ALMAJIRI PHENOMENON: TURNING THE PRACTICE FROM BEING A MENACE TO ASSET

Rasaq Ayodeji Iliyas, Ph.D and Shola Sunday Olanipekun

Abstract
The phenomenon where multitude of children learning a religious knowledge in homes of scholars roam the streets with wretched bowls they use as instrument of begging for food called Almajiri has become a sore point of human civilization. Their huge number (over 9 millions) across the country, the security challenge facing the nation, the future of these untrained hardened children and the developmental bid of the country justify one’s fears. This work attempts a discourse of the Almajiri: its source, cause and the abuse in linking it to Islam. Implications of leaving the status quo to continue and the shining pride found in a few of them exposed to training are also reviewed. The discourse strongly canvasses for immediate transformation of the inhuman child rights abuse practice through carefully thought roadmaps which include legislation banning the practice, re-orientation of the Almajiri poor parents and a biometric census of the victims, among others, to facilitate processes towards making the victim useful citizens.

Key words: Almajiri, Mallam, Begging, Livelihood, National Development

The term ‘Almajirici’ refers to a practice of sending children, mainly boys, to places far away from the homes of their biological parents to learn the science of the Holy Qur’an and other knowledge about Islam from foster parents and teachers called Mallams. Almajiri denotes the children sent out on this knowledge seeking sojourn. The word Almajiri is described to have been derived from the Arabic word ‘Almuhajirun,’ meaning an emigrant (www.naijafoman, 2012). Although the source of the name is not replicated in the current practice, but for centuries in Nigeria (from pre-colonial) and some other African countries especially, are experiencing the practice of sending young male children to towns and settlements considered Centres of Islamic knowledge to learn (Ammani 2016). The practice of Almajiri has of late turned to become a social malaise due largely to economic downturn and the shift from communal living to self or capitalist modern society. So, it has become a huge social and security challenge to societies, mostly, in the Northern Nigeria where as much as about 9million young boys roam the street without any form of basic western-type education nor skill and begging perpetually for livelihood (Universal Basic Education Commission-UBEC, 2013).

Literature Review
It can be recalled that the Islamic religion and Islamic education predated Christianity and the western-type of education by centuries. It was designed to fit its recipient into his society since Islam is a complete way of life just like the traditional religion that preceded Islamic education also sufficiently prepared the youths then for the society(Jimoh, 2014).Muslim societies have evolved a system of organized government that took care of every sector including the education of the young...
ones in the pre-colonial era. Kanem Borno Empire was reported to have an Almajiri education system called Tsangaya (www.naijafoma.com, 2012). Then, the Tsangaya School was operated on the state fund raised essentially from a pro-rata annual religion offering called Zakat. Zakat is one of the pillars of Islam meant to bridge economic gap between the affluent and the poor masses. Payment of Zakat is 2.5% on prescribed minimum amount (contingent on Naira value in global market), which for August 2016 stood at one million six hundred and three fifty naira (or asset worth its equivalent) kept for a period of twelve calendar months (Nigeria Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs, NSCIA, August 2016). The source also added that the Almajiri pupils were fed by the host communities as admonished by the religious teaching and they earn other money from sources like utility services, leather tanning, trading, and cap weaving in centres like Maiduguri, Sokoto, Kano and Zaria among others. Significant among the contribution of the Almajiri in the earlier time was the development of ‘Ajami’ - that is, Reading and Writing in Arabic alphabets (Auwal, 1992, www.islamonline.net).

Okugbeni (2012) states that the name Almajiri has over time in the North, especially, acquired negative connotations as handicapped (natural/accidental/ostensibly), beggars for alms; a young pupil of Qur’anic school (5-19 years) living with foster parent- Mallam and begging for livelihood perpetually. It can as well refer to teenagers involved in laborious/obscene jobs for livelihood. Scholars (Ammani, 2016, Iliyas, Kurfi & Adio, 2016) submit that colonial disruption of native governance and colonialist influence bred individualism and modernism; economic down turn of the country and the larger effect of globalization continued to make the Almajiri dependent. No gains too to the self-serving motive of the Mallams (Almajiri hosts/teachers) who have turned these hopeless teenagers to source of income for their immediate family’s survival. They differently assert that the Almajiri these days, have little a time for learning, all they do is to beg perpetually. Yau (2000), and Hoechner (2012) allude to the fact that the all-time begging activities of the Almajiri was also as a result of the backlash effect of state policy, particularly the introduction of Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) in the 1980s, which worsened the precarious status in poor homes – Almajiri’s parents and those of their Mallams (teachers) that Okugbeni (2012) describes as state’s insensitivity to cultural realities of her people.

Okugbemi (2012), and Onitada (2015) classify Almajiri into three broad age categories as:

- Kolo (infants) - beg to earn a living
- Tiribiri (Adolescents) - beg to earn a living
- Garidi (Adults) - engage in laborious work to earn a living

Universal Basic Education Commission (UBEC, 2013) submits that destitute and other loose children other than Almajiri found in the North abound in the other parts of the country. The World Bank (2005) describes these children as vulnerable, who experience depressing chain of shock with every new state ultimately resulting in precarious new risks. Mertimer (2005) posits that these cadre of children are exposed to raw weather, ritual killing and sexual harassment. Okugbeni (2012) found that Almajiri are exposed to poverty, social exclusion (in real life and government policies), and negative labeling. Iliyas and Lawal (2016) state that they can become violent at will, resort to crimes, and they have been used severally as instrument of social strife. In all of these disturbing situations, it is evidently clear that the Almajiri begging practice does not derive from the religion of Islam. Although the Qur’an took into cognizance that there would be poor people as found in (Qur’an 93: 9-10), nonetheless, the prophet of Islam clarifies in an authentic saying reported in Shahih Buhari thus:

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By Him in whose hand my life is, it is better for anyone of you to take a rope and cut the wood (from the forest) and carry it over his back and sell it (as a means of earning his living) other than to ask a person for something and that person may give him (p. 372).

In yet another instance, the Sultan of Sokoto (2016) affirms it that the practice of child begging called Almajiri common in the North is un-Islamic ([www.talknigerian.com](http://www.talknigerian.com)). Scholars’ studies on these loose children have found the major causes nourishing the continuation of Almajiri practice to be poverty, ignorance, wicked parenthood, and very reckless family lifestyle and not religion (Mahuta, 2009; Oladosu, 2012, Okugbeni, 2012, Sabiu, 2016; Sultan 2016,[www.islamonline.net](http://www.islamonline.net)). Some highly spirited individuals and groups have put together sustained model combined education (Islamic & western-type) for Almajiri, which has been turning out quite promising citizens from the Almajiri. A classic example is that of Adamu Tilde, an Almajiri from Maiduguri, who in June 2016 scored CGPA 4.98 (M.SC) in Animal Biotechnology at the University of Szent Istvan Egyetem, Hungary ([www.linsaikejiblog.com/2016](http://www.linsaikejiblog.com/2016)). The young man was able to achieve the feat as a result of the opportunity of the right contact and exposure made available to him.

**Justification and Framework of the Study**

A discourse on transforming the Almajiri practice from the menace it has long become into becoming a national asset is like charting a path for national transformation and development. This is when not minding hypocritical lips service paid to controlling the inhuman practice by (especially) most Northern politicians and mischief makers, who have found those harumscarum boys useful to foment trouble and distort civil process. Studies like those of Okugbeni (2012), Onitada (2015), Abubakar and Njoku (2015), and Iliyas et al. (2016) have examined various angles from which the Almajiri menace could be tackled. This discourse guided by the finding of these and other studies offers a practical panacea to this ugly Almajiri practice as a form of working agenda for stakeholders on changing the Almajiri trend. To guide the discourse a framework designed by this author is presented thus:

![Figure 1: A Model of Almajiri Interactions Across Age-based Stages](image)

The framework represents the Almajiri at Kolo stage (4-13 years old) and the features of innocence common to that age range. That stage streamed into the Tiribiri stage (14-17 years of age), when the form of exposure and contact the Almajiri has creates significance, mark (s) on his attitude,
motivation and aspirations among others. The second stage dovetails into the third adult age, Gardi (17-22 years). The Almajiri at the third stage would have formed a life pattern as strictly dictated by his context, contact and exposure. He could become an asset of the Adamu Tilde type (who scored CGPA 4.98 in a Hungarian University), and he could have become hardened frustrated and despondent. The loop shows progression pattern and a continuum that a rescued trained Almajiri, absolutely, procreates children who may never experience the practice and vice-versa for the untrained.

Roadmaps for Almajiri Transformation

Drawing from the literature and interactions with Almajiri on the field on this and other studies, some roadmaps on changing these youths abuse are offered as follows:

i. A prevailing pattern of Almajiri clusters in identifiable homes across towns and settlements can be made to be of immense advantage since the targets are already gathered. Specific policies on human development programme for them will be easily implemented with a few or no attrition at all. To derive benefit from this, census of Mallams with their Almajiri wards must be biometrically captured, upon which purposeful planning can be based.

ii. There is an urgent need for clearly articulated legislation banning children beggars and fosterhood beyond ability to feed them. Every concerned States’ Houses of Assembly should expeditiously pass an act of parliament upon receipt of prompt Executive bill as a mark of responsiveness and being mindful of the implications of these hordes of beggars on the citizenry. This legislation should be implemented courageously and every potential obstacle to its implementation should be crushed through civil means so that opposition elements would not hijack the process to cause civil strife.

Curiously, a bold step towards this direction was the August 5, 2016 declaration by Kaduna State Governor Nasir Elrufai that from the following academic session (2016/2017), street begging would become an offence and that in Kaduna State parents/guardians of every out-of-school children would be tried and jailed (www.naijatrick.byethos5.com). Every other States can emulate this courageous patriotic and religious (Islam & Christianity) policy statement.

iii. If civil re-orientation of the populace would be the only one constitutional duty for traditional rulers in the Almajiri endemic States, it should by law. The 5% Local Government Area fiscal allocation share to these rulers monthly and other privileges would then be further put to use since they are custodian of tradition cum leaders of religion; and are heldin reference by the poor parents of Almajiri. These rulers can enforce a change of believe on their subjects and genuinely facilitate sanction when they are so mandated.

iv. Political office holders in the three tiers of government should move governance beyond campaign inspired services and be keen on building enduring legacies. Evidently, the Almajiri projects of the Federal Government of Nigeria from 2013-2015 that gulped hundreds billions of naira were colossal waste, a taunt of citizens’ intelligence, and a mockery of continuously exploding time bomb that Almajiri practice is. None of these buildings could be used because they were uncompleted, mostly without furniture, even the Sokoto site used by the President for commissioning was already shot, and most of the buildings have overgrown weeds and are collapsing for the sordid job done on them. The statement can be verified from Bida to Gumel, Kotangora, Sokoto, Katsina to Adamawa and so on. Money for the disused projects had gone down the drain, but the problem of Almajiri and other street urchins still persist regrettably.

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v. A carefully reviewed implementable curriculum contents for the Tsangaya schools should be outlined, especially the aspect on skills acquisition. Even though learning of trade skills are included in the present curriculum, but ironically, no single qualified personnel on these skills and materials are available. If it will be four trade skills like Carpentry, Bricklaying, Masonry and Auto-mechanic that would be presented per school, sufficient manpower and materials should be provided such that no pupil would suffer neglect. It is not compulsory the same trade or number of trades should be presented in all Tsangaya schools. However, waste and idleness should be avoided to really attain the ideal of the programme.

vi. Almajiri education, the Tsangaya schoolsystem is a most needed intervention priority that wealthy individuals, Non-Governmental Organizations, corporate bodies, and multinationals should urgently and continuously wade into to rescue these army of debased youths. With their intervention, this inter-generational predicament can be curbed and humanity raised to respectable state.

vii. Adult and non-formal teachers of Tsangaya schools should be highly motivated and routinely exposed to refresher training to enable them grasp the dynamic of their pupils and adequately make the Almajiri pupils fulfilled.

viii. Adequate, sustained and accountable funding of the Tsangaya education should be put in place, and a feedback mechanism built into the programme for data based evaluation and need-based reforms.

Conclusion

Continuous Almajiri practice portends greater danger for the country yet with Nigeria’s current experience with terrorism challenge of Boko Haram. Also, the segregation inherent in the classed division of growing youths and the future of these overwhelming untrained hardened youths with national aspiration and development are source of deep worry. In waking up to the demands of leadership, Nigerian leaders have to summon the will not to delay the needful any further and start now and now. This is because, if in every generation, over ten million men grow to become miscreants perpetually, the remaining hundreds of million citizens and indeed the whole humanity remain vulnerable. When every person gets an Almajiri, or any other urchin trained as contained in the Jomtiendeclaration-and framework for action on education for all (1990)- the consolidation of literacy and numeracy; the acquisition of basic life skills; and laying a foundation for continuous learning, - every potential human threat to humanity as a result of early life neglect and deprivation would have been turned to asset.

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