

THE ALMAJIRI QUESTION IN NORTHERN NIGERIA: DECONSTRUCTING THE PROBLEM

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Abstract

The Almajiri problem is a serious national question especially that it is undermining national development and security. This paper deconstructs the nature and particular character of the system as well as dilates on the existing schools of thought on the subject. It notes that the system is a religious knowledge system that in the past played functional roles in Northern Nigeria in a whole lot of ramifications. However, the system in contemporary times arising from poor funding, conversion of Almajiri children to urchins on major cities, parental poverty, greedy teachers, exploitation of Almajiri by politicians and so no; have rendered the system bête noire to development and national security. The diverse schools of thought on how to resolve the quagmire indicate the complexity of the Almajiri problem and prompts the dire need for a holistic, all stakeholders engagement in resolving the problem beyond simplistic rhetoric.

Key Words: Almajiri, Islam, System, Northern Nigeria, Problem.

Introduction

In many cities in Northern Nigeria, dozens of children from primary school age to their early 20s are seen wearing dirty clothes, looking unkempt, obviously malnourished and begging for alms with bowls. These Almajiri children unlike the students of local Quranic and modern Islamic (Islamiyya) schools do not stay with their biological parents and are oftentimes fostered by religious clerics who teach them the Holy Qur'an in a process known as the Tsangaya system (Yahaya, 2018). The Almajirai as they are collectively known learn to read, write, and recite the Qur'an. Modern subjects are hardly part of the curriculum. This implies that the Almajiri children are not prepared for skills that can sustain them economically in the future. They are compelled by the logic of the system to fend for themselves and support their teachers (Mallams) through begging and doing menial jobs. Most of them sleep in a congested and unhealthy environment while others are trafficked, used as domestic servants, drug peddlers, hawkers, petty traders and even used for rituals (Zakirai and Akinyemi, 2015, Abdulkadir, 2003).

This situation of the Almajirai in Northern Nigeria in contemporary times has since provoked calls for its ban or reformation. There are indeed contentious and conflicting arguments on how to engage the Almajiri conundrum. The arguments largely hallmark the controversy and have made a simplistic answer to the Almajiri question un-workable. Indeed, a holistic understanding of the contending issues in the Almajiri question requires an excursion into the historicity and dimensions of the Almajiri system as well as the variables that have birthed contemporary contradictions.

This paper provides a hindsight narrative on the Almajiri question in Northern Nigeria and explains the issues catalyzing the forth and back arguments on the challenge. The objective is to provide grounding for understanding the trajectory of the system, the nature of the controversy, as well as dimensions of the Almajiri conundrum. The paper therefore flows in logical compartments. The first part is the introduction. The second part overviews the historicity of the Almajiri system. The third part explores the contending arguments for and against the system. The concluding thoughts are expressed in the fourth section.

Antecedence of the Almajiri System in Northern Nigeria

The quest for Islamic knowledge is a recognized practice in the Muslim World since time immemorial. The practice draws its bearing from the migration of Prophet Mohammed from Mecca to Medina. Those who migrated with the Prophet to Medina were called *Al-Muhajirrun*; meaning migrants. In Nigeria, the word *Almajiri* is a Hausa word for pupil or student and emanates from the Arabic word *Almuhajir* which means a seeker of Islamic knowledge. Khalid (1997) affirms that Almajiri means those who left their village or town, parents, relations, and friends in search of Islamic religious knowledge and scholarship.

The Almajiri system in Northern Nigeria became noticeable at about the 11th century in Kanem-Borno where Islam first had its footing. It later spread to the Sokoto Caliphate after the triumph of the Jihad led by Sheikh Uthman Dan Fodio. The Kanem-Borno Empire as well as the Sokoto caliphate institutionalized, promoted and supported the Almajiri system with public finances (Odumosu, 2013). The funding template was such that the community, parents and the pupils were made to contribute to the sustenance of the scheme. Available historical evidence indicates that the products of the Almajiri system were to form the group of elites that controlled various government organs and parastatals in the pre and post-colonial Northern Nigeria (Abdulkadir, 2003). This speaks to the functionality of this Islamic

learning system at inception. Garba Shehu cited in Anadolu Agency (2014) adumbrates further on the functionality of the Almajiri system in the past thus;

Before it was corrupted by lazy parents, greedy teachers, exploitive politicians and employers of labor, the Almajiri education (system) had functioned as a veritable means of the internalization of the Quran by youngsters and a way of imbibing a Spartan lifestyle as a means of self- discipline... these days, parents who find the upbringing of their male children burdensome throw them into the system with little or no supervision or care,...such children brought up as baggage tend to feel or behave in a way that shows them as psychologically inferior or, without a sense of self-worth...

A number of distinctive variables in the pre-colonial Almajiri system suffice for emphasis. The system drew strength from the Islamic ideology popularized by Usman Dan Fodio sequel to the Islamic revolution in Hausa land. Thus, the establishment of Islamic learning centers to speed the spread of Islam was greatly encouraged. Secondly, the system enjoyed collective sponsorship from the existing Empires, Parents and the pupils in a non-exploitative style. Consequently, there was no need for begging. Thirdly, the system was philosophically structured to reform the pupils on the basis of Islamic tenets. These ideals defined the pre-colonial Almajiri system.

The advent of colonial rule in Northern Nigeria particularly as from 1904 brought in its wake fundamental alterations in the Almajiri system. A plethora of colonial policies were introduced that weakened the funding structure of the system. The colonialists usurped the finances of the Sokoto caliphate and abolished State funding of the Almajiri school system. Western education was introduced and funded by the State in place of Almajiri schools. This development fueled dislocations in the Almajiri system and stimulated the need for alternative funding. The Almajiri pupils were now compelled to fend for themselves and also support their teachers (Mallams). It was this that instituted begging as an Almajiri practice. It is important to add that, the withdrawal of funding from the Almajiri system also fuelled animosity and antagonism; this was worsened by the belief that *Karatun Boko* (Western Education) was of Christian-European origin and therefore anti-Islamic. As a counter response to the funding challenge, Almajiri teachers encouraged the pupils to beg to sustain the system. This colonial shock destabilized the Almajiri system and sowed the seeds for futuristic contradictions. The contradictions intensified in the Post-colonial era owing to the difficult economic realities that continue to plague the Nigerian State coupled with the plundering character of the Post-colonial indigenous elites.

The Post-colonial realities of the Almajiri system are fearsome. The pupils involved are exposed to parental neglect, societal abuse and exploitation. They are a form of vulnerable children as they face higher risk than their peers in terms of violations of basic human rights arising from deprivations of parental love, care, universal basic education, healthcare, human dignity and self-esteem that are guaranteed by both the Islamic laws and the Nigerian Constitution. The decay of the Almajiri system became more acute precisely because the system was built on noble foundations tied to a paternalistic humane and altruistic society that ceases to exist. It is this that has informed the outcry and agitations against the system.

The point also need be made that the precarious conditions of Almajirai in Northern Nigeria today emerged from a cumulative interplay of economic malfunction that is historically

traceable to the 1980s. This period saw intensification in economic malfeasance arising from rapid population growth amidst dwindling oil revenues. The increased financial precariousness forced government to adopt structural adjustment measures that saw reductions in public expenditures on social services such as education and health; shifting gear towards a stronger privately driven economy. The effects of these policies exacerbated household poverty and consequentially reduced the communal support which provided the life line on which the Almajiri system thrived. Many families could hardly eat three square meals; talk less of leave left -over for the Almajirai. The living and learning conditions of the pupils have continued to worsen and stimulate security challenges as well as generate human rights issues. For example, a 2008 UNICEF report described the Almajiri system as a system that has integrated a culture of begging, child destitution, trafficking and delinquency. A 2012 research report carried in Kano and Jigawa States where 600 Almajiri children were interviewed revealed that;

The main source of income for the majority of the respondents (58%) is begging and about 29 per cent of them receive food as pay for labour. Close to 40 per cent of the respondents sleep at *Zaure* (door entrance) and about 62 per cent take their lessons on the streets. Most of the respondents (97%) are engaged in child labour and more than half of the Almajiri children are engaged by members of host communities as domestic servants. About half (52.2%) of the respondents share their incomes with their mallams and about 13 per cent of them remit part of their incomes to their parents. About one tenth of the respondents (11.2%) very often go to bed on empty stomach... fever and diarrhea is the major ailment afflicting the Almajiri children ... (Zakirai and Akinyemi, 2015)

These revelations are indeed frightening and inform on the despicable conditions of Almajiri children. Obviously, thoughtful governmental interventions are urgently required to resolve the problem posed by the Almajiri question in Northern Nigeria. A report by the National Council for the Welfare of the Destitute (NCWD) approximated the number of Almajiri to 7 million.

In 2017, attempts were made by former President Goodluck Jonathan to intervene in the Almajiri fiasco by building 165 model Almajiri Integrated Model Schools in Northern Nigeria. But this intervention did not yield fruitful results due to lapses in funding and the lack of socio-cultural collaboration by critical stakeholders. It suffices to make the point that issues ingrained in religion generate high level sensitivity and it is this that largely frustrates attempts at solutions (Punch, 27 November, 2017). It was shocking to discover in September 2019, that 300 men and boys bearing the scars of beatings and chains, some of whom had apparently been sodomized, were rescued from a purported Islamic school building in Kaduna. Two months later, 259 men, women and children were rescued from a similar rehabilitation centre in Ibadan.

Recently, President Muhammadu Buhari has expressed his disdain for the Almajiri schools and is threatening to shut down the system. Alarmed by the increasing numbers of out of school children in Northern Nigeria, there is a growing pressure for a decisive action on the part of government. For instance, 69% of the 13 million out of school children are in Northern Nigeria (Guardian 28 August, 2019). The statistics are grim. The realities are even grimmer. In spite of the expressed Presidential disapproval with Almajiri system, the political will to ban the system exists more in rhetoric than in action. There are also fundamental questions that are yet to be answered. For instance, in the event that Almajiri schools are

banned, can existing Western education schools absolve the over 7million Almajiri children? What is the funding template? Given the roles Almajiri children play in supporting their poor families, how is government going to close this gap? In other words, how effective are policies aimed at addressing the poverty question? These questions among many others underline the controversy that has since enveloped the Almajiri fiasco. The following section periscopes the arguments for and against the abolishment of the Almajiri system.

Contending Arguments for and Against the Almajiri System

The vortex of arguments that define the Almajiri controversy in Northern Nigeria revolve around two pillars namely; the supposed benefits of the system and the attendant malfunction. Thus, two schools of thought are discernible. The first school expresses conservative views in support of the Almajiri system. Subscribers to this thinking argue that parents have a religious duty to ensure that their children study the Qur'an and are mindful of the educational value of a certain degree of hardship for the social and moral training of their children. These set of parents see some moral worth in the Almajiri system. The second strand of argument associated with this thinking is that the system provides solace for poor rural families. The argument is that the Almajiri system enables poor families in the rural areas with the opportunity to relieve themselves of the burden of providing for their large family size and in some cases receive remittances from the children (Subbarao, Mattimore and Plangamann, 2001). Adepoju (2006) collaborate this view when he opines that child trafficking in Sub-Saharan Africa is a function of parental poverty and ignorance as children are enlisted into it with the hope of generating wages to sustain the deteriorating family economic situation. The third strand of the argument in support of the Almajiri system holds that the pathetic poverty in the country makes Western education unaffordable. Besides, there are a lot of ungoverned spaces with near absence of governmental presence. Proponents of this school insist that, the Almajiri schools provide some alternative form of education in spite of the limitations. Supporters of the Almajiri system therefore frown at the tendency to completely ban the system. For this school, what needs to be done is a strengthening of the system rather than an outright ban.

The second school of thought adopts a radical approach to resolving the challenge. Proponents of this school dismiss the claim that the Almajiri system is an Islamic prescript. The Emir of Gusau in Zamfara State, Alhaji Ibrahim Bello is a leading light in disparaging this erroneous insinuation. He succinctly informs;

... there is nowhere in the Holy Quran or teachings of Prophet Mohammed (PBUH) where the Almajiri system is allowed. It is against the religion of Islam to send children away from their parents to become Almajiri(Punch, 5th December, 2019).

Maigari (2019) explains further that Islam does not condone people expelling their progenies from their dwellings under the guise of seeking knowledge. Rather, Islam obligates parents to teach, train, discipline and refine the character of their children according to the dictates of Islam. Begging is abhorred and opposed in Islamic religion except in special circumstances. Those who oppose the Almajiri system also point to the fact that the practice of begging by young children is not only demeaning but dehumanizing. It is an orientation for a dependent living which has serious implications for perpetuating poverty in the future. Neglect and abuse of Almajiri children reduce them to plate washers, errand boys, luggage conveyors in markets and other marginal labor making it difficult for them to escape the life of poverty at adulthood. Those who oppose the Almajiri system also raise security concerns. They aver

that the abuse of children make them extremely vulnerable to conflict entrepreneurs especially politicians and radical clerics. The contradictions in the system thus lend itself to criminality and insecurity (Imobighe, 2012, Loimeier, 2012). The sum trite of the radical school is that the Almajiri system has made children victims of parental neglect, societal abuse and exploitation as their right to human dignity is violated, they are deprived of Universal Basic Education and they are most vulnerable to child labour. They also submit that a bleak future for this vulnerable group is foreseeable, as the dire consequences may not rest with them alone but may lay foundation for the formation of sinister groups that will castigate and detest the society for past neglect, exploitation and abuse. The failures in the Almajiri system have made many to believe that the system has morphed into a fertile ground for recruiting extremists. Again, Alhaji Ibrahim Bello retorts, “if the system is left to continue, it will come to a time when those children will turn out to be hardened criminals, thereby causing threats to the country” (Guardian, 2019).

Just recently, the Kano State Governor, Dr. Abdullahi Ganduje suggested that most of the Almajirai roaming the streets in the Northern part of the country were not Nigerians. He specifically opines;

A lot of them are foreigners from Niger Republic, Chad and Cameroon. From the survey we have conducted, most of the Almajiri roaming our streets are from Niger, Chad and Cameroon. Once you improve the quality of the Almajiri education system, you are inviting other Almajiri from other places to come to your State...northern governors are putting more pressure toward having a universal legislation that will limit migration from one state to another (Nigerian Tribune, 2020).

This suggestion points to yet another dimension of the Almajiri problem particularly the security implications of having “alien children” masquerading as Almajiri. It also indicates the lax enforcement of immigration laws. Nevertheless, this suggestion has to be viewed with circumspection because to imagine that majority of Almajirai are foreigners’ sounds exaggeratory. Moreover, the details of the study that led the conclusion were not stated. What is however important to note is the possibility of alien Almajiri given the porous nature of our borders. The essentiality of taking the Almajiri problem seriously is one that northern States cannot hope to deport their way out of. Indeed, it a multifaceted problem.

A close review of the arguments for and against the Almajiri system exposes the complexity of the problem and the danger in adopting a simplistic solution. Clearly, both the conservative and the radical schools of thought agree that the system is generating contradictions that are threatening the value system of society in diverse ways. The disagreement is however with the kind of remedy required. Whereas supporters of the Almajiri system are alarmed by the problems that a complete ban might generate, opponents of the system seem to believe that Qur’anic education can be incorporated into Western education in a manner that eradicates the dehumanizing contradictions facing the Almajiri system and prepare the pupils for the stark realities of the 21st century. This assumption though persuasive, requires careful thinking in terms of an appropriate policy thrust as well as adequate funding for meaningful results. More so, a number of observations suffice for consideration. Poverty contributes to high divorce and maternal mortality rates in Northern Nigeria. Children from disbanded families are more likely to become Almajirai than children from stable households. Poverty also limits educational options. The problem of accessible costs is also compounded by that of poor quality educational outcomes. Similarly, school enrolment often implies that a child

cannot help out with the farm work, as school timetables are poorly adjusted to the work rhythms of peasant households. This makes enrolment more difficult for families who depend on labour contributions of all their members, including the young. What this means is that the Almajiri challenge is a complex one requiring a holistic and contextual appreciation of the issues involved. It is a considered view that a resolution of the Almajiri problem requires a smart blend between religion and modernization; a holistic engagement with the underlying push factors particularly poverty which is a major cataclysm.

Conclusion

The Almajiri system of education prevalent in Northern Nigeria is indeed experiencing strains of different sorts and impacting society in disturbing ways. Though the system was initiated with very good intentions and was supported by both formal and informal community based structures; cracks began to emerge sequel to the breakdown of these support mechanisms. The problems that the system has since generated seem to have overshadowed the supposed benefits. A wide range of deprivations such as lack of food, poor clothing, poor shelter, lack of care, physical exploitation, sexual exploitation and so on; have been identified as defining identities of Almajiri children. The core worry with the system lies with the potential human security challenges the neglect of millions of children poses. The controversy with the Almajiri system basically flows from disagreements as to the best method to nip challenges associated with the system. Many believe that the system has outlived its usefulness while others insist that the system has a functional utility value and therefore what is required is a reformation aimed at strengthening it. This appears to be the dilemma behind government's inertia as regards a definitive remedy to the Almajiri conundrum. While we debate the possible solutions; our children have become down trodden, destitute, and dehumanized beings. A whole generation is locked into a cycle of poverty with concomitant consequences for national security and human capital development. The government, Ulama, and community leaders must come together and blend the utilitarian positions of the diverse schools of thought for a workable solution.

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