

## **Social Welfare and the Problem of Begging in Nigeria**

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**Abstract:** - This Paper discusses Social Welfare and the Problem of Begging in Nigeria. Observably, most beggars are found to be Muslims by religion, which raises arguments with regards to the legitimacy of begging in Islam. The Paper besides stating the real legal conditions of begging in Islam, unveils the reason why some Muslims mainly from the rural areas either as destitute or in Almajiri Schools make a living by begging including drastic disruption of support rendered to Almajiri Schools after Imperialism, extreme poverty, migration and joblessness. The solution suggested is for the attention of the Government and Non-Governmental Organizations, scholars, wealthy individuals and ordinary people alike, to make concerted efforts of establishing welfare institutions, creating social awareness, effective moral training and comprehensive system of education, in order to curb the menace to the lowest possible degree.

**KEYWORD:** *Begging, Muslims, Almajiri, Makarantan Allo, Makarantan Ilimi.*

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### **I. INTRODUCTION**

Nigeria as a nation is blessed with so many people of various languages and ethnicity, which if utilized, will not only be bliss to the nation, but to Africa and the world as a whole. Interestingly, the largest number of Nigerian population is youths, which strengthens the promising future as well as the bright prospect of the country. To make this into reality, youths' minds need to be prepared and nurtured, their welfare to be enhanced and the attitude of productivity to be inculcated. However, of the most threatening issues Nigeria faces with regards to its youths is the menace of begging which instills in the beggars bad habit of idleness and inability to be productive members of the society. Such beggars are found usually in the street, market and other social places, constituting mainly destitute, children and physically disabled individuals. Bizarrely, beggars wherever found in the country are mostly Muslims by religion, which makes some people to draw at quick conclusion that there is indeed legitimate approval of begging in Islam. That conclusion is made either by those who do not know the actual Islamic legal provisions concerning the welfare of the poor, or by those who based their judgment on the actions of some Muslims, whereas any religion is judged not on the actions of its followers but on its actual legal teachings. Thus, this paper attempts to clear the misconceptions, stating the reason why some people among the Muslims are seen in the street begging, the real Islamic guiding principles of asking people as well as suggestions to curb the menace in Nigeria.

### **II. MUSLIMS AND BEGGING IN NIGERIA**

There are essentially two groups of people involved in this phenomenon. The first group involves the Almajiris, young Muslims' children usually males from rural areas, who are sent to Islamic Schools to acquire early Islamic education. Early education in Islam cannot be overemphasized in line with the famous saying: "*learning in youth is like engraving upon the stone*". To that end, the Prophet (May the blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) is reported to have said: "***Whoever followed a path seeking knowledge, Allah will ease for him a path to paradise***" (related by Muslim and al-Tirmidhi). Therefore parents are always eager to send their children even those afflicted with extreme poverty. As a matter of fact, there is a consensus between scholars of Islam that knowledge should be affordable and accessible to everyone whether from the poor or well-to-do family. But acquiring all facets of Islamic education itself requires years if not decades for one to acquaint with all the curricular courses, as Islamic education is very wide and comprehensive that besides strengthening one's relationship with Allah, it gives guiding principles to Muslims in all aspects of their life such as their social and economic relations. At the outset, the pupils are taught how to read and write the Quran popularly known as *Makarantan Allo*, after which they will advance to *Makarantan Ilimi*, known with its endeavor to engage pupils in learning wider legal provisions. In earlier days before the colonial rule, children are taught freely, and were largely offered by people free sustenance and maintenance along with what parents left in the hands of the teacher, whilst his house is served as lodge for them. Begging after the revival activity of Sheikh Uthman was either controlled by the Sokoto revivalists by minimizing it to the smallest degree or at least was fought against,

as understood and extrapolated from the statement of Abdullah of Gwandu in his book *Lubab al-Madkhal*. He said while discussing the negative implication of allowing pupils begging for bread: "...**This (i.e. begging) breeds in them shameless and thus, will not feel ashamed before anyone. In fact, they persist on begging people thereby becoming used to lying and subservient to people in order to obtain something from them, breeding in them all sorts of greed and deception which leads them to getting people's property through unfair means until they grew up in such situation**" (Ibn fodio, 2007).

But after the colonial rule as put forward by Muhd Bello Yunusa (2013), the situation drastically changed, new educational system with secular goals is introduced, and financial responsibilities has relatively increased. Now the Almajiri schools are not supported by the society as before, and the pupils have no option but to sustain themselves through begging, laundry, house chores and other works similar. Young pupils are unable to enter into the manual or hard labor, and thus, at initial stage basically resort to asking people. This did not only affect the well being of the children, but also the quality of the education, as now the average level of knowledge supposed to be acquired by a particular individual over certain period of time has dropped to below par. The second group engaged in begging includes adults usually migrants, who were either stricken by extreme poverty or physically handicapped individuals. Long time before and after the colonial rule, dominant northern Muslims societies were known with their hospitality originated from deep religious teachings even before imperialism. Poor people and those who were unable to go to farm as a result of their physical disability were not left without help. They were supported for as long as they needed, which is why even in later days, such people are seen in Friday mosques or any other public places. As times goes on, increasing economic challenges in joblessness, ignorance, material ambitions and the bad habit of staying idle made them to consider asking people's property as a permanent occupation rather than transitional one.

It may be argued that Muslims, perhaps are reluctant to eradicate this menace out of their society for good, but in reality, such menace cannot be curbed in isolation from its root causes. From the time of imperialist rule on, there has always been concern in the Muslims' society on how to produce a young Muslim with Islamic moral upbringing through balanced curricula of courses in both religious and western education. This is because taking the two along has become taxing, and until effort is made to cope with this demand, one will expect little improvement. Another reason less important to this is in what some parents perceive by sending their children away from home. They are of the view that their child will cultivate the sense of humility and humbleness, enduring hardships in life which will help throw away any sort of material ambitions in him. He is expected to grasp the meaning of being generous to the poor and the needy having experienced it before. Thus, in the school, he learned knowledge and morality combined. That does not necessarily mean he has to live by asking for bread, since as already stated earlier, such act is not a desirable character. It means he will adapt to whatever was offered to him in the school. Lastly none the least, there is also lack of affordable accessible as well as qualitative schools in the areas from which these children come. So the parents has no choice but to send them away, and due to financial issue and lack of social awareness in its classical sense, the children end up in Almajiri schools instead. All these factors if put together, give a clear picture of the root cause of the rampant begging amongst mostly rural Muslims, which needs close study, good assessment and then providing sound solutions for them. Only then this menace would be curbed and eradicated.

### III. LEGAL CONDITIONS OF BEGGING IN ISLAM

Allah the Exalted brought mankind into existence and provided for them different means of livelihood, raising some among others in ranks and status, in accordance with the dictate of his wisdom. The Exalted He says:

***"And it is he who has made you generations coming after generations, replacing each other on the earth and raised you in ranks, some above others that He may try you in that which he has bestowed on you. Surely, your Lord is swift in retribution and certainly He is Oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful"* (6: 165).**

The above verse is a clear testimony that differences between people existed in each and every human society and will continue to exist for as long as mankind exist, as that maintains their social and economic relations. As a matter of fact, without such differences, every society is doomed to fail, because man being a social being as reiterated by Ibn Khaldun (2010) is moving inevitably towards satisfying his needs through satisfying the needs of others. The rich for instance needs labor of the poor whilst the poor needs his emolument from the rich. If that is the case, then complete eradication of economic inequality is impossible. The only solution therefore is by bridging the gap between the two, as much disparity brings such undesirable outcomes as begging, exploitation, earning through unfair means and so on. In view of this, Islam has been realistic on the matters of beggars, stating the legal conditions and regulations of asking people rather than complete prohibition.

First and foremost, scholars of Islam are in agreement that asking people solely to get richer and richer without a compelling need is not permissible. The prophet (May the blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) is reported to have said: ***"Whoever asks people for their properties in order to get rich is indeed asking for flames of fire,***

*so it is up to him to ask for more or less*" (related by Muslims). Based on this prophetic guidance, scholars like al-Gazali (2012) affirmed in his *Ihya'* that asking people their properties is essentially unlawful unless out of necessity or compelling need closer to necessity.

A guide to knowing this necessity or compelling need is given by the Prophet (May peace be upon him) while talking to his companion Qabisah al-Hilali, where he said: **"O Qabisah! asking people is not permissible except in any of the three states: A man incurred a debt upon himself (to reconcile between two parties) until he paid it off then he refrains; a man afflicted with calamity which destroyed all his wealth until he gets enough to satisfy his basic needs; a man stricken by poverty until three responsible men among his people said: 'so and so person is afflicted with extreme poverty', then it is permissible to ask for help until he gets enough to sustain himself. Apart from these O Qabisah! Asking for help is forbidden"** (related by Muslim, Ahmad, al-Nasa'i and Abu Dawud). This is a clear testimony that Islam does not approve begging without legitimate reasons. Apart from those in need, the guarantor who reconciled between two disputed people by incurring the debt upon his shoulder, and those afflicted with fatal calamity or extreme poverty, begging is essentially unlawful. But despite the permission, if these people can endure and wanders about, seeking Allah's favor, grace and mercy, then that is the best and more befitting. The prophet (may peace be upon him) said: **"Who can guarantee me one thing and I will guarantee him paradise, and one of the companion said: I (O Messenger of Allah), and the Prophet said: then do not ask anyone anything"** (related by Abu Dawud).

Now by a common sense, one will understand that making a living by begging from door to door thereby regarding it a form of occupation has no basis in Islam, and has never been a recommended act in Islam. It is only a concession granted to those in need in order to remove hardship for them. If that is the case, then there is no sin religiously speaking, if a Muslim chose not to help those who beg in order to get richer and richer without any justifiable need. On the other hand, it is a communal obligation upon the Muslims' community to offer assistance to their fellow members of the society who need their help. In various legal injunctions, Muslims are urged to give alms and not to repulse orphans, poor, and the needy. The wealthy members should give in charity on their own without necessarily being asked by the destitute. Allah in characterizing the qualities of the righteous slaves says:

**"And in their properties, there was the right of the Sa'il (the one who asks) and the Mahrum (the poor who does not ask to preserve his self-esteem)"** (5: 119).

This is substantiated with what al-Bukhari related on the authority of Abu Hurayrah, who reported the Prophet (May peace be upon him) to have said: **"Everyday, two Angels come down from the heaven and one of them says: O Allah! Compensate every person who spends in your cause; another one says: O Allah! Destroy every miser"**.

These religious values have been well-instilled in Muslims 'society such that giving alms to beggars has become common regardless of whether they actually deserve it or not. So beggars in both Almajiri schools and the street use such moral values in excuse for their actions. That is why even the modality of asking whether in verse or prose, is always to remind them the best reward that the giver may gain in proportion of what he gave away in charity. Persistence to beg therefore is more of how misinterpretation, culture and personal whims affect religious teachings; to curtail its growing, workable measures must be taken after getting the whole of the issue.

#### IV. SUGGESTIONS AND SOLUTIONS

Various Scholars and writers have made suggestions on how to curb this phenomenon, such as developing a rehabilitation centers for beggars to be kept in, monthly allowances (Onoyase, 2010), efforts to be made by the Government and Non-Governmental Organizations alike, to make Zakat fund a reality for the benefit of beggars (Tijjani, 2005). All these suggestions are good and important, but are only applicable to some rather than all beggars. Since some of the beggars are neither destitute nor physically disabled individuals. Comprehensive solutions therefore are needed, and in its end, the paper suggests the following:

1. Joint effort between Government and non-Governmental Organizations: Organizations need government's recognition and support while government needs them as resource persons to identify and trace people involved in begging. Other compelling factors should also be identified and analyzed, for instance where the most common factors are poverty and handicap, others of migration, no-care attitude of the parents and guardian; extreme violence; exploitations and family break down all may contribute. The statistical data of the people involved should be given, factors to be analyzed and assessed, and then solution with the aid of various stake holders and interested players to be provided.
2. Welfare Institutions: Institutions whether religious or not should be established with the important function of keeping wealth in circulation not concentrated in the hands of few individuals. Government and wealthy individuals should subsidize and empower such Institutions, common people also should be given access to a special scheme through which they can donate, which if properly commissioned and enforced will

not only curb the phenomenon, but will also enhance the welfare of the orphan, youths and women. Alms and giving out Zakat should always be encouraged, which if properly given by the rich, the level of hatred, enmity and envy of the poor would be reduced and with that, the rich becomes more secured. On this regard, Zamfara State has been in the forefront in making endowments funds a reality for the welfare of its people.

3. Social awareness: raising social awareness and public enlightenment, discussing the negative impact of begging and idleness is very important. As people now get more and more addicted to social media, making good use of it should not be over-looked. Programs in the radio, television and other cheap, affordable and accessible tools of communications to the remote rural areas should all be employed.
4. The Portrayal of Beggars: There are flaws in the method used when dealing with beggars. Most people in addressing the menace of begging tend to center on one approach, which is the beggars' negative portrayal, dealing with them as enemies of the development, which later may prove to be harder challenge in dealing with the psychological frustration such portrayal brings. It can even prepare the beggar to be a future criminal because of frustration and feeling of rejection from the society. Instead, they should be treated not as problems, but as members of the society who need to rediscover their identity and potentials, helping them vision their bright and prospective future waiting for them should they go for it.
5. Effective Moral Training: National goals become effective only with the presence of discipline and law abiding, which needs strong value system to be effective; and here comes the role of the religion. The teachings of the religion help inculcate in the minds of the individuals the meaning of earning a living through fair means. Children begging in the name of the religion are complete picture of how corrupt culture and misinterpretations of religious teachings influence religion. Scholars should ensure the religious teachings are correctly represented and implemented, and efforts should be exerted to producing young individuals with moral upbringing.
6. Comprehensive system of education: some may argue the relevance or importance of this, yet, it is the most important solution to quell this menace. When western education was introduced in Nigeria, Muslims as highlighted already have strong system of education comprising religious teachings and crafts. But with the introduction of the western education, the Muslims' educational system had to be relegated to the periphery, substituting the age-long system with a relatively narrow system. The challenge always has been to counterbalance between pursuing a western secular education and strong Islamic education without compromising the latter. Despite all the efforts to cope with the demand, combining the two remains privilege affordable to few families. Many Muslims now have to choose for their children, between their moral religious upbringing and modern educational system in secular schools with little or no religious training. Some parents send their children to pursue the secular education and supplement it with special religious courses privately and some do the exact opposite, sending them to purely Islamic schools after which the child is prepared to pass his Waec and Neco. In each of the case, there is danger of Muslims children falling short of one of the two systems. In view of this, parents with conservative mind mainly from rural areas, keep on sending their children to Almajiri schools, since no room for the teachings of their religion. Concerted efforts comprising educationists, Islamic studies professional teachers and other leading scholars of Islam from different angles have to be made and submitted to the Government for recognition and empowerment. The task is to design a balanced curriculum that will carry both of the two systems along. Consequently, Schools should be established in rural and urban areas, which will persuade parents to send their children to the modern school which gives Islamic and western education without compromising their belief and Islamic way of life.

## **V. CONCLUSION**

The paper has been discussing Social Welfare and the Problem of Begging in Nigeria, with special reference to Muslims' destitute and Almajiri schools. There are always arguments raised if there is legitimacy of begging in Islam, as most beggars are found to be Muslims by religion. This assertion as already put forth by the paper is by no way near the real teachings of Islam. The phenomenon emerges as a result of various factors such as societal failure to cope with the demands of the Almajiri schools after the colonial rule especially, culture, the increasing economic challenges and the bad habit of idleness. Solutions have been provided by various policy makers, which hitherto failed to tackle the issue for good due to their reluctance of not getting the whole of the situation. The paper reiterated the need to get a whole of these factors, assess them as well as providing effective solutions for them with the aid of various stake holders and other interested players. Statistical data of beggars should be known, and welfare institutions as well as effective preventive measures and policies should be provided by the policy makers. Only then can it be eradicated or at least minimized to the lowest degree possible.

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