Circumventing or Superimposing Poverty on the African Child?  
The Almajiri Syndrome in Northern Nigeria

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Abstract

This paper discusses the nature and problems associated with street begging by children as it exists today in virtually all states of Northern Nigeria. It contends that this practice in the area is antithetical to human capital development because of its proclivity to deprivation and abuse of children; inducing poverty and further exacerbating underdevelopment of the North. It suggests a sincere commitment by the northern state governments to funding education; a synergy between Qur’anic schools and Universal Basic Education; endorsement and domestication of the 2003 Child’s Rights Act by states of the north and the banning of itinerant scholars, migration of children and begging in the north as ways of eradicating begging among children in the region.

Introduction

Child abuse manifested by neglected and deprived children is a common debased phenomenon in Northern Nigeria (Musa 2008; Alabe n.d.). Nigeria is the most populous country in Africa with over 148 million people (Population Reference Bureau 2008); and accounts for the highest percentage of child births on the continent. In 1988, the population of children in Nigeria was 105.5 million (United Nations 1990: 3) outstripping all other countries in Africa; most of which suffer neglect and abuse leading to destitution. Some writers have attributed this social malady to Nigeria’s problems of mass poverty and maladministration (Alemika et al. 2005: 10; Osiruemu 2007: 117; Shettima 2009).

Child destitution in Northern Nigeria is evident via the practice of begging by children. Apart from begging, another form of child abuse in Northern Nigeria is the fact that children in the rural areas constitute the bulk of the labor force on farms (Robson 2004). In the case of begging, so many children ostensibly indulge in the act under the canopy of being Almajirai. As demonstrated subsequently, an Almajiri conventionally is expected to be educationally oriented in the basics of Islam in his or her early childhood to prepare him/her for a chaste Muslim adulthood. But the common practice in Northern Nigeria today has deviated from this norm, giving way to a mass of bowl-carrying children roaming the streets in a dire strife to fend for themselves. This has prompted Musa to pose a question that if it is obligatory for all Muslims to give their children elementary moral education, “is it not equally mandatory on all Muslims to feed, cloth, cater, and provide shelter and personal security for their children, just as it is to give them Islamic knowledge?” (Musa 2008: 1)

Begging is totally opposed to Islamic injunctions, in short “Islam enjoins man [and women] to work, to use his [or her] brain and hands in order to eke out a living for himself [herself]” (Alabe, n.d.:6). Paradoxically, mendicancy is most prevalent in the Muslim dominated Northern Nigeria. This phenomenon stimulates a lot of questions. What is the raison d’être for the persistence of the incidence of begging via the cult of Almajiranchi in Northern Nigeria? Why is the practice widespread in the north and not other parts of Nigeria? In what ways does the practice render children vulnerable to the waving truncheon of poverty and other social woes? Why have the State Governments and parents in Northern Nigeria been lethargic in addressing this unsavory practice? Is it that the states mostly affected lack the capacity and the political will to instigate a positive change to this nagging conduct? This paper addresses some of these questions by positing that the rampant Almajiri syndrome in vogue in most northern states in Nigeria today negates the drive towards development. Rather than developing the capacities of children, the practice subjects them to neglect, abuse and exposes them to lurking impoverishment. The method used in this paper is qualitative based on data obtained from documentary research derived from available literature on the subject.
Who is an Almajiri?

The denotation of an Almajiri is traceable to the origin of the tradition that bred it. The word Almajiri is the corrupted spelling of the Arabic word Almuhajir which means somebody who migrates for the purpose of learning or for the sake of advocating Islamic knowledge. The ancient culture of migration is tied to a system in which yearly, people inhabiting a given neighborhood gather their male children of school age usually after harvest and hand them to a teacher (Mallam). The purpose is for the Mallam to teach these children the basics of Islam through the Qur’anic schools where they are tutored how to read the Qur’an and write the Arabic alphabet. This is achieved through strict discipline and living an austere way of life (Woman Magazine, n.d.). A pupil of any of these Qur’anic schools is known as Almajiri (Almajirai plural). In order to escape domestic distractions, the Mallam may relocate his pupils to a distant area such as a city and camp them there. It is at this camp that the Almajirai “learn self-reliance and discipline” as well as the essence of life (Winter, 1987:180). To support the Mallam and his Almajirai, the local population provide accommodation and left over food for pupils and their teacher. But because the food may not be enough, the Mallam on a daily basis have to send out his students into the neighborhood to solicit for more food which must be brought back to the camp for collective sharing. The main reason for compelling the Almajirai to beg is to let them experience and appreciate the hardship they are going to face in their lives. The practice of begging among Almajirai is therefore known as Almajiranchi.

Qur’anic schools have been a medium of early childhood Islamic education in Northern Nigeria since the 11th century (Bolujuoko 2008: 2). Consequently, there has been the proliferation of Islamic schools in the region. As far back as 1921 there were 30,411 Islamic schools in Northern Nigeria (Reichmuth 1989: 1), in 1973; over 20,000 Qur’anic schools were established in the region (Damachi cited in Winters, 1987: 197) and by 2006 over seven million male children were approximated to have attended the Qur’anic schools across the northern part of Nigeria (Tahir cited in Usman, 2008: 64). But as the years tickled, the Qur’anic school system has been stagnated and polluted with unwholesome practices because:

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…. 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 cited in Alabe, n.d.4).

Typical Almajirai are identifiable by their awful state of hygiene, unkempt tattered clothes, diseases-affected and ulcerated skins (Awefeso cited in Usman 2008, 67). There is a general inertia towards Almajiranchi in the North since the practice has transpired for decades in its depleted form without concerted efforts by both parents and government authorities to overhaul it. The excuse usually given for the persistence of the Almajiri syndrome derives from the religious sympathy mangled in the maxim of faith procreation. Nevertheless, Musa (2008: 1) has posed a salient question that “if it is Islamic that our children leave our environment in search of knowledge, is it as well Islamic that they are subjected to this terrible condition?” The problem obviously goes beyond religion; other paradigms must be explored in explaining the sad retreat from the norm. There is another dimension to the problem of Almajiranchi which is more pitiful. Most of the children begging on the streets of the cities in the north are not necessarily genuine Almajirai in the true sense of undertaking lessons in any Qur’anic school. The increasing number of adult beggars has aggravated the already dismal conditions of destitution in the region. Some of the adult beggars engage in the act on the excuse of physical disabilities while majority of them have no discernable infirmity (Indabawa, 2000: 17). Ostensibly, according to Islamic doctrines “for any person who is hail and hearty, it is forbidden ‘Haram’ to beg” (Alabe, n.d.:6). But this sacred principle has been abandoned, which is why begging in the north has become common and sustained by the belief of the downtrodden poor that their only source of survival rest with alms solicitation despite the debasement that accompany the sordid practice.

Reasons for the incidence of Almajiranchi vary. Investigations conducted in Kano in 2008 for instance, revealed that poverty plays a unique role in the transformation of the hitherto exclusive children affair into an adult ‘business’ in Northern Nigeria (Shuaibu, 2008: 1). Most childrens (both the fake and ‘genuine’ Almajirai on the streets) and adults flock into the cities from the villages is search of alms for survival because of the acute and excruciating poverty in the countryside. Another reason why the Almajiri system thrives is the opportunity it affords rural youth to acquire Islamic knowledge and in the long run learn some trade or skills which brightens their chances of making a living in the cities (Winter, 1987: 179). Unfortunately, most children hardly complete the process leading to skill acquisition because they drop out in the process and end up as street baggers.

Similar to the poverty factor stated above is the view that the cause of the flourishing Almajiranchi is because some families in the rural areas deliberately send their children to metropolitan areas to cater for themselves due to the inability of such families to bear the burden of providing for their large families (Subbarao; Mattimore and Plangemann 2001: 3). This factor is undoubtedly appropriate in an attempt to understand the Almajiri phenomenon in Northern Nigeria where polygamy is pervasive. Many men with mean or no meaningful source of income marry three or four wives, with multiple births from these wives, they end up with fifteen to twenty children or more which their economic prowess cannot shoulder. As a corollary, children from such families who suffer deprivation seek alternative means of survival which may only be found in the easily accessible ‘trade’ of street begging. Thus, child abuse and neglect has continued unabated in Northern Nigeria despite the fact that the monumental 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child seeks to ensure that
“children under 18 years of age develop to their full potential free from hunger, want, neglect, exploitation and other abuses” (United Nations, 1990: 7). Startlingly, Nigeria ratified the convention on April 16, 1991 (United Nations Children’s Fund 2007) but it is yet to be enforced.

The Almajiri Syndrome in Northern Nigeria

There is no gainsaying that begging by children is prevalent in Northern Nigeria. The damaging impact of the syndrome on the region was underscored by the Governor of Niger State Mu’azu Babangida Aliyu when he said the phenomenon discomfits Northern Nigeria. In a tone of indictment, he questioned “why … we have endemic poverty in Muslim dominated settlements, when Allah has enjoined the faithful to balance the search for the hereafter with the search for this world?” (cited in Dike 2008: 2). The painful aspect of the pattern of begging in the north is that it is the younger generation that stands to reap its venom-coated end results by initiating them into a culture of dependence.

To illustrate the massive engagement of children in Almajiranchi, a survey of 85,112 street beggars conducted in 1992 in Kano, the most populous city in Northern Nigeria showed that 37,817 young children (i.e. 44.8%) comprised the sample population studied (Auwalu cited in Indabawa, 2000:17). Again, the National Council for the Welfare of Destitute (NCWD) in 2005 estimated that the number of Almajirai in Northern Nigeria stood at seven million (Alabe, n.d.:5). It is indeed a tragedy for Northern Nigeria that a vast number of the region’s future human resource is wasted and depleted amidst the indolence of both religious and government authorities in the region. Regrettably enough, Northern Nigeria remains the most backward region in Nigeria with the highest poverty rate in the country.

Alabe (n.d.) has attempted to explain the incident of child beggars in Northern Nigeria by arguing that the current practice is due to the influence of colonialism on the orthodox form of Islamic education in the region. However, Alabe’s assertion is refutable. The conquest of the emirates of Northern Nigeria by the British was completed as far back as 1903 and by 1960, Nigeria was granted political independence; guaranteeing reforms by the former three regional governments with indigenous leadership. Therefore to attribute the present desolate state of children in Northern Nigeria in the 21st century to colonial impact is arriving at a conclusion based on wrong premise. With close to 50 years of Nigeria’s existence as a political entity with more decentralization of power to the lower levels of government; if the state and local governments in the north have failed to reform the practice of Almajiranchi then the cause definitely cannot be attributed to colonialism. The problem resides with the political leadership in Northern Nigeria that is absorbed in self indulgence to the neglect of the ignorant poor populace. Besides, it is the children of the underprivileged Hausa masses that are worse hit by the Almajiranchi plague (Winters 1987: 197; Usman 2008: 62). Otherwise it will be tempting to interrogate why one hardly sees the children of local government chairmen, commissioners, state governors, ministers and the monarchs from the north engaging in Almajiranchi. The prevalence of begging in Northern Nigeria in whatever form is indisputably prompted by poverty. There is a functional correlation between education, poverty, child labor and begging (Indabawa 2000; Canagarajah and Thomas, 2001; Osirnuemu 2007). Lack of proper educational upbringing of children is an invitation to their future impoverishment. The higher level of mass poverty in Norther Nigeria today (Ejembia et al. 2003; Sam, 2009; Ujah and Binniyat, 2008) compared to the southern part of Nigeria is not unconnected with the fact that formal education was introduced and embraced in the region many decades after Southern Nigeria had already accepted formal education as a way of life from the missionaries. Given that Northern Nigeria currently has the highest concentration of illiterate children in the world (Ujah and Binniyat, 2008); premonition point to the probability of future existence of high poverty rate in the region unless drastic measures are taken to recoil the ugly trend.

Begging among children in Northern Nigeria can as well be explained on sheer parental failure (Musa 2008). The polygamous practice ubiquitous in Northern Nigeria has warranted many people to bear children more than they can cater for. Sending some of these children to other towns and cities to ‘acquire education’ could be a source of economic relief to most parents. In some cases, female children are sent on the streets to engage in petty trade in items like kola nut, groundnut, maize, and assorted condiments to augment the lean income of their families. Such girl children are exposed to countless vile social hazards like sexual abuse, rape, kidnapping etc. Also, the monstrous problem of corruption in Northern Nigeria as in other parts of the country, has worsened matters. Recent assessments show that corruption is known to be pervasive in Nigeria (Canagarajah and Thomas, 2001; Global Integrity Report 2008; Human Rights Watch 2008). Lack of transparency and accountability among public office holders has culminated in the outright embezzlement of huge sums of public money meant to improve social infrastructure. The result is unimaginable wide scale poverty, squalor and deteriorating living standard of the populace. This has in turn produced all manner of societal ills inimical to stability in Nigeria including communal conflicts, unemployment, armed robbery, begging etc.

Few state governments in Northern Nigeria have made efforts (though feeble) at addressing the menace posed by Almajiranchi. For example, after the Maitatsine riots of 1984, the Kano State Government banned the migration of itinerant scholars from rural areas to cities (Bolujoko 2008: 15), but it was momentary. The current governor of Jigawa State, Alhaji Sule Lamido has made strides in modernizing Qur’anic education in the state but the positive impact is yet to be fully felt. The Kano State Government under Malam Ibrahim Shekarau has introduced some strategies aimed at addressing the problem of child street beggars. These include a pilot feeding scheme in three priority local government areas, training of Islamiyya teachers, provision of agricultural infrastructure (fertilizer, improved seeds, farm implements,
cows etc) and skill development programs. These initiatives have not yielded the desired results in these states because of weak and corrupt government institutions coupled with the paucity of ardent political willpower.

The Almajiri Syndrome, Human Capital Development and Poverty

Human capital formation is a sin-qua-non to socio-economic development (Bolujoko, 2008: 3) because of the matchless role personnel play in the development process. In Northern Nigeria specifically and Nigeria in general, the drive towards human capital development by government is lethargic. This neglect can breed poverty in the population especially children.

Studies conducted by Helfer, McKinney and Kempe (1976) and Herrenkohl, Roy C. et al (1991) have revealed that the neglect and abuse of children leaves an indelible mark on their lives because of their inability to contribute economically to societal growth. This case is illustrated by the ordeal Almajirai experienced because of neglect, thus they are reduced to plate washers, errand boys for wealthy families, luggage conveyors in markets. Under this circumstance, poverty will hardly evade the affected children even as adults because “poverty breeds poverty. A poor individual or family has a high probability of staying poor” (Osiruemu 2007: 117). This contention upholds Brooks-Gunn and Duncan’s (1997) thesis that children who live in extreme poverty for so many years are bound to suffer the worst outcomes in their lives.

Three categories of poverty have been identified by Ebigbo (2002) including ill-tempered poverty, dependence poverty and poverty of the mind. Among these, it is the dependence poverty that Almajiranchi is bequeathing on many children. Logically the system recruits and orients the kids to depend on others for their subsistence. This is analogous to generational transmission of poverty. If conventional education liberates the mind, equips a person with knowledge to be utilized for his/her betterment, the unanswered question is; will poverty be circumvented or superimposed on the Almajirai through the system of education that make the Almajirai subservient? The tenacity of orthodox Islamic system of educating children as pointed out above precluded begging and was found in its resoluteness at indoctrinating into the Moslem folks religious dogmas anchored on morality and steadfastness. The limitation of the present system in Northern Nigeria is the hard fact that “…instead of educating for his/her betterment, retaining the child’s best interests shall remain paramount in all considerations” (Okoye and Ya’u cited in Usman 2008: 64). It has also been observed that the tacit resistance and non-receptiveness of Northern Nigeria to western education is a function of the deep rooted resistance of Islam to western education (Bolujoko 2008: 15; Winter 1987: 178-180). For example, in 1976, Northern Nigeria opposed the introduction of Universal Primary Education (U.P.E.) (Winter 1987: 180) whereas Qur’anic schools were dominant in the region. Almajirai have played negative roles during religious and ethnic conflicts in Northern Nigeria. From mere street beggars, these children do transform to street gangs known as Yandabas in Kano (Ya’u 2000). Similar violent inclined street gangs exist in other parts of Nigeria with variegated nomenclatures such as Area Boys in Lagos (Momoh 2000), Egbesu Boys in Enugu (Oruwari 2006), Bakassi Boys in Port Harcourt and environs (Baker 2002; Smith 2004). But what set Almajiri in Northern Nigeria apart is their predilection to become handy recruits during periods of violent conflicts in the region. For instance, from 1980 to 1985, Northern Nigeria witnessed four main religious riots and conflicts in the region. For instance, from 1980 to 1985, Northern Nigeria witnessed four main religious riots and according to Winters (1987: 197), the “participants in these ‘riots’ [were] predominantly products of the Koranic school system of Northern Nigeria”. During the Maitatsine riots in Kano 1980, Kaduna and Maiduguri 1982 and Yola 1984, the Almajirai were handy in fuelling the crises (Hiskett 1987). In the recent 2004 religious crisis in Kano city which has the highest concentration of Almajirai, the violence unleashed on innocent residents was successful because the gangs comprised mainly Almajirai (Human Rights Watch, 2005:60).

By serving as catalysts for destruction of lives and properties (Adebiyi 2008), the Almajirai in Northern Nigeria pose a major social security threat which must be curbed. Otherwise like the Madrassahs of Central Asia, the Almajirai, given their numbers, stands to metamorphose into potential terrorists in the region (Awofeso; Ritchie and Degeling 2003). Moreover, begging on the streets render these children vulnerable to traffickers. It exposes the children 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. Again, their health is endangered since they depend on leftover and at times rotten food for feeding.

Suggestions

The analysis above has shown that street begging by children is an ominous reality in most parts in Northern Nigeria. To reverse the trend it is suggested that the state governments in the north should sincerely be committed to the provision of functional education in the region. The 19 Northern Governors Forum should be used as a platform for mobilizing support for the channeling of resources to the education sub-sector in the north. Similarly, all the 19 Northern State Governments must be cajoled by their forum to endorse and domesticate the Child’s Rights Act 2003 signed into law in Nigeria in September 2003 because the Act has provisions which says “the child’s best interests shall remain paramount in all considerations” and that a “child shall be given such protection and care as is necessary for its [his/her] well being, retaining the right to survival and development.” By so doing, it will be statutorily binding on the state governments to protect children and foster their welfare in the region.

Also, a synergy should be created between Qur’anic schools and Universal Basic Education (UBE) currently implemented in Nigeria. All elementary Islamic schools including Islamiyya and other Qur’anic schools should
be converted into formal schools but with great bias in Islamic curriculum and should have the status of awarding certificates. Equally too, migration of children from one village or city to another in large number should be restricted and begging by school age children should be banned throughout the north. To improve funding of formal education in the region, the billionaires strewn all over Northern Nigeria should, as a matter of community service, offer direct financial assistance to the needy children. This assistance can be in form of establishing private scholarship schemes, education foundations and endowment funds to cater for talented but poor children that abound in the region. Parents in the states where Almajiranchi is most prevalent should, as a matter of social obligation, exhibit and assume more parental responsibility in raising their kids rather than sending them to unknown areas to fend for themselves.

It is equally imperative for the Ulama (Islamic clergy) in Northern Nigeria to accelerate action on awareness creation among northerners particularly Moslems for better understanding of Islamic injunctions regarding polygamy. This will further assist in educating the people to avoid unwarranted polygamous families that often breed lots of children many fathers cannot cater for. The Qur’anic doctrines as embedded in Qur’an 4:3 can be used by the clergy during sermons to cajole followers to be more rational when considering the number of wives to marry. Similarly, Abdal-Ati (1977) has clearly espoused the nature of permissible Islamic family structure which should be made known to people in Northern Nigeria. This measure will in the long-run, reduce the number of Almajirai on the streets in the north because people of the region will appreciate that it is not the number of wives a person marries and the number of children one begets that matters but how justly they are treated and how well they are reared respectively.

Conclusion

The central thesis of this paper is that Almajiranchi in Northern Nigeria today creates conditions that debase and abuse children in the area. The practice of street begging by children in the region has therefore, inextricably entrapped the children involved to the truncheon of an impoverished future if urgent measures are not taken. The ugly trend can only be reverted if the capacities of these children are developed through sound formal education so that they can exist exuberantly beyond the reach of poverty. Suffice to restate that the basic needs of children involves good upbringing which is defined to include right to good parental care, education, health, good nutrition, shelter, entertainment, interaction and associational life. These tasks are the collective responsibilities of parents and governments the world over and the case in Northern Nigeria cannot be excluded. While governments in Northern Nigeria should provide the broad based framework to facilitate child development; the parents should individually nurture their offspring to full-blown responsible adults. In addition, education serves to empower and not to disempower people. The future of Almajirai of the north should not be slain on the platform of lethargy on the part of both parents and governments in the area. Doing so will be tantamount to sowing a seed of impoverishment in the children and unwittingly or unwittingly superimposing poverty on the younger generation as well as forfeiting human capital development in the north and by extension, Nigeria.

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