

The Almajirai System in The Face of Surging Security Challenges in Nigeria



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Abstract

The “Almajirai system” of children wandering the streets of northern Nigeria as destitute, criminals, and beggars has become a menace. It used to be a product of religion (Islam) but current studies and expose’ has revealed that Islam is fast disassociating itself from the “abashment.” The purpose of this essay is to examine the remote and immediate causes of the “modern Almajirai” system operational in Nigeria and how family, society, and government’s irresponsibility has continued to exacerbate the disturbing trend with a focus on its implication on Nigeria’s security architecture given the worsening security challenges in contemporary Nigeria.

Keywords: Almajirai; Poverty; Religion; Crime; Negligence

Introduction

For Nigerians born and bred in the North or any other person that is familiar with northern Nigeria, the word “Almajiri” is not queer. While some persons have ignorantly attributed Almajirai system of begging to Islam as part of its religious practice; prominent Islamic clerics, scholars, and elites have refuted the claims that the Almajirai system is a product of Islam. Professor Idris Abdulqadir in his 2003 Bayero University convocation ceremony stated that the Almajirai system of education in contemporary Nigeria is bastardized in its entirety in comparison to what was obtained in the pre-colonial era [1]. For the Sultan, Almajiri is synonymous with “begging” and is a function of hunger and poverty not a product of Islamic doctrine.

The Sultan remarked in the course of officiating the pre-Ramadan meeting of Jama’atu Nasril Islam Central Committee in 2017 [2]. In his words, “Almajiri system of begging is not representing Islam and must, therefore be dissociated from Islam” [3]. Almajiri is Arabic for “emigrant” derived from the word “Almuhajirum.” Almajiri is generally known as someone who goes to other places other than their homes and comfort zones in search for Qur’anic knowledge [4]. Many writers agree that “Almajiri” which originated from Arabic word Al-muahjir is the Hausa for a pupil in Qur’anic school [5]. For one of the greatest advocates of the Almajirai system Iman Shafi’I, “seeking knowledge away from home is vital for relief from sorrow and earning a livelihood, then knowledge, good manners, and friendship.” Prophet Mohammed was also reported to have said:

If anyone travels on the road in search of knowledge, God will cause him to go on one of the streets of Paradise. The angels will lower their wings in their great pleasure with one who seeks knowledge. The inhabitants of the heavens and the Earth and (even) the fish in the deep waters will ask forgiveness for the learned man. The superiority of the learned over the devout is like that of the moon, on the night when it is full, over the rest of the stars. The learned are the heirs of the Prophets, and the Prophets leave (no monetary inheritance), they leave only knowledge, and he who takes it takes an abundant portion. (Abu-Dawood: Hadith 1631) [6]. Shafi’I assertions corroborate Professor Idris Abdulqadir representation stated earlier that the Almajiri system was the perfect system in the pre-colonial era before its eventual degradation by British incursion [7].

There were an estimated 250,000 Almajirai in 20,000 Qur’anic schools as far back as 1900. By 1961, the number of Almajirai schools had increased to 27,600 with 423,000 pupils enrolled according to the census conducted by the government of Northern Nigeria [8]. Today, the enrolment rate has snowballed to millions. Though there is no statistic on the exact figure of Almajirai in Nigeria, it is estimated that over 9,000,000 of them roam the streets on a daily basis in search of necessities [9].

The Contemporary Almajirai System - A Function of Poverty or Islam?

The system is indeed a function of poverty! You wouldn’t find the children of the elites among the “Almajirai” because

they practically do not have reasons to roam the streets as destitute. Their taking shelters in the streets also make them extremely vulnerable to all forms of attacks while exposing them to unimaginable social vices. In the course of one of my visits to Borno state in 2017, I was surprised to see how these children wandered the streets of Maiduguri unchecked despite the many security challenges emanating from Borno and its ripple effects on north-eastern states of Nigeria. My “surprise” sprang up from the fact that parents could feel so comfortable having their children wander the streets in the face of so many dangers. They beg for food and alms and sleep anywhere they deem fit at night regardless of the dangers. If indeed, this system is an Islamic injunction and not a function of poverty and ignorance; it wouldn't be exclusive to the poor as we are witnessing today.

Although, some of the northern states are beginning to integrate the Qur'anic schools into basic education to encourage a mix of quality western education and improve enrolment rates. 2017 BCC report shows that Nigeria has the highest number of out of school children with 60% of these children being of northern extraction according to UNICEF [11]. The Global Report on out of school children say “poverty” is the most significant hindrance to education which is reflective in Nigeria where two-thirds of the children from impoverished homes are not in school; a contrast to 5% of children from affluent homes who aren't enrolled but hope to commence in the future [12].

International and Legal Frameworks on the Rights of the Child

Observational studies have shown that the Almajirai system in Nigeria is made up of persons between 18 years and below. These persons are legally referred to as children as enshrined in Article 1 of UN Convention on The Rights of the Child (CRC) (1989) and Article II of the Africa Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (1990). Nigeria ratified the provisions of the UN Declaration on the Right of the Child on 21st March 1991 under the military regime of Ibrahim Babangida [13]. The ratification implies that Nigeria becomes bound by the provisions of the Charter under International Law. However, the Charter was not domesticated until 2003 in the democratic regime of Olusegun Obasanjo with the enactment of the Child Right Act (2003) by the National Assembly.

In all three laws – the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) (1989), Africa Charter on the Right of The Child (1990), and the Child's Rights Act (CRA) (2003); the emphasis is the same. That is that in all decisions concerning the child his or her best interest should be the fundamental consideration. See Article III CRC (1989), Article IV Africa Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child and Section Child Right Act, 2003 [14].

The beauty of the “Law” is its capability of being enforced, and sanctions slammed on violators to serve as a deterrent. In other words, laws are ineffective when they only prescribe actions without sanctions. One of the greatest shortcomings of

International laws has been its poor and ineffective “enforcement mechanisms” [15]. For example, if an “act” let's say “murder” is criminalized, murderers wouldn't stop committing murder because murder has been codified as a “crime,” they may only be deterred if the consequences of committing murder is also spelt out and also seen to be enforceable and enforced in the event someone commits a crime. Thomas Hobbes in one of his early writings stated that “Covenants, without the sword, are but words and of no strength to secure a man at all” [16]. The sword here is the enforcement and sanction aspect of the law which when not applicable renders a law useless no matter how well enacted.

The law in the Face of Parental and Governance Failures

The only logical explanation for the reasons behind millions of unguided children taking care of themselves from a very tender age presupposes loss of family values, ignorance and government irresponsibility. Okay, let see what the constitution of Nigeria which is considered the ground norm says in S. 17 (3) (f) 1999 CFRN as amended – The state shall direct its policy towards ensuring that children, young persons, and the age are protected against any exploitation whatsoever, and against moral and material neglect [17]. Though this provision falls within the context of the non-justiciable rights, the government at all levels are responsible for the welfare of its citizens especially the young and aged population.

Though the CRC has been domesticated in Nigeria, 12 states are yet to adopt this law according to the chief legal officer of the National Human Rights Commission Mr. Kiyenpiya. These states are Adamawa, Bauchi, Enugu, Borno, Gombe, Kaduna, Kano, Katsina, Kebbi, Sokoto, Yobe, and Zamfara states [18]. This inaction is a failure on the part of “policy makers” in the states mentioned above. This explains why the contemporary Almajirai system which is abhorred in today's Nigeria is still prevalent in the north; since 11 of the mentioned states are in northern Nigeria. Let's go back to the provisions of CRC (2003) and analyze its provisions in the face of the unfortunate extreme hardship which the Nigeria “Almajiri child” is subjected to. While noting that these children have got nothing to call “childhood,” a right which every child is entitled; here is what Olusoji of UNICEF Nigeria said about the object of the CRA 2003:

Nobody is stopping anybody from having as many children as he or she wishes. However, the bottom line of the Child Rights Act holds that any child should and ought to have the basic and needed parental care which includes feeding, shelter, clothing, and training, among others [19].

Section 10(2)(3) CRA 2003 provides that- A child shall not be subjected to any form of discrimination merely by reason of his belonging to a particular community or ethnic group or by reason of his place of origin, sex, religion or political opinion [20]. Are Almajiri children subjected to discrimination? The

answer is “Yes!” The fact that they are from impoverished homes is one of the reasons they do not have access to basic amenities necessary for dignified living. Their parents don’t seem to care about their struggles, all they are interested in is, give birth to a male child in the face of desperate hardship and push him to Almajirai School where they are exposed to life’s struggles. They are also discriminated against based on their religious beliefs.

Many Nigerians that are not Muslims are yet to understand that “today’s almajiri system” is “un-Islamic” as stated by the Sultan. Ignorant Nigerians despise these children when they come to them for food or alms from their “understanding” of Islam which encourages begging. These children sadly indulge in begging because they lack parental and religious guidance with the government turning a blind eye to their plights.

S. 10 (3) CRA 2003 provides that -No child shall be subjected to any disability or deprivation merely by reason of the circumstances of his birth [21]. This provision serves as a foundation for the analysis in this section. So, we have to consider at this point whose responsibility it is to ensure the child is protected and cared for. Every member of the society is responsible for the care of the child starting from the home (members of the child’s family), institutions, Commission, government ministries, and NGOs.

Parents and where applicable, legal guardians shall provide guidance and direction in the exercise of these rights having regard to the evolving capacities and best interests of the child see S. 7(2) CRA 2003. What role do the parents of these children play in there upbringing? “None!” Regrettably, there is no known record of any of these parents that have been brought to book as stipulated by the law in states like Nasarawa, Plateau, Niger, Gombe and a few other northern states that have adopted the CRA Act. This action does not give any glimpse of hope to the children in the states where this Act is yet to be ratified. Again, we can see the nexus of governance and family dysfunction playing out in this scenario.

Every child has the right to free, compulsory and universal basic education and it shall be the duty of the government in Nigeria to provide such education. Every parent or guardian shall ensure that his child or ward attends and completes his primary and junior secondary education S. 15(1)(2)(a)(b) CRA 2003. This is yet another call to duty on parents and government. The government is expected to provide the facilities for education and also make them free for the benefit of the poor while the parents are responsible for ensuring that their children and wards attend these schools. How many Nigeria states are living up to this responsibility? According to Goodluck Jonathan, his administration built 165 Almajiri schools because the almajiri system became a barrier to the opportunities that should avail the almajiri child and also impact Nigeria’s developmental agenda negatively. He also stated that he was moved to tackle the problem of illiteracy ravaging the north with an estimated 80% of out-of-school Nigeria children from the north.

Because of government’s lack of interest in alleviating the despicable situation of the almajiri child, most of the almajirai schools which the Goodluck’s administration constructed with a whopping fifteen billion naira only (N15, 000,000,000.00) to integrate the system with conventional education are not serving that purpose. While some states converted the schools to full-fledged conventional schools, others didn’t care thereby leaving the facilities lying in ruins.

In the final analysis, the system of almajirai in Nigeria is thriving and will continue to thrive on parental, and governance inefficiencies and failures because they have shown significant unwillingness to live up to this provision of the Child Rights Act - every parent, guardian, institution, person and authority responsible for the care, maintenance, upbringing, education, training, socialization, employment and rehabilitation of a child has the duty to provide the necessary guidance, discipline, education and training for the child in his care or its care such as will equip the child to secure his assimilation, appreciation and observance of the responsibilities set out in Part II of this Act See S. 20 CRA 2003.

The Almajiri System Impacting Nigeria Security Architecture Negatively

The fact that children are being trained as terrorists and suicide bombers by most terrorist groups’ calls for concern; their activities have become fodder for the news with Nigeria not being an exception. There is a UN documentary of the Islamic State in Syria (ISIS) deployment of 362 children to fight its terrorist causes. These children are used for purposes ranging from combatant, spying, smuggling, beheading, and even suicide missions [27]. “On an almost daily basis, children are featured in multiple contexts, from highly publicized executions and training camps to Quran memorization fairs and dawa (charity) caravans.” In the face of intensifying security challenges in Nigeria, the Almajirai system needs critical appraisal. There are however speculations in Nigeria that the Boko-Haram sect recruit and exploit children for their organizational goals though there are no statistics on how many of them metamorphosed to terrorist from being an almajiri child. The mother of Abubarkar Shekau who is the leader of one of the factions of Boko-Haram said in a recent interview that she had not seen her son since 15 years after alleging that she left home as an almajiri child and never came back after his indoctrination by Mohammed Yussuf, the founder of the Islamist sect.

Though this essay is on almajiri children who are predominantly boys, Boko-Haram sect has on different occasions exploited female children in their onslaught. In 2017, 76 girls were reported to be among the 110 children sent on suicide missions by the Boko-Haram sect according to UNICEF and majority of these children were under the age of 15. Several other rescued girls narrated their ordeals in captivity before they were sent out on different special missions where they either escaped or were rescued. An Analysis of the dynamics

of Boko-Haram operations has shown according to research by Combating Terrorism that of the 434 suicide bombings attacks by Boko- Haram since inception, 244 out of 338 of those attacks were launched by women and girls respectively.

Today, there are many Abubakar Shekau's amongst today's almajiri children awaiting manifestation at the fullness of time. These children are not just invaluable in terrorist operational attacks; some of them have very well perfected the act of stealing and indulgence in other forms of anti-social behaviors.

Conclusion

This essay underscores the fact that parents and governments at all levels are not living up to their responsibility in breeding a society where children are raised with dignity. The lack of care on their part is exemplified in the "Almajirai" system which cannot be linked to any religious ideologies and cannot be justified as a function of poverty.

If Nigeria has to work on an effective and efficient security architecture where the sanctity of lives and properties are fundamental, then it must pay attention to the plight of the almajiri child and every other child living in desperate conditions irrespective of their locations. Without parental guidance and government's interventions, Nigeria is likely to be doomed with insurgence plethora of security challenges since millions of its children are allowed to grow and have continued to grow in the streets unchecked. If children that had the privilege of being under the custody of their parents with all the enabling environments and guidance are taking up "crime" as a viable vocation; imagine the eventual outcome of a child without guidance and direction. With an eye in the future, Nigeria will be more secure with the abolition of the "contemporary almajiri system."

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