



ALMAJIRI AS A NATIONAL CRISIS: UNVEILING THE CULTURE OF SUFFERING AND NEGLIGENCE IN NIGERIA

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Abstract:

The Almajiri culture is a reality in the cultural life of Nigerian people. It is widely practiced in Northern Nigeria. This practice is widespread even in contemporary times. Consequently, this study used primary and secondary data to document the culture of Almajiri system in Northern Nigeria. The primary data were collected through interviews from randomly selected informants. It found that the Almajiri culture is characterised with social crisis, suffering and culture of abandonment, thereby necessitating a continuous interrogation and recommendation on the strategies to manage it. It recommends multidimensional strategies of human capital empowerment towards the transformation of the Almajiri culture, which is expected to drive development in Northern Nigeria.

Keywords

Almajiri, abandonment,
negligence, Suffering &
Northern Nigeria

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

The Almajiri system of education is one of the most controversial and debated topics in northern Nigeria. This educational system has been in existence in northern Nigeria for more than five hundred (500) years. The origin of this system of education can be traced to the origin of Islam in northern Nigeria in the eleventh (11th) century. However, it is pertinent to note that, what ought to be a system whereby the northern Muslims are inculcated with the values, principles, fundamentals and tenets of Islam, to a system of alms seeking ranging from going to house to house begging for food, walking bare footed, wearing tattered and dirty clothes, loitering around banks, ATMs, markets, restaurants, car parks, traffic junctions, etc, begging for help. Therefore, this work seeks to examine the neglected peoples of Africa of which the Almajiri people constitute a part. The origin of the Almajiri system of education is the same with the origin of Islam in Makkah, when the Quran was unveiled to Prophet Muhammed. Therefore, it is germane to state that, as a system of learning, this system has the full backing of Islam as enshrined in several passages of the Quran on the importance of knowledge seeking. Tracing the origin of this system of education, it is of import for us to look at the origin of Islam.

Muhammed, the great prophet, was born at Makkah in the ruling and aristocratic clan of the Quraysh, a branch of the Ismailite family. His father Abdullah was the youngest son of the then chief of the Quraysh, Abdul Muttalib. Abdullah was married to Aminah, a daughter of Wahhab of Bznu Zohra clan. There are some differences as to the date of the birth of the prophet. The accepted view is that he was born in 571 A.D. The child was named Ahmad by his mother and Muhammed by his grand-father¹.

After his marriage to Khadijah, Muhammed frequently visited a cave of the Hera, a small mountain not far from Makkah, and devoted himself to meditation. He would spend month of every year in deep meditation in the Hera cave. He thought of the wretched condition of the people, their mis-beliefs and social evils, and sought for divine light and guidance to lead them to the path of true religion and morality and better and

¹ Rahim A, *Islamic History*(Lagos: Islamic Publication Bureau, 2001), 12

healthier social order and system. Muhammed mediated at Hera for fifteen years, yearning for truth and divine guidance. At last the truth and divine guidance came down to him. One night in the month of Ramadhan as he lay in the cave, wrapped in his mantle, a voice came to him and bade him to read. He trembled with awe and said that he could not read. Asked the second time, he made the same reply. When the third time the voice commanded him to read, he read the verse of the Quran. Muhammed became a prophet and at this time was aged forty (610AD). After this first revelation, the verses of the Quran were revealed to prophet Muhammed during the twenty (20) years of his prophetic career. The Quran is the fundamental of Islam and of an ideal social order. Islam enjoins its followers to lead a pure, simple and decent life².

The Almajiri system of education trains young Muslims about the system of their religion starting from the Quran³. The Hausa name for this system of education is called Tsangaya system of education. Colloquially, the term has expanded to refer to any young person who begs and does not attend secular school⁴. The male gender seeking Islamic knowledge is called Almajiri, female gender is Almajira, and the plural is Almajirai. The system encourages parents to leave parental responsibilities to the attached Islamic school. It is equally important to state that, in the Almajiri system of education of the contemporary era, a person seeking Islamic knowledge may literally not leave his/her immediate environment, this is as a result of the proliferation of Islamic scholars in northern Nigeria, thus, one can learn how to read, write and recite the Quran within the coffers of his house. However, it is pertinent to note that, 99% of people that leave their immediate environment to another in search of this knowledge are the male gender, while the female counterpart learns within their own environment.

² Rahim A, *Islamic History*, cited. 17-18

³ Dr Muhammed Tanko Aliyu, 45, years old lecturer and head of department of Islamic studies, federal university, Lafia, interviewed on 3rd August, 2021 at his office in federal university, Lafia

⁴ Akhaine Saxon et al, "Northern governors begin expulsion of Almajiris over coronavirus", *The Guardian*, April 23, 2020, accessed August 29, 2021, <https://www.guardian.ng/news/northern-governors-begin-expulsion-of-almajiris-over-coronavirus/>

The Almajiri educational system is developed within the philosophy of Islamic faith in teaching and learning. This is why the central idea revolves around the inculcation of Islamic knowledge, morals and values on how to practice the Islamic religion (prayers, alms giving, pilgrimage, mu'amalat, fasting, etc). Amongst its objectives are; to ensure that children read and recite the Quran, children become fully inducted into Islamic moral values in all behaviours and children become knowledgeable in Arabic language and basic Islamic sciences as a foundation for further studies⁵.

The Almajiri system of education is supported by several passages in the Quran. A notable example is Quran 9:127, which enjoins Muslims to seek knowledge; "A company of every part should go forth and gain sound knowledge in religion to enable them to teach their people when they come back to them". In several Hadith narrations, the prophet was reported to have said; "Go ease the way to the paradise for him who seeks knowledge", "Whoever follows the road of knowledge Allah will show him the road to paradise"⁶. The prophet also opined that one can seek for knowledge as far as China.

The system has produced the judges, clerks, and teachers who provided the colonial administration with needed staff. The first set of colonial staff in northern Nigeria was provided by the Almajiri schools⁷. The aim of the Almajiri system of education is to build individuals that will contribute to the development of the society in general⁸. Therefore, this system has led to the rise of prominent Islamic clerics and scholars in northern Nigeria that has contributed to the religious development of northern Nigeria. Prominent amongst them include; Sheikh Dahiru of

⁵ Muhammed Isa and Danjuma Yusuf, "The Almajiri Educational System: Origin, Dynamics and Challenges", *Journal of Political Science and International Relations*, Vol 2, No 1 and 2 (2015): 198-199, accessed August 29, 2021, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/34397692_The_Almajiri_Educational_System-Origin_Dynamics_and_Challenges

⁶ Muhammed Isa and Danjuma Yusuf, "The Almajiri Educational System", cited. 199

⁷ Nwanze Cheta, "History of the Almajiri system in Nigeria", *The Guardian*, May 29, 2019, accessed August 29, 2021. <https://m.guardian.ng/features/history-of-almajiri-system-in-nigeria/amp/>

⁸ Muhammed Isa and Danjuma Yusuf, "The Almajiri Educational System", cited. 200

Bauchi⁹ The system which produced teachers, bureaucrats, writers, diplomats and politicians, during the colonial era, the colonist ensured that no much attention was given to this system of education in reform, modification and continuity¹⁰.

With time, the Almajiri system, which was meant to inculcate Islamic virtue into the youth, degenerated into a practice characterized by unwholesome and inhuman activities. At the formative stage of Almajiri schooling, it was not envisaged that the Quranic pupils would have to beg for alms permanently or do menial jobs for their survival, as it is the practice today. These days, a typical Almajiri can be spotted by his unsavoury appearance – dressed in tattered clothes, disease afflicted, and armed with plastic plate, he roams the street begging for alms. Socially, regarded as nuisance, the Almajirai are often chased away by decent people. They hang around restaurants, markets, shops, petrol stations, and houses, most times sleeping on disused piece of cardboard or bare floors. As a result of these social and economic deprivations, some Almajirai end up becoming commercial errand boys, hewers of wood, or fetching of water (known locally as ‘mai ruwa’). Many take to pretty theft, thuggery, and peddling of hard drugs¹¹. Therefore, it is important to note that, the negligence of this system of education has led to different dimensions of Almajiri crisis, sufferings and abandonment. In this study, we shall take a cursory look at these dimensions, sufferings, and abandonment that the Almajiri has lived in for decades. The work is divided into six sections. The first section is the introduction. It is followed by the conceptual clarification and literature review, which analyses existing study and conception on the Almajiri. The third section covers the gap on the existing policies and the findings on the sufferings of the Almajiri as a neglected group. The fourth centres on the recommendations and the last part which is the conclusion.

⁹ Mallam Rabi'u, owner of Almajiri school and also an undergraduate student of federal university, Lafia, interviewed on 31st July, 2021 at his Almajiri school, makarantan Mallam Rabi'u, Kofar Kaura, Lafia.

¹⁰ Muhammed Isa and Danjuma Yusuf, “The Almajiri Educational System”, cited. 202

¹¹ Aghedo Iro and Surulola James Eke, “From Alms to Arms: The Almajiri Phenomenon and Internal Security in Northern Nigeria”, *The Korean Journal of Policy Studies*, Vol 28, No 3 (2013): 104, accessed August 29, 2021, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/28030982_From_Alms_to_Arms_The_Almajiri_Phenomenon_and_Internal_Security_in_Northern_Nigeria

2.0 CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION/ LITERATURE REVIEW ON DIMENSIONS OF ALMAJIRI CRISIS

The word Almajiri is derived from the Arabic word AL which means God¹². It also means an emigrant, in other word known as Muhajurum. That is to say, someone who leaves his place of origin to another location in search of knowledge¹³. Therefore, during the time of prophet Muhammed, there was people who devoted their time, whose only job and duty was to read and recite the Quran as it has been handed over to the prophet by Angels¹⁴. However, its development as a system of education can be traced to the death of prophet Muhammed. Before the Almajiri system of education, people recited the Quran in a wrong way¹⁵. Therefore, there was a need to create a system in which people will be taught on how to read, write and recite the Quran. Thus, this single act led to the origin of the Almajiri system of education.

The Almajiri crisis which is as a result of the decaying school system has taken different dimensions ranging from insecurity, political instability, religious fundamentalism and fanaticism, dwindling economy, etc. Therefore, it is pertinent to take a cursory look at each of these phenomenon in order to understand the dimensions of the Almajiri crisis properly in northern Nigeria. In 2006, it was estimated that over seven million males a year were matriculating into Quranic schools. Currently, there are 9.5 million Almajirai in northern Nigeria. About half of these are domiciled in the core northeast geopolitical zone.¹⁶

¹² Tijani Dan'Maje, civil servant who works under the ministry of education, Lafia, interviewed on 28th July, 2021, at his wife's house, beside Sandaje hotel, millionaire's quarters.

¹³ Aliyu Umar C, self-employed and a graduate of Nasarawa State University, Keffi, interviewed on 28th July, 2021, at his home, Ochefu Crescent, Almakura street, Lafia.

¹⁴ Umar Muhammed Kwasau, graduate of federal university, Lafia and a graduate of an Almajiri school, interviewed on 29th July, 2021, at federal university, Lafia, Nasarawa state.

¹⁵ Mallam Abubakar Dahiru, Islamic teacher in Aunty Dele College, Shinge, Lafia, interviewed on 28th July, 2021 at Aunty Dele College, Shinge, Lafia

¹⁶ Aghedo Iro and Surulola James Eke, "From Alms to Arms", cited. 104

However, it is pertinent to note that, as a system which has its origin in Islam, it is not only a system in practice in Nigeria but other prominent Islamic countries such as; Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Omani, Iran, Qatar, Iraq, Indonesia, Pakistan, etc. Unlike what is obtainable in these countries whereby the schools are structured and are funded by government, that of Nigeria system were left for the mallams who runs it independently of government and are often given some help by the society. Therefore, the mallams who do not have the wherewithal to take care of these children force them to go out and beg. When they go out to beg for food they also look for money and in some cases become vulnerable to undesirable elements in the society and they are used as foot-soldiers for insecurity, insurrection and other social vices in the society¹⁷.

However, the use of social miscreants' fodder has a long history in northern Nigeria, as shown by the Maitatsine urban revolts which broke out in Kano in 1980 and spread to Maiduguri and Kaduna in 1982, Jimeta-Yola in 1984, and Gombe in 1985. Muhammed Marwa, who led the Maitatsine uprising which claimed over 5000 lives, obviously the precursor to Boko Haram terrorism, had exploited the dwindling economic situation of northern Nigeria in the early 1980s by recruiting foot-soldiers from the Almajiri system. Street urchins who were unable to afford the basic necessities of life became diehard patriots of the Islamic sect and Marwa. The Maitatsine preached that killing was compulsory and they believed they would go to heaven if they killed *arnas*¹⁸.

Relative poverty is another intervening variable driving the correlation between the Almajiri population and insecurity in the region. The level of poverty in northern Nigeria is higher than the national average. And the most hit is the Almajirai, who are totally dependent on alms to survive. The proliferation of gangs, militias, and vigilantes, many of which operate outside state control, leads to insecurity by providing a source of weapons and training for miscreants, including Almajirai. In much of northern Nigeria, the Yan Daba (a reserved army of the unemployed) often take care of the Almajirai, who serve as the main pool

¹⁷ Dr Muhammed Tanko Aliyu, cited

¹⁸ Agbedo Iro and Surulola James Eke, "From Alms to Arms", cited. 107

for Yan Daba recruitment. The Almajirai play the role of errand boys while the Yan Daba membership act as mentors, whom the average Almajiri child looks up to. This relationship is cemented by the seeming unity of purpose that they share: standing in antithesis to anything or anybody perceived as responsible for their dehumanized condition. These groups often act in ways that are indicative of the ease with which they metamorphose into tribal and religious terrorists¹⁹.

Groups like the Yan Daba, Boko Haram, ISWAP (Islamic State of West Africa Province), and their Almajiri recruits claim to be committed to the purification of Islam, which sets them against anybody that fails to adhere to the dictates of the Quran, and this includes even Muslims of Yoruba extraction, who they regard as untrue Muslims for sabotaging their desire for an orthodox Islam, along with the Nigerian police force, which attempts to curtail their activities. Recent threats and attacks on police headquarters and other police posts by the Boko Haram sect make clear just how antagonistic the relationship between the Boko Haram and the police is and also indicative of the Boko Haram's willingness to exterminate any opposition to its so-called Islamization agenda. Yet, religion is only used as a tool to legitimize their violent operations, which are carried out by the spiraling youth population that has become uncontrollable due to the region's development crisis²⁰.

Conservative estimate put the number of people who have died in Boko Haram related conflicts at over 3600. Most of the victims are innocent civilians, including men, women and children, who have been killed in such public places as worship centers, schools, markets, and relaxation spots. A sizable number of security personnel have also been killed as a result of carefully planned and executed attacks on security formations such as police stations and soldier barracks. But the Nigerian government and the Muslim community saw the Almajiri menace coming. A former permanent secretary in the ministries of Water Resources, Science and Technology, and Education in Jigawa state had in 2010 alerted the nation to the danger of the Quranic students when he started that "we are only

¹⁹ Aghedo Iro and Surulola James Eke, "From Alms to Arms", cited. 114

²⁰ Aghedo Iro and Surulola James Eke, "From Alms to Arms", cited. 115

grooming them as future terrorists not only in Nigeria, but in the whole of Africa”. Indeed, various studies have also implicated the Almajiri system in several urban revolts in northern Nigeria²¹.

Amongst these include, the case of Almajiri Usman Musa demonstrates the evil consequences of manipulation. On July 9, 2010, the 19 years old was arrested by the police for attempting to assassinate the emir of Kano with a gun during Jumal service at the Kano Central Mosque. The Emir of Kano is one of the most prominent Muslim leaders in Nigeria. On interrogation, the Almajiri confessed that he was only doing the bidding of his mallam, who also gave him the weapon and some charms. He added that a week earlier, he had deposited the sum of one million naira which he and his mallam robbed from an Igbo trader. 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 Almajirai. One of them admitted that they were paid about 30 dollars each by some politicians and rebel leaders to spy on troops, vandalize property, and maim and kill non-Muslims. “We were given a keg of petrol by our bosses to set some schools ablaze, which we did within Maiduguri, and we were paid 5000 Naira”. Another Almajiri ‘child-soldier’ said:

We were taken to Damaturu. We watched out for the Soldiers at their units and reported back to them (B-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 that²².

The instrumentalisation of disaffected youth for violence is, however, not new in the region. Militia groups such as Dan Kalare in Gombe, Yan Sara Suka in Bauchi, ECOMOG in Borno were, for instance, used by politicians in their struggle for power in the run up to the 2007 elections and thereafter. In addition to these groups and the more notorious Hisbah, there are a plethora of local gangs such as Yan Farauta (gang of hunters), Yan Tauri (persons who make and use ritual herbal medicine to

²¹ Aghedo Iro and Surulola James Eke, “From Alms to Arms”, cited. 107

²² Aghedo Iro and Surulola James Eke, “From Alms to Arms”, cited. 106-7

prevent injuries from weapons), and Yan Daba (young marginal toughs) who lead violent lives on the edge of urban society in northern Nigeria. The ready availability of the members of these groups has been accompanied by the growing dysfunctionality and corruption of the federalized police force, creating a serious problem²³.

3.0 GAPS IN EXISTING POLICIES

Pervasion was introduced into the Almajiri system of education which have made some undesirable elements to hijack this system. Instead of a child going to acquire this system of education, the person is radicalized by way of brutality, compelling other ill treatment and force labour. One of the identities of the Almajirai is carrying plates, wearing tattered clothes, walking bare footed and many are underage going walking on the streets for survival. As far as we are concerned, there are several international treaties against this act, even in Nigeria, there is what is known as the Child Right Act, which amongst other things has what is known as the age of accountability which is pegged at 18 years and above. At this age, a child is perceived to be matured enough to fend for himself but when you sample the age bracket of these Almajiai most of them are children, teenagers that has no capacity to make informed decisions or care for themselves. These children have grown to become violent in nature, hostile, terrorists and the bulk of Boko Haram foot-soldiers and other terrorist groups have passed through the Almajiri school system²⁴. The socio-economic destitution of the Almajiri makes them prey to conflict entrepreneurs – desperate politicians who will stop at nothing in their quest for power and resources – who pay the street urchins peanuts to execute criminal acts. Today, the Almajirai have become ready-made recruits against political and business opponents and rivals. Many Almajirai are; exploited and used by the politicians as thugs and hoodlums to foment trouble, cause a riot, disrupt peace and achieve selfish political interest. In fact, it has been alleged that most of the terrorist attacks involving suicide bombings, setting places of worship ablaze, killing innocent souls and destroying property were masterminded by jobless pupils of Almajiri schools²⁵.

²³ Aghedo Iro and Surulola James Eke, "From Alms to Arms", cited. 105

²⁴ Alexander Emeka, self-employed, who was interviewed at his shop at Dan'maje shopping complex, Jos road, Lafia, Nasawara state on August 21st, 2021.

²⁵ Aghedo Iro and Surulola James Eke, "From Alms to Arms", cited. 105

The Almajirai have been used as a pawn in the chess game by northern political elites to foment political instability in the region. The vulnerability of these children have been exploited by the political ruling class during notable elections such as local government elections and general elections to carry out underage voting. In one of the videos, a young boy who appears to be between the age of 11 and 13, at Gwazaye polling unit, Kumbotso local government area, is seen fixing his thumbprint against a party logo while other children struggle to receive their ballot papers²⁶.

However, the vulnerability of these children in the area of political instability is not only limited to underage voting. They have been employed by bandits and kidnappers who have promised to take care of their well-being and are employed as their foot-soldiers. Therefore, the Almajirai are indoctrinated with extremist beliefs which has re-shaped their religious and cultural orientation and they are been taught to see the ruling class of the northern elites as a major obstacle to their socio-economic situation. Therefore, at any given situation, they are sent to carry out several illicit activities such as kidnapping, killing, rape, robbery, etc.

Therefore, this has led to the kidnapping and killing of high profile politicians and statesmen from the northern part of the country in a broad day light. Therefore, it has also led to the kidnapping of school children in which the latter are subjected to inhuman treatment such as forceful rape and early marriage to the leaders and members of the sects. A notable example includes the kidnapping of Chibok and Dapchi school children in Borno and Yobe states respectively. Also the killing of the former Chief of Staff, Alex Badeh in his farm along Keffi-Abuja express way, Keffi, Nasarawa state. More recently, the Nigerian security apparatus (Nigerian Defense Academy), was invaded by bandits, killing two officers and kidnapping one officer. These attacks are carried out in a broad day light. The son (Na'Allah Abdulkarim) of Senator Na'Allah from Kebbi state was killed by bandits who traced him to his GRA (Government Reserved Area) residence in Kaduna. The recruits of these sects are mostly the Almajirai who are roaming the streets carrying

²⁶ Akinkuotu Eniola, "Again, INEC distances self from underage voting in Kano", *Punch*, January 19, 2021, accessed August 30, 2021, <https://punchng.com/again-inec-distances-self-from-underage-voting-in-kano/>

plates, walking bare footed, begging for food from house to house, parks, restaurants, markets, filling stations, traffic junctions, banks, and highways, etc.

The surge in the insecurity situation of northern Nigeria has proliferated as a result of the abandonment of these children on the street. The kidnappers and bandits are having free day in the 19 northern states. Most of the headlines that occupies the national dailies both electronic and print media are the issues of insecurity ranging from kidnapping, unknown gunmen, banditry which the northern part of the country constitute 80-90% of these cases. Nowadays, one cannot travel along the busy Abuja-Kaduna-Kano express way by night due to the fear of being kidnapped or robbed. This is not only limited to the Abuja-Kaduna-Kano express way, night transportation has been brought to a halt in most of the states in northern Nigeria where the kidnappers and bandits are having a free day.

The point been made here is that, the Almajirai might not be the ones committing these crimes directly, but they are employed as spies and foot-soldiers to most of these dangerous sects such as Boko Haram, ISWAP (Islamic State of West African Province). Most of them might come having good intentions to beg, some are not, using the opportunity to spy on their targeted opponent, knowing when he goes out, when he is around, the entry and exist point of his house, etc. Therefore, in international security the place of spying cannot be over emphasized though it is not being done on a professional level unlike what is obtainable in developed countries of the world.

Therefore, with the growing insecurity in northern Nigeria, there is a need for the 19 northern governors to go back to the drawing board in ameliorating this obnoxious situation. However, in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, state governments in northern Nigeria banned the Almajiri system as a measure to limit the spread of Coronavirus²⁷. Good the policy adopted, but it did not in anywhere had an effect in changing or stopping the system. Nowadays, there is no major streets in northern

²⁷ Njoku Geoffrey, *Children adjust to life outside Nigeria's Almajiri system*(Nigeria: UNICEF Nigeria, 2020), accessed August 30, 2021, <https://www.unicef.org/nigeria/stories/children-adjust-life-outside-nigeria-almajiri-system>

Nigeria one cannot sight an Almajirai who are identified by wearing tattered clothes, bushy hair, carrying plates, etc.

However, it is germane to state that, not all those who beg (bara) are Almajirai. Some have taken advantage of the loosed system to solicit for alms and claim that they are also Almajiri. Thus, a layman equates or interprets Almajiri as meaning begging. Therefore, the streets have been proliferated by diverse beggars such as Dan-Kuruku (deformed), widows, blind, Almajiri, deaf, dumb, etc. Without fear of contradiction, one cannot come to the north without a sight of one of those beggars in the street. Thus, this has remained a vicious cycle in the societal system of northern Nigeria. Also, some undesirable elements have taken advantage of the system to steal, rape and carry out other illicit activities in the society. Therefore, if not checkmated, the situation may be worsened and all blames goes to the Almajiri system of education.

During the glory days of this system of education, students were at liberty to acquire skills in between their Islamic lessons, and so were involved in trades such as farming, fishing masonry, among others. Many were the farmers whose produce formed the famed groundnut pyramids. After colonization, Almajirai were recruited by the British as miners in Jos²⁸. Although, this is still obtainable, some venture into shoe repair, cloth washing, farming during raining season, wheel barrow pushing, water fetching, errands going, etc, in other to get money in other to feed themselves and also to buy soap in other to wash their clothes. This is because the students stay days without taking their bath neither washing their clothes, they even wear their clothes repeatedly. Some after graduation ventures into farming and other petty businesses. However, the point here is that, some of the Almajirai sleeps at garages, market places, food and drinking joints, restaurants, parks, inside filling stations, etc. Some no longer even attends class session which hold in the morning, afternoon and evening. Some due to the pressure from their mallams or teachers to bring certain amount on a weekly basis abscond from school because of the punishment that will follow if they did not pay such money. Therefore, they see no alternative than to remain in the street which they see as their only source of hope and survival. Some, due to

²⁸ Nwanze Cheta, "History of the Almajiri system in Nigeria", cited.

the pleasure they derive from begging in the street and mingling with their fellow students, ran away from studies and choose to make the street their permanent home. However, some rich men and women in the north has adopted these children to be house boys without adequately providing for their basic needs such as formal education. Some Almajirai has lost trace of their home of origin, this is because one starts this school at a tender age as early as four years. Thus, it is not surprise seeing a twenty years old roaming the streets of northern Nigeria as an Almajiri. While parents may believe they are fulfilling their religious and moral obligation to their children and that the learning is provided free of charge²⁹, most parents have lost contact with their children, this is because of the I don't care attitude of most parents. Therefore, these children are left to fend for themselves without any support from their parents whom may have six to seven other children who are still under him trying to survive.

The system also produced the judges, clerks, and teachers who provided the colonial administration with the needed staff. The first set of colonial staff in northern Nigeria was provided by the Almajiri schools. The British abolished state funding of Tsangaya, arguing that they were religious schools. "Karatun Boko", western education was introduced and funded instead. With this loss of support, the system collapsed. The pupils, and their mallams, having no financial support, resorted to begging for survival. Animosity and antagonism grew, worsened by the belief that western education was of Christian-European origin and therefore anti-Islamic. Fears grew that children with western education would eventually lose their Islamic identity³⁰. Therefore, this school system, has bred religious extremist as a result of the rigorous teaching the children pass through. Almajiri training provides one of the easiest avenues for indoctrination and radicalization. For example, the Almajirai are made to chant songs of protest and radicalization that criticize "makarantan Boko" (schools providing western education) and praise "makarantan addini or makarantan allo" (schools for Islamic instruction):

²⁹ Njoku Geoffrey, *Children adjust to life outside Nigeria's Almajiri system*, cited

³⁰ Nwanze Cheta, "History of the Almajiri system in Nigeria", cited.

Yan makarantan Boko
Ba Karatu, ba sallah
Sai Yawan Zagin Mallam

The song translates as;

Pupils of western schools,
You do not learn or pray
but only abuse your teachers³¹.

The Almajiri school system was meant to be like the Christian Missionary Schools³². The Almajirai has turned to undesirable elements of the society. This is due to the wanton suffering they undergo. The Almajirai are meant to be in classes divided into morning, afternoon and night sessions. However, due to negligence and lack of care, the Almajirai are found in the street roaming about seeking and begging for alms. As a result of this, the Almajirai no longer attend their classes as scheduled. Some have become a pawn in the chess game for some politicians in northern Nigeria.

When someone hears of the word ‘Almajiri’ he/she thinks of terror, radicalization, ideology to the detriment of humanity. The Almajirai are victims of circumstance, this is because they are not aware of the system but found themselves in the system which is affecting them. A situation whereby a child has no parental care, love, proper nurturing by parents, some at the age of 7, 8, 9 and 10 are found outside a harsh environment and condition under torture and they are given a treatment that is not good for their age which makes them to be hostile and radicalised³³

Therefore, the system that is meant to care for them is no longer giving them what they needed because the system has collapsed. In a conventional education, the teachers are paid and structures such as library, classrooms, desks, etc, are put in place for their conducive learning but these basic structures are lacking in the Almajiri school system. The Almajirai are seated on the ground or on a mat, bare-floor

³¹ Aghedo Iro and Surulola James Eke, “From Alms to Arms”, cited. 106

³² Alexander Emeka, cited

³³ Alexander Emeka, cited

using slate and the environment is not conducive for learning. Some are radicalized, to be in form of a recruits of some militant Islamic sect because of what they are being used to perpetuate such as securing their economic and political places. This radicalization is as a result of the training they receive which is not part of Islamic principles and fundamentals³⁴.

In the area of abandonment, the elites only use them to achieve their religious, political and economic end. They are not being treated the way they ought to be treated. For instance, in the recent COVID-19 outbreak in Nigeria, the first measure the northern governors put in place was to send back the Almajiri students back to their states instead of providing and catering for them. It became a competition amongst the governors of northern Nigeria in sending thousands of these students back to their respective states of origin. But the fact still remains, these students have been there for years, what have these governors done for them? How were they fed? Some children in the orphanage homes are taken care of than people in the Almajiri school. Therefore, they have been abandoned to suffer by the people that created the system and are used only to achieve they religious end³⁵.

Due to the suffering and abandonment that the Almajiri students are subjected to, they often eat soured food and also eat scrub from the ground. Some of the Almajiri students also search for food in waste bin. Therefore, this has exposed them to all manners of diseases and sicknesses. Therefore, this is a clarion call for northern stakeholders to wake up and ameliorate this bad image.

4.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

The 19 northern states should establish a regional approach to Almajiri education and holistic re-orientation campaigns and the role of the emirate system should be re-define to reflect the contemporary changes around the world, particularly as it obtained in most dominated part of Arab world³⁶. For any intervention to succeed, the monitors and

³⁴ Alexander Emeka, cited

³⁵ Alexander Emeka, cited

³⁶ Muhammed Isa and Danjuma Yusuf, "The Almajiri Educational System", cited. 196

supervisors should be people of impeccable characters with Islamic and Quranic education who can be respected by the teachers. The proprietors of the system should be given opportunity to further their education³⁷.

There is need for government to restructure the syllable of the Almajiri system of education in other to fit into contemporary system of education since it has classes which can be classified as similar to a western education system where one goes from primary-secondary-university³⁸

Government has to be truthful³⁹. There is need for government to carry along the teachers of these schools in formulating any given policies⁴⁰. This could be said of the Almajiri schools which was established by the then president, Goodluck Ebele Jonathan, which failed because most of the teachers were not carried along. There is need to integrate the Almajiri schools into Islamic schools. Although, Islamic schools is quite different from Almajiri schools, but the former also teaches what is been taught in the latter⁴¹.

In other to ameliorate the level of begging in the street, government can provide food items to schools which could be monthly or quarterly⁴². Also, national policy on Child Rights Act should be ratified by northern states⁴³. The private sector and Islamic organisations should intervene in the programme reform and improve on the gains made so far to prevent situations of having the students out of school to seek livelihood, as it does not speak well of Islamic faith⁴⁴. There is need for government to think about putting these proprietors on payroll in other to feel carried along and that their contributions are recognized by the government⁴⁵.

³⁷ Dr Muhammed Tanko Aliyu, cited.

³⁸ Umar Muhammed Kwasau, cited.

³⁹ Tijani Dan'Maje, cited.

⁴⁰ Mallam Hassan Kukabinsa, 50c years old Mallam that inherited an Almajiri school from from his father, interviewed on July 31st, 2021 at Makarantan Mallam Hassan Kukabinsa, Lafia.

⁴¹ Mallam Abubakar Dahiru, cited

⁴² Mallam Rabi'u, cited and Ismail Abubakar 28c years old Almajiri student of Makarantan Mallam Musa, interviewed on 31st July, at Makarantan Mallam Musa, Kankaran Rapi, Lafia.

⁴³ Muhammed Isa and Danjuma Yusuf, "The Almajiri Educational System", cited. 196

⁴⁴ Muhammed Isa and Danjuma Yusuf, "The Almajiri Educational System", cited. 196

⁴⁵ Dr Muhammed Tanko Aliyu, cited

There is need for the teachers of these schools to register under the federal government in order for government to know the numbers of Almajiri schools in the country and also to know the number of students under each schools and adequately make plans for them. Government can establish a school whereby these students can be attending under the government control⁴⁶. This school should be equipped with modern facilities and their teachers should collaborate in order to teach these students.

In Lafia, efforts are being made to reform this system through the collaboration of different stakeholders. There is an intervention project fund that the federal government has been disbursing to selected centers of every states for building of infrastructure in these schools. The programme is called IQTE (Integrated Quranic and Tsangayya Education). The desk officer for IQTE in each centers of the selected twenty-five states is the desk officer for SUBEB coordinated by the coordinator of Islamic studies. This intervention is with a grant of five million naira for each centers and it is their responsibility to choose what they want and the money is given under the supervision of State Implementation Team (SIT) and with also the monitoring of SUBEB and UBEC. They were given a deadline to complete this project and when they finish, the project remains they own⁴⁷

This is a laudable initiative from the federal government. However, there are certain conditions attached to it, part of which are; they must agree with the integration - both Islamic education and western education are taught in the Almajiri schools. Although, some accepted this proposals others rejected it vehemently⁴⁸

Most recently, there is a move by Sardauna foundation, led by its Managing Directors, Engr Abubakar Umar Gambo, to reform the Almajiri system of education. He said, 'we decided to engage traditional leaders and religious leaders to advocate for a reform in the Almajiri system such that the Almajiri will study with dignity and in a healthy and globally acceptable environment so that the study will be beneficial to them and the society', he further postulated that, 'the purpose of the

⁴⁶ Dr Yusuf, lecturer in the department of Islamic Studies, federal university, Lafia, interviewed on 2nd August, 2021 at his office in federal university, Lafia.

⁴⁷ Dr Muhammed Tanko Aliyu, cited.

⁴⁸ Dr Muhammed Tanko Aliyu, cited.

engagement is to collate views to get the best ways to modernize the system and thereafter engage stakeholders at the policy level that will change the condition and maybe in the near future, we will see improvement in the system'⁴⁹.

5.0 CONCLUSION

The Almajiri is a reality that is characterised of massive suffering and abandonment of children. It is widely practiced in Northern Nigeria and has strong negative implication for Nigerian national development. This study has traced the origin of the Almajiri culture and how they suffer in different parts of Northern Nigeria. It is pertinent to note that, some Mallams strictly adhere to the practice of this system of education. In an attempt to ensure a total overhaul of the Almajiri educational system in northern Nigeria, there are pragmatic ways to improve and reform the system. In a specific way the government and stakeholders involve in Almajiri education should adopt the following reforms⁵⁰ This is a system that cannot be abolished. The northern governors during the Covid-19 lock down sent most of these children back to their respective states. However, this strategy was never a success story because people still roam about the streets begging including the alleged repatriated Almajirai boys.

⁴⁹ Ahmadu-Suka Maryam, "Sardauna foundation seeks ways to reform Almajiri system", *Daily Trust*, August 13, 2021, 29.

⁵⁰ Muhammed Isa and Danjuma Yusuf, "The Almajiri Educational System", cited. 196