



A REVISIT OF CONTEMPORARY ALMAJIRI SYSTEM OF EDUCATION IN THE FACE OF INSECURITY CHALLENGES IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Like any other traditional system of education in other parts of the Muslim world, the Almajiri school system in Nigeria used to be a decent and reputable scheme that produced eminent scholars and policy makers. It mustered support and solidarity from all stakeholders and propelled the nation to enviable status in literacy, social, spiritual, diplomatic and economic spheres, to mention a few. Its prominence however took a nosedive with the arrival of the British who hijacked the administrative power in the land and relegated all religious and traditional structures to the background. The upshot of this scenario paved the way for all forms of adulteration being smeared on the system today, which denigrate the whole structure. This paper appraised the situations of the contemporary Almajiri who are excluded from the mainstream of modern school system and the consequence of the threat they posed to national security. The method of approach was purely based on observation and empirical sources. Findings reveal that the Almajiri system is a threat to security in the society. The paper recommended that unnecessary street-begging and hawking which constitute child abuse and parental neglect should be sanctioned. Poverty alleviation programme and employment opportunities to the society should be put in place in order to reduce juvenile delinquency in the Almajiri school system.

Introduction

The Hausa word Almajiri is derived from the Arabic word, "المُهَاجِرُ" "al-Muhajir", which refers to a person who migrates from his home in search of Islamic knowledge. In other word, it usually refers to a person who migrates from luxury of his home to other place or to a popular teacher in the quest for Islamic knowledge. It is hinged on the Islamic concept of migration which is widely practiced especially when acquisition of knowledge at home is either inconvenient or insufficient. It was established as an organized and comprehensive system of education

for learning Islamic principles, values, jurisprudence and theology (*Omeni 128*).

The male gender seeking for knowledge through the system is called Almajiri, female gender is Almajira, the plural is Almajirai, the system is called Almajiranci and the school is called Tsangaya. The system allows parents to leave parental responsibilities to the school management. Colloquially, the term has expanded to refer to any young person who begs on the streets and does not attend secular school. Many people in Northern Nigeria give

Sadakah (alm/charity) to Almajirai on daily basis seeking divine reward and protection. Almajirai are children, usually from poor rural backgrounds who leave their hometowns to study from Malamai, teachers of the Qur'an (Yusuf 1). The Almajirai usually begin their studies between the ages of 5 and 12. When not engaged in learning, Almajirai in rural areas may work on farms, while urban Almajirai conduct small tasks like domestic chores, running errands and fetching water among others (Nurudeen 14).

Almajiri School System during Pre-Colonial Era

Muslim traders first came to the Nigerian regions of Kanem Borno in the 9th century and the Islam spread through trade and migration. Almajiri system began in Kanem Borno in the 11th century when many rulers practiced Islam. More than 700 years later, in the 19th century, Islamic scholar and revivalist, Usmanu dan Fodiyo founded the Sokoto caliphate and furthered the cause of Islamic learning. Prior to the British arrival in Nigeria, the children stayed at home with their parents and attended *tsangayu* (local Qur'anic schools) to learn about the Qur'an. All the schools available then were in close proximity with the immediate environment of the students. Inspectors were introduced to go to the schools and report the affairs of the school to the emir of the province. The schools were funded by the state treasury, the community, parents, *zakat* (obligatory charity) controlled by Emirs, *sadaqah* (voluntary charity) and sometimes the farm output of the students. In the pre-colonial era, Almajiri did not beg because there

was sufficient funding to feed and clothe them (Fahiya 20).

Almajiri School System during Colonial Era

The British colonized Nigeria in 1904 and with them came many changes to the Almajiri system. During the colonial era, the British invaded the Northern Nigeria, defunded the Almajiri school system, and killed most emirs, deposed some and the remaining emirs lost controls of their territories. This resulted in the loss of fundamental control of the Almajiri school system. The system collapsed as a result of no support from the community, emirs and government. The British neither established secular schools on a large scale nor advanced existing institutions. Most Western education was introduced and conducted by the Christian missionaries with the aim of introducing Christianity to the Northerners systematically. The Western education established by the British was only available for a small portion of Northerners. Because the Islamic scholars did not have a Western education, they were disqualified from white-collar and political jobs. In 1921 (before the colonization), there were more than 30,000 Islamic schools in Northern Nigeria (Yusuf 3).

However, as the British invaded and colonized the Northern Nigeria territories and took control of the state treasury and abolished the state funding of Almajiri school system which to them was mere religious schools. Western education was introduced and funded instead. This development rendered Islamic

scholars unqualified for employment and participation in politics. This created poverty situation as the Malamai, (the tsangaya teachers) lost their jobs because of lack of Western education which is the only criteria for white-collar jobs (Salam 23).

The British established large urban centers, so many Malamai migrated from rural areas to the cities. Many Northern cities such as Zaria and Kano became important centers of Islamic learning. Parents started sending their children to the cities to study Islam and the relationship between the Almajiri and the Malamai became more salient. The teachers and students had no financial support, so, they turned to alms begging and menial jobs for survival. Eventually, this unfortunate practice became the norm. With the loss of support from the government and the helpless emirs and increasing number of pupils to take care of, as well as increasing level of poverty as a result, the care of the Almajiri became overwhelmingly burdensome for Malams who were left with no choice but to send these little students out to beg for alms and food (Shehu 47).

Almajiri School System during Post-Independence Era

The 1970's oil boom, which decreased the profitability of farming, and the 1986 Structural Adjustment Program (SAP) which slowed economic growth, both increased poverty in Northern Nigeria and exacerbated the challenges of the Almajiri school system. In 1989, the Nigerian government created the National Commission for Nomadic Education (NCNE) to improve formal and non-

formal education systems (including the Almajiri school system) for nomadic Nigerian children to attend schools. Many Northern states made integrated Muslim/secular primary and post-primary schools (Salam 19). Though, this program did not solve the problem of Almajiri situation because some Muslim parents did not give upbringing and education of their children adequate attention as some misinformed elements among them harbour in their minds that Western education is a sin when Islam challenges Muslims to seek any form of knowledge, so long as it does not contravene the teachings of Allah due to the way it was introduced to them.

The Fall of Almajiri School System and the Rise of National Insecurity

The invading of the British into the region and the killing of most emirs and others disposed could be a history but the effect may still be with the current generation. The emirs lost control of their territories and accepted their new roles as mere traditional rulers. They also lost fundamental control of Almajiri schools arguing that, they were religious schools (Salam 14). There is no doubt that education is the foundation of any development in every society. It is important to every individual and the society at large, as roots are important to the growth and development of a tree. However, the argument now is 'whether education thrives better when incorporated with the intrinsic of the people's culture or when the people's culture is neglected?'

Almajiri education in Nigeria started in the olden days when the quest to

acquire knowledge was prevalent, especially the Qur'anic knowledge by the Muslims. Although, there were no formal laid down procedure or channels adopted in obtaining such, except the unconventional way of handing over wards to a supposedly teachers, known as Malam (Yusha 13). The Malam now enlist the child and the teaching of religious scripture and way of life are indoctrinated into the young pupils. The feeding and accommodation of the pupils were also part of the teacher's responsibilities. Unfortunately today, a single Malam could recruit and keep hundreds of pupils, unlike in the days when Almajiri schools enjoy the support and funding of the states. The coming of the modernization life styles started encroaching into the big-cities of the North, some of these Malams became allured to the greed for money and started migrating to other cities and towns with their pupils and subject them to the vagaries of the streets. The motives of Almajiri at formulation which are among others:

- i. To ensure that children can read and recite the Qur'an.
- ii. Children become fully inducted into Islamic moral values in all behaviour.
- iii. Children become as knowledgeable in Arabic language and basic Islamic sciences as a foundation for further studies.

Unfortunately, all these motives and more are bastardized by the process and greed of some Malams. The Malams having no financial support resorted the pupils to begging and other menial jobs for survival. The predicaments of the Almajiri system

now made available manpower that could pose threat to the national security. It is easy for the Malam who takes charge of feeding and accommodation to redirect the pupils for some insecurity acts. Nigeria as a multi ethnic country and with the fate of the helpless Almajiri situation in the hands of their Malams becomes easy for manipulation. However, in Nigeria, cases of domestic criminality are on the increase result to general insecurity and fear with Nigerian seemingly helpless in tackling the manual headstrong (Yusha 31).

The Almajiri school system of education as practiced today in the North is a completely bastardized system compared to the form and condition under the system it was operating and its output during the pre-colonial period. The Almajiri syndrome or phenomenon is alarming because it takes a different dimension compared to the initial idea of the Almajiri formation. Such children are usually frustrated, aggressive and violent as they are exposed to different forms of pressure, problem, hunger and jobs that demand several times their energy and weight before the job is accomplished. Almajiri school system could be a labour or manpower mobilization centre for some National security threat factors. These threats to national security also militate against some social developmental factors such as poverty rate, literacy rate and population explosion (Edinyang 103).

According to AbdulQadir (15), the rise of national insecurity cannot go without blame or source. The fall of Almajiri school system could be one

of the sources of violent actors in the North (AbdulQadir 16). There may be other sources or blames especially in other regions of Nigeria but for the sake of this paper, the focus is on the threat of Almajiri system on national security.

Contemporary Almajiri System as Function of Poverty

The essence of the Almajiri system of education initially was to coach young Muslims on basic Islamic values and to prepare them for higher social responsibilities in the society. The system functioned effectively across various Northern communities prior to colonial intrusion. However, it has degenerated today to become an institution for breeding destitute street beggars. The system is indeed a function of poverty. One cannot find the children of the elites among the “Almajirai” because they practically do not have reasons to roam the motor parks or 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. Unfortunately, one can see these children in Borno state wandered the streets of Maiduguri unchecked despite the many security challenges emanating from Borno and its ripple effects on North-Eastern states of Nigeria. It is surprising that parents could feel so comfortable having their children wander the streets in the face of so many dangers of insecurity. They beg for food and alms and sometimes they 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 (Fahili 52).

The Almajiri School System as a Threat to National Security

In recent times, the prevalence and ugly sights of Almajiri boys in tattered clothes, bowl-in-hand, looking very dirty and destitute soliciting for food and alms in the streets, motor parks, restaurants, markets etc in the urban cities constitutes a source of concern to governments and the citizenry (Shehu 20). They serve as domestic servants to other people; and engage in odd jobs that are hazardous, detrimental to their health and exploitative of their basic rights to survival. Lack of parental participation in the moral up-bringing predisposes the Almajirai to become delinquents. These circumstances conditioned them to be inherently dangerous; and quite a number of them had ended up with bad behaviours and attitudes; becoming juvenile delinquents and subsequently criminals (Salam 31).

The Negative Impact of Almajiri School System on Nigerian Security Architecture

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. In the face of intensifying security challenges in Nigeria, the Almajiri school system needs critical appraisal. There are however reports 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 Abubakar Shekau who is the leader of one of the factions of Boko Haram said in an interview that she had not seen her son for long after alleging that he left home as an Almajiri child and never came back after his indoctrination by late Muhammad Yusuf, the founder of the sect. Though this paper 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 (1-5), 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 (Human Right Watch 4).

Today, there are many criminals amongst today's Almajiri children awaiting manifestation at the fullness of time. These children are not just invaluable in criminal operational attacks; some of them have very well perfected the act of stealing and indulgence in other forms of anti-social behaviors (Fahiya 43). The (ab)use of the Almajiri has a number of implications for state and society in Nigeria, as well as, for the country's immediate neighbours. As noted earlier, the abuse of the children makes them extremely vulnerable to conflict entrepreneurs—especially do-or-die politicians—desperate business persons and clerics preaching religious intolerance (Alli 22) who promise better life opportunities. The system has over time become a

breeding ground for criminality and insecurity (Loimeier 137), spawning youths who are significantly inclined to violence as a means of survival or making their voices heard. Almajiri training provides one of the easiest avenues for indoctrination and radicalization.

Furthermore, confessions of children arrested in connection with Boko Haram terrorism provide insights into the vulnerability and radicalization that lead them into violence. Some of the 35 children released in May 2013 confessed to be Almajiri. One of them admitted that they were paid about \$30 each by some politicians and rebel leaders to spy on troops, vandalize property, and maim and kill people:

We were given a keg of petrol by our bosses to set some schools ablaze, which we did within Maiduguri and we were paid N5000” (Alli, 4).

Another Almajiri “child soldier” said: We were taken to Damaturu. We watched out for the soldiers at their units and reported back to them (Boko Haram). We were reporting when soldiers were at ease or enjoying themselves and when they were off guard and we were paid for doing that (Alli, 4)

The destitute Almajiri boys depend largely on public philanthropy and alms for survival, a fact that makes them vulnerable to conflict mobilization.

Almajiri and Maitatsine

The Maitatsine disturbance in Kano broke out in 1980 with the main

recruits drawn from the Almajirai. In a research conducted by Shehu (22), it was discovered that the main adherents of Maitatsine are Almajiri who the leader of Maitatsine easily indoctrinated through his teachings and fake promises. Lacking the basic necessities of life was enough to make Almajiri fall easy prey to any promise that is connected to bettering their lots, so as to have a face lift. Many lives and properties were lost including the members of the Police and the Military. This shows a direct influence of social network on juvenile delinquency among Almajirai in Kano State.

Apart from Kano State, the Maitatsine equally took place in other parts of the North like Gombe, Kaduna and Yola which were brought under control by the military forces. These uprisings have claimed so many lives and properties worth millions of Naira. The zeal expressed by these Almajirai shows their level of involvement in outlawed behaviour. Shehu (22) narrated that the main disturbances started in Kano on the 18th December 1980. It broke out in Shahuci playground and later spread to Yan Awaki, Fagge, Koki, Kofar Wambai and later to the entire city of Kano. With the devastating nature of the crisis, Nigeria cannot afford to experience such ugly incidence again.

Almajiri and Yandaba Thugs

Yandaba gangs are political thugs especially in Kano State. It has been alleged that some of the today's Almajirai are tomorrow's Yandaba. For instance, Zakari Yau (21) discovered from his study of Yandaba that Almajiri from mere destitute

street beggars do transform to street gangs known as Yandaba. This is demonstrated adequately by the Panel of Investigation on Kano October 1991 riot, which found that closely related to the issue of youth unemployment is the existence of notorious groups in almost every ward of the Metropolis known as Yandaba. The activities of this group of thugs have led to the death of many in the past. Politicians have allegedly used this group to attack political opponents and to promote electoral fraud in their quest for power.

A study conducted by Salam (60) was summarized to buttress this assertion. Seventy-one members of the Yandaba gang between the ages of 13 and 27 years were recruited for the study from the variety of the gang's locations and hideouts in Kano, using the snowballing technique. Adopting quantitative analysis, the outcome suggests that the majority of the gang members were school dropouts or had become involved through the process of Almajiranci. A huge number of the gang members also had a history of arrest and conviction. One should not be perturbed to hear that Almajirai go to Yandaba hideouts to look for food and accommodation. The criminogenic influences from Almajiri interacting with Yandaba gang cannot be ignored as it could breed criminals.

In one of his studies, Zakari Yau (20) discovered that the entry of Almajiri boys into the Yandaba gangs has more to do with the issue of food and accommodation than with the failure to secure employment. Many ex-Yandaba gangs interviewed said that they were attracted to the Yandaba

hideouts because of food they could otherwise not get. He equally identified housing accommodation as one of the gains of staying in Yandaba hideouts. This speaks volume of the vulnerability of Almajirai to social vices as they go to this group of criminals to seek for solace.

Almajiri and Boko Haram

The origin of Boko Haram, otherwise known as Jama'atu Ahlis Sunnah li Da'awati wal Jihad 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 Madinah for studies, paving way for late Muhammad Yusuf's take over. The second source traced the sect to Maitatsine of the 1980s (Ahizih, 24). 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 most of the Almajiri do not attend formal school. The products of these schools have often preached that Boko is Haram and in spite of this, decade after decade, the governments have allowed this system to flourish.

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. For instance, Aluaigba (29) found that street and motor pack begging exposes the Almajiri to all sorts of vile and deviant behaviours and immoral acts because they interact freely with people of low virtue like thieves, prostitutes, drug addicts and gamblers.

Conclusion

The paper has exposed the relationship between Almajiri and some crimes, and how the Almajirai are sometimes (ab)used as instruments of destruction in times of ethno-religious and socio-political upheavals which in return is likely to make them future security problem if care is not taken. street and motorpark begging, lack of guidance, parental neglect and poverty were identified as factors responsible for Almajiri interaction with criminal groups. The Almajiri system of education had served the purpose of its creation in several communities of Northern Nigeria before the colonization. This was evident because the system provided social value prior to colonial intrusion in Nigeria. The system witnessed neglects over time and degenerated to the pupil becoming street beggars and public nuisance after the colonization.

It is obvious that the only Almajiri means of survival and sustenance is through begging and other provisions avail them by the semi middle class people of their host communities and with the continuous global economic meltdown which are now a reality, these very middle class with little means of sustenance and incomes are to provide for them and man must survive as nature advocates. Education is to make one objective

and productive in a society, of which the contemporary Almajiri school system of today has failed woefully to address on both sides, rather it has become retrogressive for our national security, development and collective interest of the people in this very twenty first century.

Recommendations

In respect to the conclusion above, the paper thereby recommends that:

1. In attempting to integrate the Almajiri system of education in the mainstream state educational programme, the government should ensure the peoples buy-in and acceptance is achieved. Earlier experience under the leadership of former president Goodluck Jonathan where government made attempt to intervene by building Almajiri schools failed largely because the people were not carried along. This is why religious leaders' engagement is highly recommended. Government bureaucrats cannot sit in the comfort of their office and continue to churn out policies that will be resisted by the people. To this end, in order to change the status quo with regard to the Almajiri situation today, all stakeholders must work together to put a stop to the embarrassing situation.
2. Muslim scholars and leaders in the affected areas should encourage Muslim parents to accord upbringing and education of their children adequate attention. They should be educated that contrary to what some misinformed elements among the Muslim

community harbour in their minds, Western education is not a sin and Islam challenges Muslims to seek any form of knowledge, so long as it does not contravene the teaching of Allah. This measure is envisaged to forestall child labour, child neglect, child abuse and street begging.

3. The authorities on their part should live up to expectations by providing social amenities in the rural areas to dampen down rural urban migration. In the same vein, enabling environment should be created for middle and lower classes of the society to lead a better life devoid of humiliation and dehumanisation in the hands of the elites and the well-to-do in the society.

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