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## **Covid-19 Pandemic and the "Almajiri" System in Northern Nigeria**

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### **Abstract**

Almajiri system is no doubt among the social problems in Nigeria. The system has been condemned for propagating youth poverty and delinquency, making Almajirai (Wards in the system) susceptible to abuse and exploitation. The condition of Almajirai, often unhygienic, messy and unkempt, makes them vulnerable to Coronavirus diseases (Covid-19). The attendant precautionary measures (lockdown, movement restriction, inter state travel ban, physical and social distancing) introduced by the government further complicate their means of survival. This study is essential as it examined the operations of the Almajiri system during Covid-19 pandemic in Nigeria and analysed government response to address the problem. By means of secondary sources, the study found that Almajirai way of life were threatened by Covid-19 preventive measures (lockdown, movement restriction, inter state travel ban, physical and social distancing). Although, previous response by the government were geared towards integrating the Almajiri system with the formal education system, Covid-19 pandemic instigate a new and practical approach towards halting the system.

**Keywords:** Northern Nigeria, Almajiri System, Covid-19, Lockdown, Hygiene

## The Problematic

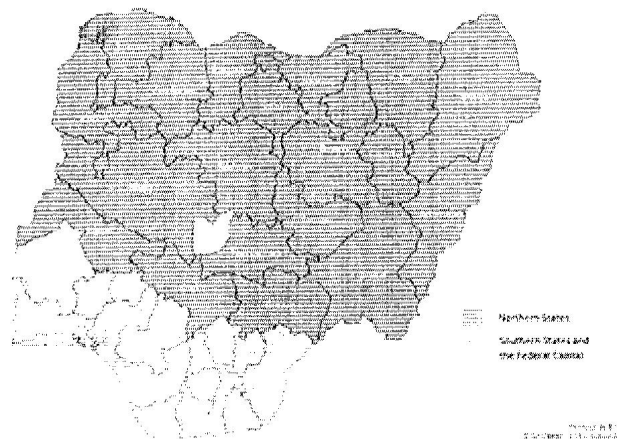
Caused by poor socioeconomic status of parents in Northern Nigeria, the societal and cultural norms of the Almajiri system compels poor parents to entrust their wards (usually ages 3 and 12) to Islamic teacher (Mallam) for free Quranic education farther from their place of abode (Khalid, 2001, Sebastine and Obeta, 2015). This system is thought of as a means for teaching children to be oriented in Islamic doctrine in early childhood to groom them for decent adulthood (Khalid, 1998; Yakubu, 2017). However, the Almajiri system has been devalued, acquiring different meaning synonymous with child destitution. In the course of begging for alms, Almajirai are exposed to various forms of hazard and conditions not conducive to healthy living.

Covid-19 is a variant of Corona viruses that spreads mainly through release from nose and droplets when an infected person coughs or sneezes (Nigeria Center for Disease Control, 2020; World Health Organization, 2020). Due to the rate of spread of Covid-19 globally, good hygiene practices such as regular washing of hand, avoiding crowded spaces, wearing of face mask, observing physical and social distancing etc., were put forward to reduce the spread of the virus (NCDC, 2020; WHO, 2020). However, the condition of the Almajirai, often in cluster, unhygienic, messy and unkempt makes them vulnerable to Covid-19.

Existing studies (Balogun and Adeyemi, 2015; Aghedo and Eke, 2013) revealed that Almajiri system constitute threats to social cohesion, security and active citizenship. In relation to Covid-19 pandemic, poor hygiene condition of Almajirai as well as Covid-19 precautionary measure (lockdown, movement restriction and inter state travel ban) brings to bear the fear of increasing rate of the virus. This study set out to examine the dynamics in the operations of the Almajiri system during Covid-19 pandemic in Nigeria and analyse government response to solving the Almajiri problem. To achieve these objectives, the study is organized into seven parts. In addition to this introductory note, the second section attempt a brief description of the socioeconomic condition in the Northern region. While the third section contextualized Covid-19 pandemic in Nigeria, historical synopsis, philosophy, operating strategy and problems of the Almajiri system were discussed in the fourth section. The fifth section examined the operations of the Almajiri system during Covid-19 pandemic in Nigeria, while the sixsection analysed government response to address the menace, before conclusion.

## Affected States

Diagram 1 shows the map of Nigeria showing Northern part covering 19 states including; Adamawa, Bauchi, Benue, Borno, Combe, Jigawa, Kaduna, Kano, Katsina, Kebbi, Kogi, Kwara, Nasarawa, Niger, Plateau, Sokoto, Taraba, Yobe and Zamfara. Northern Nigeria is populated by the Hausa-Fulani, who are predominantly Muslims. Socioeconomic condition in Nigeria showed a wide gap between the impoverished North and the prosperous South (Dapel, 2018; Ngbea and Achunike, 2014). Available information on poverty and inequality by the Nigeria National Bureau of Statistics (2019) ranked Northern states highest in poverty rate. Compared to Southern states, Northern states are short of financial resources required to create an environment for poverty reduction (Dapel, 2018).

**Diagram 1: Map of Nigeria showing Northern states**

### Covid-19 Pandemic in Nigeria

Corona viruses includes Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS-CoV), discovered in China in 2003 and Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS-Cov), first reported in Saudi Arabia in 2012 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020; WHO, 2020). Covid-19 emerged as a different strain of SARS (SARS-CoV-2). Studies (Peiris, Lai and Poon, 2003; WHO, 2020) found that Corona viruses are zoonotic, in the sense that they are largely transmitted between animals and humans. While Covid-19 symptoms may differ according to the degree of severity, common manifestations are fever, cough, severe and difficulty breathing, sore throat, fatigue etc. (CDC, 2020; WHO, 2020).

Since the discovery of Covid-19 in Wuhan China, 2019, the virus as continue to spread globally, mostly through person-to-person contact (WHO, 2020; NCDC, 2020). Due to the contagious effect and rate of spread of Covid-19, the WHO confirms Covid-19 as a pandemic on 11 March, 2020 (CDC, 2020; WHO, 2020). As of 10 September 2020, there have been 28,056,964 cases of Covid-19, including 908,657 deaths and 20,123,066 recoveries globally (WHO, 2020). While Covid-19 vaccine is still in view, preventive measures involves good hygiene practices including constant hand washing, wearing a face covering, observing physical and social distancing etc. (Awofeso and Irabor, 2020a, WHO, 2020; NCDC, 2020). Other precautionary measures such as lockdown, self-isolation, movement restrictions, barn on public gathering, inter state travel ban etc. were also introduce by governments to curb the spread of Covid-19 (Awofeso and Irabor, 2020b; NCDC, 2020).

Nigeria recorded first case of Covid-19 in Lagos state on 27 February, 2020 through an Italian citizen (NCDC, 2020). By 10 September 2020, the number of confirmed cases and deaths resulting from Coronavirus in Nigeria has increase to 55,632 and 1,070 respectively (NCDC, 2020). To contain the spread of the various, the Federal government declared lockdown on 30 March, 2020 in Lagos Ogun and Kano states, as well as Abuja (Awofeso and Irabor, 2020a; NCDC, 2020). Similar directive were followed by state governments leading to interstate travel ban, movement restriction and closure of school, religion, social and sport gatherings. A Presidential Task Force (PTF) on Covid-19 was also instituted to monitor the management of Covid-19 in Nigeria (Awofeso and Irabor, 2020a; NCDC, 2020). Furthermore, Emergency Operations Centers were established as a prompt response approach to fetch information on

suspected Covid-19 persons for immediate testing and isolation (NCDC, 2020).

Due to ineffective health facilities, developing countries, Nigeria inclusive, may face inadequate test equipment for the virus. This problem is accompanied with the challenges of widespread poverty, illiteracy and inadequate infrastructural facilities to aid Covid-19 preventive measure in Nigeria (Adesoji, 2014; Awofeso and Irabor, 2020a).

### **Almajiri System: Historical Synopsis, Philosophy, Operating Strategy and Problems**

The Almajiri system predates colonial era in Nigeria. Sources traced the system to the migration of Prophet Mohammed from Mecca to Medina in 622 CE (*Hijrah*) in order to escape prosecution in Mecca and to resolve disagreements between tribes in Medina (Shittu and Olaofe, 2015; Taiwo, 2013). While in Medina, Mohammed dedicated time to preaching Islamic doctrines which led to consolidation of Islam in Medina (Khalid, 1998; Shittu and Olaofe, 2015). Those who migrated with Mohammed to Medina were to be called *AlMuhajirrun*, which means emigrants (Taiwo, 2013; Khalid, 1998). To this extent, Almajiri is used to refer to someone who migrated from place of abode in search of Islamic knowledge.

The Migration of Muslim traders to Kanem and Borno region in the 9th century led to the spread of Islam in Northern Nigeria (Alao, 2017; Oladosu, 2012). The Almajiri system started during the 11th century in the Kanem and Borno Empire as a complete system for learning Islamic ethics, jurisprudence and theology (Shittu and Olaofe, 2015; Yakubu, 2017). The system gained credence in the Sokoto Caliphate upon the success of the Jihad led by Uthman Dan Fodio in 1808 (Shittu and Olaofe, 2015; Alao, 2017). Uthman Dan Fodio further increased recognition of the Almajiri system by establishing an inspectorate for Quranic literacy leading to increased funding of the system by the Emirs (Aghedo and Eke, 2013; Shittu and Olaofe, 2015).

The advent of British colonial administration in Northern Nigeria in 1904 led to the introduction of Western education, resulting to abolishment of the Almajiri system (Khalid, 1998; Oladosu, 2012). This development led to withdrawal of state fund for Almajiri schools which also affect socioeconomic condition of Mallams as it made them unqualified for employment (Aghedo and Eke, 2013; Oladosu, 2012). On the other hand, abolishment of the Almajiri system by the colonial authority was met with resentment and sociocultural distrust against Western education in Northern Nigeria (Aghedo and Eke, 2013; Alao, 2017). In the event of loss of financial support, coupled with increasing number of pupils, the *Mallams* were left with the option of releasing Almajirai to beg for alms which eventually became the norm today (Khalid, 2001; Shittu and Olaofe, 2015).

Almajiri system is valued for its Quranic education. An Almajiri is to be trained in Islamic doctrines which implies religious devotion and moral character (Aluaigba, 2009; Taiwo, 2013). Because of the strictness associated with Almajiri system of education, it is viewed as a means for instilling discipline, patience and humility in children, which are seen as the core elements of Islamic faith (Oladosu, 2012; Sebastine and Obeta, 2015). Apart from teaching pupils Islamic doctrines, the system is also considered as a last resort for rehabilitating undisciplined youths. This belief stems from the orientation that the formal school system are not of the same disciplinary level as the Almajiri school (Khalid, 2001; Taiwo, 2013).

However, Almajiri system has been degraded, and sustained by poor parents large ly in rural areas who entrust parental responsibilities to itinerant Mallams for free Islamic education in the urban centers. Available statistics by the United Nations International Children's Emergence Fund (2014) put the estimate of Almajiri pupils in Northern Nigeria to 9.5 million of Nigeria's 13.2 million out-of-school children. A study conducted by Sebastine and Obeta, (2015) showed that Kano state had an estimated 3,703 Almajiri centers and approximately 1,560,611 Almajiri pupils spread across these centers. Sule-Kano (2008) and Okonkwo (2017) described the environment under which Almajirai learn as revealed in; sitting pattern on bare floor, congested, dirty and messy rooms which also serves as school and shelter places, poor feeding habit etc. Almajirai are seen on streets in most urban centers particularly, Kano, Kaduna and Borno states in tattered clothes begging for alms to survive (Shittu and Olaofe, 2015; Sule-Kano, 2008). Since Almajirai are not in the protection of their parents, they are subjected to exploitation, abuse and stigmatization. The system has also been condemned for excluding pupils from the formal education system and vocational skills, making them unqualified for the workforce and susceptible to the antics of conflict promoters (Okonkwo, 2017; Yakubu, 2017).

### **Operations of Almajiri System During Covid-19 Pandemic in Northern Nigeria**

Amid Covid-19 pandemic, the Almajiri system raises certain fundamental issues in Northern Nigeria. One of such observation is the problem of maintaining good hygiene practices including hand washing with soap and water, observing social and physical distancing, wearing of face mask etc. to contain the rate of community transmission of the virus. Major drivers of Covid-19 community transmission are poor hygiene, illiteracy, poverty, ignorance as well as poor contact tracing of infected person (Nwozor, Okolie, Okidu and Oshewolo, 2020). Almajiri are often unkempt, they leave in cluster and lack resources to live decently (Olagunju, 2012; Taiwo, 2013). This is even worst as findings showed that Almajiri tested positive for Covid-19 (Akintunde, Chen and Di, 2020; Orjinmo and Abubakar, 2020). Therefore, the system constitutes a medium for the rapid spread of Covid-19 community transmission in Nigeria.

In the face of Covid-19 lockdown and community transmission in Nigeria is repatriation of Almajiri to their home state. The attendant fear of person-to-person contact occasioned by the poor state of health and confirmed cases of Covid-19 among Almajiri requires Northern Governors to embark on deportation of Almajiri to their home states (Akintunde, Chen and Di, 2020; Agomuo, 2020).

Moreover, repatriation of Almajiri to their home state amid Covid-19 pandemic was met with allegation. The Almajiri system lack proper documentation and central reporting system for the children (Akintunde, Chen and Di, 2020; Okonkwo, 2017). In this sense, transportation of Almajiri amid Covid-19 lockdown may contribute to the spread of the virus if adequate contact tracing and testing capacity is not improved. Further still, repatriating Almajiri to their home state may be complicated for Almajiri who do have an abode to return nor recognize their state of origin, thereby increasing their risk of exposure to Covid-19 in their locations.

Another corollary to the spread of the virus is the ban on Almajiri system across the Northern states. This decision was held in unison by Northern state Governors on 27 May, 2020 to put an end to informal Islamic centers (Agomuo, 2020; Bello, 2020). The preceding section of

this study analysed this perspective as a major government response to Almajiri system in Nigeria.

### **Government Response to Almajiri System During Covid-19 Pandemic**

Even before the outbreak of Covid-19 pandemic, governments (both states and Federal) have instituted policies aimed at ameliorating the condition of the. Major effort in the past was geared towards integrating the Almajiri system with the formal education system. For instance, in July 2013, the Federal government implemented Almajiri Education Programme in Northern states to provide opportunity for Almajiri to access Basic Education, reduce proliferation of child destitutes and facilitate integration of Islamic studies with the Universal Basic Education Program (Alao, 2017; Shittu and Olaofe, 2015). A total of 157 Almajiri model schools were built across Northern states between 2013 and 2015 (Agomuo, 2020; Balogun and Adeyemi, 2015).

Government intervention scheme through the Tertiary Education Trust Fund and Universal Basic Education Commission also offered free and compulsory education for Almajirai as well as day and boarding facilities for pupils and teachers across Northern states including Niger, Jigawa, Zamfara, Sokoto, Kebbi, Kaduna, Plateau, Taraba, Yobe, Adamawa, Bauchi and Katsina (Charles and Osah, 2018; Okonkwo, 2017). Coupled with these integration efforts is the provision of vocational training and skill acquisition programmes for the Almajirai by Northern state governments and Civil Society Organizations (Charles and Osah, 2018; Mashema, Idria and Musa, 2018).

By and large, these integration policies were faced with opposition and resentment for promoting secular education at the expense of Quranic education which is held in high esteem in Northern Nigeria (Balogun and Adeyemi, 2015; Mashema, et al., 2018). Further still, Sebastine and Obeta (2015) noted that low socioeconomic conditions in Northern Nigeria necessitates poor parents to patronize free Islamic education in urban centers. The problem of poverty is compounded by the orientation that the formal school system are not of the same disciplinary level as the Almajiri system (Charles and Osah, 2018; Khalid, 2001). This position stems from the strictness associated with the Almajiri system of education which is viewed as a cultural norm for instilling discipline, patience and humility in children, as the core elements of Islamic faith (Charles and Osah, 2018).

A recent development was the decision by the Northern state governors to ban Almajiri system. Two major issues seem to account for the ban on Almajiri system during Covid-19 pandemic in Northern Nigeria. Firstly, is the pattern of unexplained deaths that manifested across Northern states including Kano, Yobe, Jigawa, Bauchi, and Taraba. Amid Covid-19 pandemic, estimated figure put the number of 'mysterious deaths' in Kano state to 680 (Izundu 2020; Nwozor, et al., 2020). In Bauchi state, about 110 unexplained deaths were counted within 14 days amid Covid-19 pandemic (Affe, Ajaja, Alagbe, Okere, Bakam, 2020). Although, Northern states governors dismissed any connection between these deaths and Covid-19, the lack of Covid-19 laboratory for possible detection of the rising development (Kanabe, 2020; Nwozor, et al., 2020), suggests an emergence of epidemiological connections relating to these deaths. Secondly, are cases of Almajirai who tested positive for Covid-19 (Izundu 2020). With many Almajirai untested, coupled with their nomadic and poor health lifestyle, the system

constitutes a medium for the rapid spread of Covid-19 community transmission in Nigeria.

### Conclusion

Precautionary measures (lockdown, movement restriction, inter state travel ban, physical and social distancing) was introduced by the government to mitigate the spread of Covid-19 in Nigeria. However, the negative effect of these measures was visible among Almajiri in Northern Nigeria, culminating into a practical approach towards halting the system. To contend with an aged-long practice, banning Almajiri system may be seen as exigency towards minimizing the spread of Covid-19 in Nigeria, it has no doubt raised another radical approach towards re-integrating the system into main stream society or eradicating it.

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