



Research Paper

National Drive to Curb Street Begging By Almajiri in Contemporary Northern Nigeria

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Abstract

This paper examined how in Northern Nigeria, in the cities, towns and villages – a multitude and a host of young boys of school age walk from house to house in search of alms. In fact, in various communities, streets and markets, in Northern region, one finds young boys stray and stroll about each armed with his begging bowl, pleading for alms, charity, gift, offerings and relief from strangers, philanthropists and generous alms givers; from those who are donors to their well being and are kind hearted patrons and public spirited givers to the young poor boys. Over several decades, this practice of almajiri that deprives millions of youngsters the opportunity of Western education has been criticized, bad-mouthed, and condemned. But the advocates and defenders of the almajiri system and culture have always justified such arguments, insisting and subscribing to the almajiri culture as an integral feature of the Islamic faith. This paper to a great extent tries to strengthen and enhance child dignity in contemporary Northern Nigeria with new laws to tackle child labour and other vices abhorred by the society in the 21st Century. The study adopted the descriptive methodology. It drew upon primary and secondary sources, primary sources include oral information and testimonies. Newspapers and magazines reports were also used in collaboration with official records in government publications. Secondary sources include vital books. The researcher also made use of direct observation method. All the information so gathered were subjected to historical examination.

Key words: Almajiri system, curbing, Begging, Enhancing-child-dignity, Nigeria.

Received 13 Apr., 2025; Revised 24 Apr., 2025; Accepted 26 Apr., 2025 © The author(s) 2025.

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I. Introduction

In many cities, towns and villages in northern Nigeria, one witnesses an army of ruffled, unkempt, uncombed and untidy boys of school age that roam and wander from house to house and from street to street in search of alms. Each of the homeless boys is armed with a begging bowl. Over several decades, people from decent homes have lamented, weep for, sigh for and sorrow over the practice that deprives millions of almajiri youngsters the opportunity of a Western education, but advocates, who patronize, adopt, champion, endorse, uphold and encourage the almajiri system have always countered such arguments, insisting that the system, culture and practice is an integral feature, hallmark, peculiarity and trait of the Islamic faith, allegiance and conviction. As a national drive toward enhancing child dignity and curbing street begging by the almajiri in contemporary Nigeria, President Jonathan's administration, initiated a system of education for the almajiri, which proposed a mixture of Arabic and Western education for the kids. It was reported that about N15 billion was expended on the schools across some northern states but the programme and innovation was suspended after the Jonathan administration was replaced by President Muhammadu Buhari in 2015. (Sule, 2020).

Meanwhile, as a national drive against street begging by almajiri, some state government in the North are determined to remove the culture of begging from the almajiri system. This is because the street begging practice of almajiri is not civilized, decent, polite, right courtesy, decorum and correct custom or manner to beg

for alms as regard world best practices. If almajiri need alms from strangers in their cities, towns and villages in the north; it must be properly sought by appropriate and civilized authorized personnel. The embarrassing and busy-body approach adopted by the almajiri system is clearly unrefined and unacceptable by well meaning Nigerians and the international community. There must be a method of begging by the poor that is not disgraceful, and humiliating. The almajiri culture of begging may have meant well to the young boys and their poor parent but everything about it is foul. Issues of begging for help need proper etiquette that must be followed. For almajiri to beg for alms in the north four issues are relevant and appropriate here:

(a) The right person must make the request for alms for the almajiri; it is either the president of Nigeria, the Governor of their state or a trusted and reliable Non-Governmental Organization (NGO), or a respected monarch, who should make any such request if desirable. Such a request would of course, be based on the situation on ground as determined by the need of the almajiri in a poor country, not like Nigeria with abundance natural and human resources.

(b) The request of alms for the almajiri would have to be made through a proper channel, proper communication and not through street begging with bowl by almajiri, street begging is a disrespectful medium to use in decent societies.

(c) Street begging should not be done with the condemnable manner that is exhibited here in Nigeria by almajiri. This shows that the governments in Nigeria do not take care of the welfare and child dignity of its youthful population.

(d) Nigeria should only ask for alms to help the almajiri if the government and individuals here and in the Diaspora are no longer able to help. The government of northern Nigeria can rise to occasion on this matters and curb street begging by almajiri.

Almajiri in the north should not ask for alms from the street and markets, when their state government and corporate bodies have not done enough to help them with all the potential available in northern Nigeria. The national drive to curb street begging by almajiri should attract the sympathy of the northern elite. Alms begging by almajiri affect the image of the northern leaders negatively. So there is a limit to the amount of help that the almajiri can expect to get from the street and strangers who are also trying to deal with their own problem. Today in Northern Nigeria, there is a supply gap the almajiri need to alleviate poverty and hunger, begging in the street cannot tackle the problem. Northern governors have the right to help the almajiri come out of illiteracy and poverty. That help the almajiri need must be properly sought by appropriate and authorized personnel of both the public and private sectors. Street begging by the almajiri is clearly unrefined and unacceptable. There must be a method of begging by human beings to give humanity respect and honour (Ray Ekpu, 2020).

Parent of northern Nigeria has imposed almajiri system on the northern elite and leaders with an unprecedented crisis, which the conservative elite was not prepared for, but, being a cultural crisis. Leadership in the north are yet to perform better in stemming the challenge of the almajiri, by reducing the effects and negative fatalities of street begging. Emir Sanusi II, during his reign as Emir of Kano was stretched to the limit, the challenge of the almajiri gave him a stab in the heart because of the inability of the northern governors and parent to provide education for the almajiri. Sanusi II was dethroned and banished from Kano because he spoke truth to power no matter whose ox is gored concerning the plight of the almajiri. The conservative elite saw his message against street begging as irritating and insult to their cultural heritage.

Dirisu Yakubu (2020) had this to say about Emir Sanusi II and his unforgettable quotes that earned him trouble with the conservative elite and triggered his dethronement and banishment to Awe, in Nasarawa State. "The Former Emir laid claim to superior knowledge to fault such ills as wife battering, public perception of polygamy, street begging by almajiri, out of school children, bogus earnings by politicians, particularly federal legislators, and schools in place of building new mosques, among others. This position, and the bad blood between him (Sanusi II) and Governor Ganduje, many argued, played huge role in his eventual dethronement by the Ganduje administration. Those who wanted Sanusi dethronement saw in him a primal traitor and defiler of their cultural heritage and traditions. Sanusi spoke truth to power and rattled powerful influential figures of the conservative elite with his public condemnation of their actions". He blamed street begging on their parents and government lack of vision for the almajiri system. As a result, book makers predicted a short stewardship on the stool, a prediction that comes to pass. For Sanusi II, the poor conditions under which the almajiri live in the north bear no proportional relationship to the resources available to the governors of the region. It was a measure of his generous spirit that at every forum he (Sanusi) was privileged to speak, he condemned and criticized northern leaders for doing little to champion the cause of education like their southern counterparts. Emir Sanusi II, in his utterances, called a spade a spade. He spoke against polygamy not backed with sufficient financial resources to nurse and openly charge Muslims to do away with the idea of fathering children they

could not afford to train. As a social crusader emir, Sanusi II made himself the guardian of truth and sanity to fight social and political ills in Nigeria, especially northern Nigeria where he hail from. (Yakubu, 2020).

According to Ugoji Egbujo (2020), Sanusi became emir and remained a social crusader. He sat on the throne flamboyantly, and told the north hard truths coldly. Sanusi believe the remote cause of almajiri was polygamy and warn the north to check polygamy. That sounded heretical. He told the north to zip up. These messages irritated many, especially the conservative elite. This is also because the north had been told in the past that its strength lay in its numbers. Teaching the north to control population seemed politically naïve and short sighted. Sanusi told the north that its million unhealthy illiterate children as almajiri would destroy it. Many short sighted conservative elite said Sanusi II was always insulting the elders. Sanusi II painted pictures no southerner could have painted without being branded a bigot or a dogmatist or a chauvinist. Sanusi told the north that with the almajiri system the region had become an eye sore. He wanted to push the northern elite into a much clear-headed realistic and sober restrain reflection. He said the north was backward, so developmentally shabby, it did not look part of same country with the south. That was accusation and condemnatory but honest and truthful picture. Many northern political leaders who grew up with the almajiri system had created a bubble in which the north ensconced, entrenched, established and settled with born to rule and pride above others. Sanusi II wanted to burst and puncture the bubbles with the weapon of truth and honesty. The school enrollment figures in the north look like data from Somalia and Afghanistan with the almajiri system and other social ills against the girl-child, the north has the highest number of out of school children per 1000 in the world. The north has the highest number of malnourished children in the world. Yet, northern politician march around the universe in bloated babanriga, smiling like astute politicians (Egbujo, 2020). The truth is, lack of sense of shame afflicts all political leaders in the country-both north and south. It is sad to note that the north is filled with abundance natural resources and youth, yet the north is underdeveloped. Sanusi II emphasized important of education for the almajiri and girl-child education. If all emirs in the north spoke truth against begging by almajiri across the region, the north would be a better and meaningful place and society.

As Onuoha Ukeh (2020) aptly pointed out that the governors in the north should tackle the problem of out of school children in their state. For example, a visit to Kano would show one an army of idle youths roaming the streets. The youths do not have education that would empower them in a challenging and competing world. They do not have skills that would make them competitive or give them their daily bread. These youths are Nigerian whose future depends on what the governor would do in government.

Even though, the government of Kano State had ordered the arrest of the almajiri in the streets as a national drive to curb street begging by the almajiri. Every governor in the north should have a state programme and policy to prepare these youths for the future. The almajiri need reorientation to tackle their problem of begging, high illiteracy and excruciating poverty. The northern leaders also need to curb the problem of subjugation of women. Islamic nations are liberalizing their womenfolk to embrace functional education, among others. These are the virtues Sanusi II has been preaching to the conservative elite. Every governor in the North should initiate the drive and programme to curb street begging by almajiri and enhancing child dignity.

National Drive to Enhance Child-Dignity and Curb Street Begging by Almajiri in Contemporary Northern Nigeria:

The researcher examined national drive to encourage, enhance and bolster child-dignity and curb street begging by almajiri in contemporary Northern Nigeria. This is because one of the greatest challenges of most governments in the north is the almajiri phenomenon. It is largely represented in school-age children roaming the streets, begging for alms to take care of themselves or the return to their local clerics. In many state capitals in the region, it is common to encounter almajiri at junctions, traffic lights and motor parks, armed with empty bowls, asking for alms. The tradition of almajiri dates back in time but has only grown in complication in the post colonial era. The negative effect is that a huge population of the almajiri is untrained in the Western style of education like their contemporaries who are with their parents. In the spirit of national drive to enhance child dignity and curb street begging by almajiri, the Kebbi State Government in concert with some of the Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) attempted to address the problem through the medium of free education and the introduction of some of the values of Western education to their schools. Some Islamic teachers were deployed to undergo Western education programmes organized by the Ministry of Basic and Secondary School (Lawal, 2020).

Other initiative to curb street begging by almajiri in the recent history of northern Nigeria, is the Mass Literacy Programme and Almajiri's Initiative (MALPAI) Foundation, ran by wife of Governor Abubakar Atuku Bagudu, Aisha, celebrated and restated its commitment to get these children back to school. The foundation vowed to do the needful to arrest the trend, which is beginning to affect the overall face of childcare delivery in the state. Governor Bagudu (2020) said at the occasion that N900 million was embarked for disbursement to almajiri schools with a view to ensuring that every child acquire both Western and Islamic education. He declared that the almajiri school teachers and students would be supported financially: facilities such as

accommodation, teaching and learning aides would be upgraded. Almajiri would also be taught English and Mathematics with a view to enable them progress in their education up to Colleges of Education, Polytechnics or Universities. The aim and objective is to assist the less privileged, orphans and almajiri to have a better life, which is the best programme of human development. Governor Bagudu (2020) as a drive to enhance child dignity and curb begging by almajiri urged parents and guardians to enroll their children in schools, assuring that government would support and encourage the almajiri to excel in all fields. Permanent Secretary, Ministry for Basic and Secondary Education, Rafaatu Hammani (2020) aptly pointed out that there is a determined effort to ensure that no school age girl is found roaming the streets during school hours. As a national drive to bolster child dignity and curb street begging by almajiri, during an advocacy visit by the technical team on Best Education Delivery For All (BESDA) to the Emir of Argungu, Samaila Muhammed Mera (2020) said: "The main objective is to give education to all children especially the out of the school children, the almajiri, normads and fishermen children". Desk Officer for BESDA programme, Hassa Umar (2020) said 504 Islamic Quranic Schools would be integrated into mainstream education system, 50 percent of primary schools in the state would be involved in the literacy programme. Emir Mera (2020) in a spirit to enhance child dignity and curb almajiri, directed district heads in his domain to commence the mobilization of out-of-school children for enrollment in their respective districts. He warns that each district head would be held responsible for failure of the programme.

Other Governors in the north that are determined to remove the culture of begging from the almajiri system, include Governor Abdullahi Sule of Nasarawa State, the governor has declared a war on what it termed child abuse and child labour. Governor Abdullahi Sule (2020) has insisted that begging has never been a part of almajiri system. In a national drive to enhance child dignity and reduce street begging by almajiri, the governor asserted that parents in the state would have to take responsibility for their actions, nothing that each family must be conscious of their responsibilities to their children and to society. He vowed that parents that take their kids to Islamic teachers fully aware that such children would be forced into a life of begging must shun such habits or face justice.

As a national drive to curb street begging, Governor Sule (2020) said his government was working on a law that would criminalize child begging in the state. He regretted that the almajiri system in the Northern States accommodates about 10 million children, the majority of whom had been turned into itinerant roaming and wondering beggars who solicit alms from place to place. The governor explained that his government was determined to eradicate child begging in Nasarawa, assuring that a bill to that effect would soon be in a place. While insisting that the right of children must be protected. The governor also stated that the army of jobless children parading the state in the guise of begging also constituted a security threat to the people. Government must establish that it is a crime to abuse a child, it is crime to bring children to this world and send them to almajiri system when you cannot take care of them. Parent must take responsibility. You cannot bring children to this world and dump them somewhere and expect somebody else to take care of them, so parent must not shy away from their responsibility.

It is also important to note that as a national campaign to bolster child dignity and curb street begging by almajiri, Governor Sule (2020) of Nasarawa State signed the Child Rights Protection Executive order into law. The executive order seeks to ban street begging for children in the state. The law prescribes a ten years jail term to parent who allow their children go into street begging".

The law partly reads: "This law, apart from the prohibition of secret begging, provides punishment for parents who, out of irresponsibility, threw away their children to street begging.

To further strengthening child dignity in Nasarawa State, Governor Sule allayed fears that the new law could induce security challenges in his state. He said his government was already tackling insecurity in three different ways:

- (a) Providing jobs through agriculture
- (b) Providing vocational and technical skills and
- (c) Ensuring that parents who send their children to Almajiri School are able to take care of such children.

Governor Sule of Nasarawa State has this to say about the new child Rights Protection Laws in Nasarawa State, "People give birth to children they cannot take care of and from the age of six, seven, eight, 10, they take them from one village to another and say they are going to acquire Islamic education. It is a very awkward way of trying to stay away from responsibility. Most of such parents don't even leave enough resources for the up keep for their children with the malams. They just abandon the children for the malams. Unfortunate, some of the malams deliberately send the children to the streets to get and earn money, so the money could be used to pay for their education. In the spirit to earn easy money, the Mallams often tell the almajiri to make daily contributions according to their ages. Some might pay N300, some other N500 and so on. In this way, the almajiri are exposed to danger as they are exposed to all kinds of child abuse. Such as child labour, delinquency, crime and wrong doings and the issue of protecting the child is zero. But at the end of the day the almajiri end up acquiring no functional education. The time they would have used to acquiring education and home training

is what they use in begging alms. The law the state government enacted is to protect the child from abuse". Governor Sule (2020) explained how the law would operate to protect the almajiri: "Any child between six and ten must not be separated from the parents or guardian. Such children should return to their parents to sleep each day after leaving the Almajiri School. The parent should take responsibility for feeding them, clothing them, and providing shelter for them. For those their parents are not in the state, they should be with their guardians. By the time they are 10, the state government will provide some assistance. Islam doesn't allow begging. Parent must learn to have the number of children they can take care of and not to have 10 or 15 children when one can care of only three or four?

In the spirit of national drive to curb street begging by almajiri and bolster child dignity in the north Governor Sule of Nasarawa State and Emir Sanusi II share the same view that the truth must be told to power and the conservative elite no matter whose ox is gored. The fight against street begging by almajiri is a very controversial cause but that is the truth and the right way to go to make north a better place and society for all. Leaders in the north that confront social ills like almajiri institution and the need for girl-child education, have got to trouble with the conservative elite because they said the right thing. But the north cannot run away from the right things, even when saying the right things might be unpopular. As a national drive to fight against street begging almajiri, Governor Sule has vowed to send about 30,000 underage children from other states that are being used for child labour across Nasarawa State back to their respective states.

In the spirit of national drive to bolster child dignity and curb street begging by almajiri as Emir Sanusi II have been campaigning for the Northern region. In Kano State, the problem of child begging by almajiri. Arrangements are being made for the enrolment of out-of-school children in 12 faculties across some local government areas in the state, in compliance with the states policy on free and compulsory education. Each facility has dormitories, hostels, cafeteria, toilets and staff quarters, (Garba, 2020) Despite this efforts, Kano State is yet to tackle the menace posed by the almajiri on recent time, that made Sanusi to cry out for help.

II. Conclusion

In the recent history of Nigeria, Emir Sanusi II national drive to enhance and bolster child dignity and curb street begging by almajiri has gained widespread and far-reaching acceptance in Northern Nigeria and the world at large. The national drive and move is now gaining more support as other northern governors have started joining the crusade against begging by almajiri children. Even though, Emir Sanusi II was dethroned for speaking truth to power no matter whose ox is gored to curb social ills in Northern Nigeria and Nigeria at large. However, in the fight against street begging by almajiri the north need more Emirs like Sanusi II to join the crusade. The danger of 14 million out-of-school children doesnot qualify the almajiri institution but, rather, an oppressive system that can best be described as a crime against humanity of the children by their parents and a society that condones such evil of irresponsible parenting (Dahiri, 2020). This growing army of homeless, hungry, barely clothed and uneducated socio-economically dislocated children is already an exploding time bomb that cannot be rationalized on the basis of the religion of Islam.

III. Recommendations

This paper has come forth with the following recommendations to curb street begging by almajiri and enhance child dignity.

(a) It is not good for poor men to marry more than one wife, and gave birth to many children that may end up becoming beggars in the streets. As Sanusi (2020) put it, "We have all seen the economic consequences of men who are not capable of maintaining one wife, marrying four, producing 20 children, not educating them, leaving them on the streets to end up as thugs and terrorists". A man who love his children would not allow them to beg. Sanusi (2020) warned the conservative Northern elite and people: "We have adopted an interpretation of our culture and our religion that is rooted in the 13th Century mindset that refuses to recognize that the rest of the world has moved on"(Yakubu, 2020).

Emir Sanusi II was a social crusader that champion child rights and child dignity to curb vices as street begging by almajiri. He was a source of inspiration that fight for progress, liberty justice and equality for all humanity. In the fight against street begging by almajiri he was an icon, figure, symbol and representation of the almajiri freedom and dignity that other leaders and traditional rulers in the north should emulate as pragmatism and realism to liberate the oppressed almajiri.

(b)In the spirit of national drive to curb street begging by almajiri and bolster child dignity, Governor Bagudu of Kebbi State and Governor Sule of Nasarawa State. Were symbol and hope to edify and restore the dignity of almajiri by building facilities across their states to bolster the education of the almajiri so that they would stop street begging that endanger their lives and future. Thus, in the fight against street begging by the almajiri, the emirs, governor and the National Assembly members suppose to collaborate and team up to collapse, and sink the walls of social ills of begging of the almajiri institution in the northern region. The almajiri need functional education that would enable them to be economic self reliance. They also need

reorientation, face lift education and improvement of their moral to stop the habit of begging. The state governors in the north should enact laws that would abolish and abrogate street begging by almajiri. The almajiri schools should be reformed, remolded and refurbished with trained teachers that would repeal and cancel the street beggarly altitude of the almajiri children. Entrepreneurship centres and skills acquisition centres should be build in the north to enable almajiri acquire skills that would enable them earn a living in a competitive modern world of today.

(c) In the fight against street begging by almajiri, all hands must be on the deck to enable the almajiri to discard, quit and reject the habit of almajiri roaming the streets begging alms during school period. The negative thinking about Western education in the minds of the almajiri should be remodel and rejuvenated to embrace Western education. Such reinvigoration, renovation and rejuvenation should come from their parents, Emir, teachers, president of Nigeria, Senators and their governors. Such renaissance of the almajiri to stop their old ways of street begging to welcome the new dawn of functional education is a new birth and reawakening of re-emergence of modernity and new resurrection which the Nigeria president, the National Assembly and governors should be ready to put in fund and human resources from the national budget; to repair and restore the old damage caused by street begging for alms over several decades by the youthful population in Northern Nigeria.

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