most of these recommendations were not implemented largely because of there was no political will to actually reposition the Almajiri system of education. As the country drift into poverty levels from the 1980s, it also had ripple effect on the locals’ ability to support the Mallams. The result was that the Mallams and the children had to fend for themselves. These Mallams had to encourage their respective students to engage in street begging. The proceeds from wandering are usually returned to their respective Mallams (Abubakar & Agyeno, 2020). The school environment is usually unfriendly, overcrowded and unhygienic (Hoechner, 2018).

The Federal Government of Nigeria (FGN) in 2012 set up a Committee on Implementation of Almajiri Education Programme and charged it with the responsibility of ensuring that the more than 9 million Almajiri are integrated into the Universal Basic Education (UBE) Programme (UBE Commission, 2012). Unfortunately much was not achieved through the UBE programme because it did not receive the support of the locals. Many Northern Nigeria parents still prefer to patronize the schools. The reason is largely driven by feelings that it is a religious obligation they must fulfill. The system is also preferred because it is affordable for the majority of the poor Northern population. Above all, there are conservative parents who believe that children learn faster when they are away from home. As a result of these factors, many of the Almajiri schools still flourish very well as there are high enrollments. However, because the Almajiri spends most of his time on the street, many of them eventually intermingle with criminals.

### **The Worsening Conditions of Almajiris**

The vicissitudes of street life have predisposed the Almajirai to delinquency for self-survival. In the urban space, the Almajirai mixed up with several youth demographic cohorts and delinquents such as the Yan-ci-rani (seasonal migrant youth), Yan auri (local hunters/vigilantes), Yan banga (criminal gangs), and Yan daba (violent youth delinquents) (Adesoji, 2011). The lack of food has made many of them vulnerable to diseases including COVID-19 infection. Some of them have resorted to theft and other crimes on account of material deprivations. Also, several Almajiri teachers have been arrested for perpetrating crimes such as homosexuality against their pupils and others. The Nobel laureate Wole Soyinka had referred to the Almajirai as the butchers of Nigeria following their growing participation in social violence. Also, Falola (1998) drew a

similar inference when he described the 1980 Maitatsine uprising in northern Nigeria as a revolt of the disinherited because of the role of Almajirai in the conflict where hundreds of people were killed. In addition, members of the Almajiri cohort have been forcefully conscripted as foot soldiers of jihadist groups in the Lake Chad region including the Boko Haram (Aghedo, 2017). However, despite the overwhelming evidence of Almajirai radicalization, Omeni (2015) argues that the street children are not as violent as they are often portrayed in mainstream narratives.

### **Almajiri and Boko Haram**

The origin of Boko Haram, otherwise known as Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Ladda', is not certain. Two likely assertions traced the sect back to 1995, when it was called sahaba which was led by one Abubakar Lawan, who later proceeded to University of Medina for studies, paving way for Yusuf's take over (Gomment & Esomchi, 2017). The second source traced the sect to Maitatsine of the 1980s (Ahizih, 2014). The relationship between the almajiri and Boko Haram is not farfetched, as demonstrated by Nigerians. The belief of most Nigerians is that Boko Haram is an Islamic terrorist group who proclaimed that Western education is a sin. This background is justified by the fact that the almajiri do not attend formal school.

According to Shehu (2012), there is basically nothing new in saying Boko is Haram. The perception that Boko is Haram has been with us since Boko (Western education) came to the North through Christian missionaries. Northern Muslims then, and some even now, feared the Christianization of their children if they enrolled them in Boko schools, hence the predominance of Almajiri schools. The products of these schools have often preached that Boko is Haram and in spite of this, decade after decade, the northern elites have allowed this system to flourish.

Onochie (2011) posits that almajiri and Boko Haram are now like primary school pupils graduating into secondary school. The two are inseparable and Boko Haram cannot exist without almajiri. If there is any difference between almajiri and Boko Haram, it should be a matter of semantics. Thurston (2013) reported that the violent Northern Nigerian sect Boko Haram drew some of its recruits from the almajiri. Other scholars noted that the almajiri system in Northern Nigeria made the intensive membership mobilization of Boko Haram easy (Odoemelam, Kidafa, Onyebuchi, & Agu, 2014).

Linking the almajiri to Boko Haram should worry every well-meaning Nigerian because this Islamic sect has been adjudged the latest and deadliest of its kind as observed by Odoma (2014), who equally acknowledged that the activities of the sect has greatly affected the economy of Northern Nigeria. The sect has claimed responsibility for numerous deadly attacks on police formations, communities, churches, banks, markets, military, media, United Nations Building in Abuja, beer palours, etc. Car bombs have been a relatively recent addition in their operational strategy. Two Nyanya motor park bombs in Abuja and a Kano motor park bomb in late 2013 are still fresh in our memories (Ahizih, 2014). The postponement of the 2015 general elections from February 14 and 28 to March 28 and April 11 on the ground of insecurity in the Northeastern Nigeria shows the gravity of the activities of Boko Haram in Nigeria. The shift in the general elections attracted heated controversies from members of the opposition political parties, Civil Society Organisations and International Organisations and community. Efforts at rescuing Chibok girls who were abducted from their school in Borno State did not yield positive result despite international concern.

Abuh (2015) observed that the rising insecurity in Northern Nigeria creates threat to economic and political stability. The spate of violence in the region, which has of late come

under attack by the members of Boko Haram Islamists group, has worsened in spite of the opportunities offered by the return to democracy. According to Onwumere (2013), those who are not from the North are worried that while the almajiri wander the streets in search of support from people, they pose a threat to national security as they could be vulnerable to the indoctrinations of the Boko Haram terrorist group. This shows a strong nexus between almajiri and Boko Haram. Abdulrafiu (2009) found that the problem with the current Boko Haram menace is unarguably traceable to the uncared for almajiri beggars who lost parental and governmental welfare. Another pre-disposing factor to the growing number of almajiri pupils in the North is the people's antagonism towards family planning and child spacing citing the hadith of Prophet Mohammed which says, "Go forth my congregation, get married and multiply so that I will be proud of you". But Adamu Sani, a veterinary doctor, says this aspect of the Hadith has been grossly misrepresented. He says that under Sharia, some of the basic rights of a child are food, shelter, clothing and education and so any parent who fails in this direction has an explanation to give before Allah (Abdulrafiu, 2009).

To establish the above assertions, the Northern Traditional Rulers' Council (NTRC) recommended that the only solution to the festering wounds inflicted on the North and its people by the activities of the dreaded Boko Haram sect is to ban the current almajiri system. The council also recommended that begging should be made an offence, as part of measures aimed at securing the Northern region from what it termed "sustainable socio-economic developments" just as it called on the federal government to apprehend, prosecute and punish those behind what it described heinous crime.

It is important to note that the three terrorist groups, Maitatsine, Yandaba and Boko Haram, have left so many Nigerians dead from their violent criminal activities. Almajiri interaction with these violent criminals can breed future terrorists drawn from almajiri which is capable of perpetuating endless terrorism in Nigeria.

The social network and contacts of the almajiris and the criminogenic influences from contacts cover a whole gamut of criminal groups which include but are not necessarily limited to the aforementioned. For instance, Aluaigba (2009) found that begging exposes the almajiri to all sorts of vile and deviant behaviors and immoral acts because they interact freely with people of low virtue like prostitutes, drug addicts and gamblers.

### **Ineffective Reforms of Almajiri**

The challenges posed by the Almajiri situation became more prominent during the COVID-19 lockdown. Some state governments went into panic-driven policy actions to ensure strict compliance. There were a back and forth deportation of hundreds of street children across some States of the country. However, the hasty moves did not solve the Almajiri crisis. Over the years, efforts by the government to effectively address the Almajiri syndrome have not succeeded. (Nextier SPD, 2020).

Policy measures to modernise and reform the Almajiri system have been rebuffed. In 2001, UNICEF underscored the need for individual northern States to eliminate the Almajiri phenomenon. This call was not heeded by the northern power elite. In December 2010, the Goodluck Jonathan administration came up with the National Framework for the Development and Integration of Almajiri Education into the Universal Basic Education. A total of 157 Tsangaya/Almajiri model schools were built across the country. However, the Ulama and several influential northerners were opposed to the educational reform because of its blend of secular

and Islamic curricula. Also, most parents see the hardships associated with the Almajirai as necessary for Islamic knowledge. Similarly, efforts by the current Kano State government to reform the Almajiri system were opposed by the Council of Ulama. Between late 2019 and early 2020, the Kano State government had placed a ban on street begging, employed additional 7,500 teachers, and offered free and compulsory education for all Almajirai across the State (Nextier SPD, 2020).

Therefore, any people-targeted project without their buy-in is bound to fail. The North East Development Commission (NEDC), state governments in the Northeast, must realise the importance of collaborating with religious and traditional institutions before the Almajiri system can be sustainably reformed. The principle of 'Do No Harm' must be adhered to ensure that intervention efforts for the Almajiri do not worsen the conditions it aims to improve. The Northeast states must work with civil society groups and faith-based organisations to identify stakeholders and spheres of influence in target communities. The Almajiri system is an ancient practice that dates back to the 11th century. The system is intricately tied to religion such that sensationalism can ruin policy actions targeted at reforming it (Nextier SPD, 2020).

### **Durable Solutions**

From the foregoing, the push and pull factors of the Almajiri practice must be addressed in order to sustainably redress the outdated phenomenon. The following recommendations should be considered in order to ensure a durable rehabilitation of the street kids.

1. The socio-economic wellbeing of women and children should be improved through effective empowerment interventions. The illiteracy of women and girls in northern Nigeria is higher than the national average. States in the north-east and north-west have female primary net attendance rates of 47.7 percent and 47.3 per cent respectively on account of deprivations and socio-cultural norms. This undermines women's capacity for informed choice over their children's welfare and education. Rather than a holistic development targeting the whole region, affirmative principle should be used for particular women's groups in northern Nigeria for empowerment which will promote their opportunity to earn income, recognition and independent voice.
2. There is need for effective birth control measures in northern Nigeria. The use of contraceptives and other birth-control measures have not resonated and gained significant acceptance in the region, leading to parents having children they cannot cater for. The practice of polygamy has also aggravated children's population in the region. A formidable campaign is needed to educate people on the need to have only the number of children they can cater for.
3. National and local pressures should be mounted on northern states to codify or domesticate the 2003 Child Rights Act. While most southern states have domesticated this federal law which criminalizes child abuse, 11 northern states have refused to codify the law. As a result, the Almajiri phenomenon remains fashionable in the region. Civil society organisations should take the lead in the campaign against northern government's opposition to the domestication of the Children's Rights Act.
4. There is need to ensure inclusion in the formulation and execution of Almajiri rehabilitation strategies. To ensure durable solutions to street children situations, rehabilitation policy should be crafted with, rather than for, the recipients and their stakeholders. In the past, policies aimed at redressing the Almajiri system had been

formulated and implemented with little or no in-puts by the recipients, their parents, their teachers and the Council of Ulama, leading to their opposition. Henceforth, critical stakeholders such as the intended recipients should be included in the formulation and implementation of the policies in order to ensure their buy-in.

## Conclusion

Finally, the Almajiri practice which had a noble goal at its inception in the 11th century has become a terrible security threat in Nigeria today. To address the phenomenon, the socio-economic wellbeing of the poor in northern Nigeria needs to be addressed. Also, birth-control measures and the domestication of the Children's Rights Act need to be popularized. However, these laudable measures can only succeed if the critical stakeholders in the Almajiri system are included in the crafting of policies to redress the scourge.

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