Everywhere was home until now: Understanding the rejection and repatriation of the Almajiris amidst the Covid-19 pandemic in Northern Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

Urban inequalities are usually a dicey issue in any pluralistic society such as Nigeria especially when these issues take root in institutions like religion. The Almajiri system is an age long educational system practiced in present Nigeria. While the goal is seeking knowledge, the living conditions of the children involved has not been given priority as many are left to cater for themselves and others have been isolated and disconnected from reins of society. Using the narratives from available literatures, parallel to the covid-19 pandemic, this study finds that rejection of the children took effect at both the states of destination and origin due to the unverifiable conclusion drawn at the norther governors’ forum asserting that the Almajiri children were strong carriers of the disease and a risk to the entire nation. The study also revealed the draconian lifestyles of the children as they seek to provide refuge for themselves due to the forceful ejection. These not negating the fact that they were however, adorned a valuable asset in periods of election and a heinous use by the same politicians. There is no comprehensive data of the Almajiri population in Nigeria and this hampers adequate planning and policy execution in their favour. Either home or away, everywhere within the Nigerian entity should be regarded as home for all and the rights of every citizen needs to be respected as governed.

Key words: Almajiri, repatriation, rejection, COVID-19, Nigeria.

INTRODUCTION

One of the fundamental principles of Islam is the quest for knowledge and the Quran stresses that the true lovers of the Almighty are those who are knowledgeable (Maigari, 2017). According to Umar (2020), the Almajiri system is a system of education obtainable in the north which involves the schooling of young boys. Maigari (2017) opines that Almajiri (learner) is any individual seeking Islamic knowledge on transit or at home. The term Almajiri was gotten from the Arabic word “Al-Muhajirun” meaning one that migrates from home seeking Islamic knowledge. The Almajiri is often used to refer to a group of children who in their quest for Islamic education left their homes; this situation is mostly predominant in northern Nigeria (Akintunde et al., 2020). Johnson (2019) opines that Almajiri system is a longstanding tradition that can be traced back to the 11th century. According to Al-Amin (2019), it was first referred to as Tsangaya when it was established under the Kanem-Borno Empire. Upon establishment, it operated as a comprehensive and organised system of education where Islamic values, principles, jurisprudence as well as the memorization and recitation of the Quran were learnt.

Children aged three to twelve can begin their Quranic lessons in Nigeria. Some children operate from their parents’ houses, going on a daily basis most of which are between the ages of nine and eighteen years. Al-Amin (2019) maintains that the system was initially funded by the state and being controlled by the Emirs as traditional
system of government was the practice in Nigeria before the coming of the British colonialists. He further stated that, charity and welfare is encouraged by Islam. The community is encouraged to give alms to the Almajiris who came from far away; in return, the Almajiris are taught and encouraged to be involved in community service by providing services such as laundry, weaving, cobbling, gardening etc. The students were free to acquire skills in the course of their training and were involved in small businesses such as fishing, trading, farming, tailoring, masonry, well construction among others. This led them to make up the larger percentage of the work force in society and after colonization they were employed by the British to work in the mines, as groundnut and cotton farmers; while some later became teachers and judges in the sharia legal system.

According to Johnson (2019), the jihad of Uthman Dan Fodio, made the Almajiri system concrete under the Sokoto Caliphate. However, the system was killed and dismantled by the British when state funding was abolished. The Emirs were reassigned new roles as they were used to accomplish their indirect rule policy, while those who resisted the abolishing of the almajiri system were either removed from seat or killed. At a point, the students could no longer get financial support, thus resorting to begging in other to survive. On the other hand, the Islamic teachers depended on the work of the Almajiris and the alms of the community to survive as they are not salary earners (Al-Amin, 2019; Johnson, 2019). Umar (2020) notes that as a general usage almajiri has grown to mean anyone begging on the streets. It has grown to include all those sent to obtain Quranic education, as well as those with disabilities begging for alms; these set of children are mostly from poor backgrounds.

ALMAJIRIS IN NIGERIA

There is no current data as to the total population of Almajiris in Nigeria, however, reports from studies conducted gives us an idea of the population of Almajiris in Nigeria. For instance, Adeniyi-Egbeola (2018) opined that almajiri children constitute 70% of street children in Nigeria. Also, the teaching of Quran is encouraged by the Universal Basic Education Commission through its policy. The purpose of approving this educational system is to improve basic primary education in the north. In 2014, UNICEF made a report with a record of 9.5 million Almajiri children in Nigeria; this brings them to a total of 72% of out of school children in the country (Johnson, 2019). Nigeria has about 13.5–15 million children who are out of school and majority of them are found in the northern region. Ibeh (2019) reported that Kano State Governor, Governor Ganduje claimed that 90% of Almajiri in Kano roaming the streets are foreigners. He went further to implement the free education scheme in a bid to end the almajiri system.

He believed that education is a vital tool to end unemployment.

COVID-19 PANDEMIC AND IMPACT IN NORTHERN NIGERIA

The World Health Organisation (2020), on the 11th of March 2020, made a pronouncement declaring covid-19 a global pandemic. This came two weeks after Nigeria’s index case was first confirmed 27th of February, 2020. However, as of 13th August 2020, Nigeria reported 338,084 tested samples, 47,743 confirmed COVID-19 cases, 33, 943 discharged, 12,844 active cases and 956 deaths. With the ravaging covid-19, there are concerns over the ability of the government to contain the virus and handle this crisis. Moreover, the number of tests carried out on a daily basis is barely 1,200 for a population of over 200 million (Maclean, 2020). The name covid-19 emanates from the corona virus that first appeared in Wuhan China in 2019. These corona viruses according to Lindsay (2020) are common among humans and animals. Corona virus belongs to the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) viruses which was first discovered in the 1930s in a domestic poultry. The various categories are severe acute respiratory syndrome Coronavirus (SARS-CoV) which was discovered in 2002, Middle East respiratory syndrome Coronavirus (MERS-CoV) in 2012 and Covid-19 pandemic (SARS-CoV2).

The novel Coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2) is an acute respiratory disease that broke out in Wuhan, a city in the Hubei province of China. This disease is receiving global attention as it keeps spreading globally (Vergnaud, 2020). According to Lindsay (2020), the corona virus can cause severe lung infections in humans while in animals it can cause gastrointestinal, respiratory, neurologic and liver diseases. In the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, there has been controversies as to the source of the disease which saw Donald Trump the president of the United States of America accuse China of being responsible for inventing the virus. This accusation was followed by a suit filed against the Chinese government by Missouri in the United States of America as well as China being sued for $200 billion dollars by an assemblage of Nigerian lawyers over the adverse effect of the virus on the citizens and the country (Huileng, 2020). Covid-19 spreads through droplets from infected people. These droplets come from infected people who sneeze or cough. When people come in contact with these droplets or an infected object they become infected as well. Thus in other to curtail the spread of the virus, people are encouraged to self-isolate for fourteen days whenever they are suspected to have come in contact with an infected person. Covid-19 comes with symptoms such as tiredness, difficulty in breathing, dry cough and fever. Some persons may also experience diarrhea, runny nose, body pains and aches. However some persons are asymptomatic as they do not show any symptoms but are carriers. WHO (2020)
reports that globally there have been 20,405,695 confirmed cases with 743,487 deaths. Although there’s currently no vaccines or drugs for the virus, however, various governments have devised means of combating the virus such as declaring total and partial lockdown of states, public enlightenment on the importance of good personal hygiene, wearing of face masks/shields and the practice of social and physical distancing so as to reduce contact between people. Furthermore, infected persons are being isolated and quarantined by health professionals. In northern Nigeria, index cases were discovered in Abuja and Bauchi consecutively on the 24th of March, 2020. Kaduna state was next, followed by Kastina, Kano, Gombe, Sokoto, Yobe, Plateau and Nasarawa states. At this period, there were no covid-19 testing centres in the entire northern region except one in Abuja (NCDC, 2020). Figure 1 shows the few testing centers available at the initial stage. As of August 13th, 2020 all states within the northern region have had an index case of the coronavirus with over one thousand cases recorded in Kaduna, Kano and Plateau states, while the Federal Capital Territory tops the list (Table 1). Laboratory testing centers in the region have also increased as the number of confirmed cases. Figure 2 shows the distribution of testing centers across the nation as at August 13th 2020.

DISPLACEMENT AND REPATRIATION IN THE FACE OF THE PANDEMIC

While the lockdown prevented free movement in the south, east and western part of the country, it allowed for the forceful movement of targeted persons in the north. When people are forced to leave their places of residence or homes due to natural or man-made disasters, they are often regarded as internally displaced. Upon the declaration of the lockdown nationwide, the Almajiris were ordered to go back home as they were no longer welcome in these states where they’ve been resident. Being children, they became vulnerable as they lacked shelter, were at risk of covid-19 due to exposure and risk of starvation. What is more challenging is the lack of adequate information on the number of repatriated Almajiris (Akitunde et al., 2020). Although there is a paucity of information on displaced Almajiris as there is no reporting system as at 13th August 2020, permutations can be made from some available data to determine the population of displaced Almajiris. Available online data shows that Kano state prepared 178,000 Almajiris for repatriation to their families (Murtala and Bolaji, 2020). Reports indicated that 3,452 children were sent back to different states twice; and as at May 3rd 2020, Nasarawa state government reported to have repatriated 1,100 out of the 23,500 displaced children to various states (Shakyaa, 2020); while Gombe state returned 700 Almajiris to several states out of the 11,700 Almajiris that were accounted for (Michael, 2020). Just as several states made attempts in repatriating these children, others were preoccupied with protecting their territory from them especially as the Covid-19 virus continued to spread in geometric proportion. Bauchi and Kaduna state governors cried out as majority of their Covid-19 cases were almajiri children (Amanambu, 2020). Following this stigmatization, other states for fear of the rise of the virus in their states rejected the children from
Table 1: Coronavirus cases in northern Nigeria.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Northern States</th>
<th>No. of Cases (Lab Confirmed)</th>
<th>No. of Cases (on admission)</th>
<th>No. Discharged</th>
<th>No. of Deaths</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>FCT</td>
<td>4,597</td>
<td>3,238</td>
<td>1,313</td>
<td>46</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kaduna</td>
<td>1,666</td>
<td>182</td>
<td>1,472</td>
<td>12</td>
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<td>Kano</td>
<td>1,644</td>
<td>277</td>
<td>1,313</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plateau</td>
<td>1,643</td>
<td>934</td>
<td>686</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kwara</td>
<td>882</td>
<td>311</td>
<td>549</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Katsina</td>
<td>746</td>
<td>265</td>
<td>457</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Borno</td>
<td>697</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>576</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gombe</td>
<td>635</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>562</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bauchi</td>
<td>579</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>530</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nasarawa</td>
<td>371</td>
<td>140</td>
<td>223</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jigawa</td>
<td>322</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>308</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Niger</td>
<td>226</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>165</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adamawa</td>
<td>185</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>104</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sokoto</td>
<td>154</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>138</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kebbi</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taraba</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zamfara</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yobe</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kogi</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Adapted from covid19.ncdc.gov.ng

Figure 2: Map showing distribution of laboratory testing centers.

gaining entrance. For instance, it was gathered that a truckload of Almajiris were intercepted by security operatives in Abia and Akwa Ibom state (Ugbor, 2020). Also, Taraba, Ondo, Osun, Lagos, Delta and the Southern and Middle Belt leaders were some of the states that either rejected or evacuated the almajiri children (Fulani, 2020; Dayo et al., 2020). Even though the declared lockdown was done to combat the Covid-19 pandemic, it clearly had
negative effect on the economy and mostly affected vulnerable people in the country. In the face of the pandemic, the Quranic schools were shut and could not serve as a source of shelter for the almajiri children, thus they became unsheltered. Following their displacement, there is no data to support the almajiri children, hence, they are missing and unaccounted for (Akintunde et al., 2020).

EVERYWHERE WAS HOME UNTIL NOW

Akhave et al. (2020) opined that the Northern Governors’ Forum (NGF) made a decision to repatriate the almajiri children back to their states or parents. Not only did they make the decision, Kano state government immediately embarked on the project by repatriating them to Bauchi, Jigawa, Kaduna, Katsina and other states (Amanambu, 2020). This act is a direct opposition of the 1999 constitution (as amended) of the Federal Republic of Nigeria which states that “the state shall secure full residence rights for every citizen in all parts of the federation” (Amanambu, 2020). Governor Abdullahi Umar Ganduje justified actions stating that: “We agreed at the forum that all Almajiris should be moved to their states of origin. This is why we are sending, in good faith and procedures, all Almajiris that are not from Kano State to their respective states of origin” (Shuaibu, 2020). He further affirmed that, the state was not only sending out but receiving her share of Almajiris from other states. In Nigeria, there has always been a debate on how best to share the national cake. This debate bothers on resources derivation, population and land mass, etc.; however, the use of population in the sharing formula has become the order of the day (Amanambu, 2020). Figure 3 shows Almajiri children waiting for food.

Nwachukwu (2019) stated that President Buhari while having an interview session 22nd July 2015 with Caroline Baker of the United States Institute of Peace (USIP) said, “I hope you have a copy of the election results. The constituents, for example, that gave me 97% (of the vote) cannot in all honesty be treated on some issues with constituencies that gave me 5% (sic)”. Furthermore, after the general elections of 2015 which brought President Buhari to power, Rabiu Kwankwaso an Islamic leader in Nigeria and a very strong politician boasted that the votes of the Almajiris have been used to kick former president Goodluck Jonathan out of Aso Rock (Tijani, 2015). According to Mansur (2018), there are five million Almajiris in Kano state; this implies that following Kwankwaso’s boast, the 1.9 million votes that brought president Buhari to power as declared by INEC was gotten from the Almajiris (Amanambu, 2020). The forceful ejection and return migration of the Almajiris to their states from Kano state did not go as planned. There were some intervening variables that also triggered displacements to unplanned locations even to the eastern and southern part of the country.

In Abia and Akwa Ibom states security agents intercepted truckload of Almajiris (Ugbor, 2020). The leaders of the Southern and Middle Belt Forum (SMBF) also urged citizens...
of the states to be vigilant and avert the spread of the Coronavirus by Northern elements through the Almajiris. In virtually every state of the country, these children have been rejected, ejected and stigmatised. The deportation of these children across the country has in itself defeated the fight against the pandemic.

The game being played by politicians over the lives of vulnerable youths needs to stop. The Almajiris being regarded as a priority risk during the pandemic by all states especially by the northern governors, were however, adorned a valuable asset in period of elections under a heinous use by the same politicians. According to Amanambu (2020), it is cruel to use these children as a force to get to the presidential villa only to abandon them in the face of a challenge. He further opined that this showed how wicked and selfish Nigerian leaders are, as the only lens through which they view people is how they can be used to achieve their political and economic ambitions.

As part of the measures put in place, to reduce hunger during the period of lockdown across the states of the nation, palliatives were rolled out by the Federal government of Nigeria using the National Social Register to identify poor and vulnerable households. Over four million households were selected from the northern region. Regardless, the vulnerable Almajiris were excluded. Section 41 subsection (1) of the 1999 constitution (as amended) of the Federal Republic of Nigeria provided thus:

(1) “Every citizen of Nigeria is entitled to move freely throughout Nigeria and to reside in any part thereof, and no citizen of Nigeria shall be expelled from Nigeria or refused entry thereby or exit therefrom”.

Section 42 subsections (1) and (2) of the 1999 constitution (as amended) of the Federal Republic of Nigeria

42 (1) “A citizen of Nigeria of a particular community, ethnic group, place of origin, sex, religion or political opinion shall not, by reason only that he is such a person”

(a)“be subjected either expressly by, or in the practical application of, any law in force in Nigeria or any executive or administrative action of the government, to disabilities or restrictions to which citizens of Nigeria of other communities, ethnic groups, places of origin, sex, religions or political opinions are not made subject”; or

(b)“be accorded either expressly by, or in the practical application of, any law in force in Nigeria or any such executive or administrative action, any privilege or advantage that is not accorded to citizens of Nigeria of other communities, ethnic groups, places of origin, sex, religions or political opinions”.

(2) “No citizen of Nigeria shall be subjected to any disability or deprivation merely by reason of the circumstances of his birth”.

The repatriation of these children is therefore an anomaly and is not consistent with the provision of the constitution. It is also a violation of their human rights and their right to be free from discrimination.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The slogan “no one is above the law” seems to be passive when it involves political gladiators of the country. Nigeria leaders seem to be very active when it comes to deliberating over the issues that bothers on the lives of the citizens of other countries while her citizens suffer similar or greater problems. Like it is said, a leader’s problem is a leading problem, while Nigerians were silent over the repatriation process, it was easier for citizens to form groups under the auspices of Black Lives Matter Movement in Nigeria protesting the gruesome murder of George Floyd in the USA; it is obvious Nigeria lives do not matter much. With reference to the repatriated children, this study therefore recommends that:

1. There is an all-important need for data collection of the population of the country. The last census conducted was done in 2006, fourteen years (14) ago. Adequate data profiling births proper planning and policy drafting. Conducting census in the country will also record data of Almajiris which have not been properly captured.

2. The social register should be expanded to include the welfare of the Almajiris with proper accountability process enforced.

3. The Northern Governors Forum should make adequate provision for shelter for all Almajiris in the region, such that mitigate their exposure to diseases and exploitation.

4. The child protection and safeguarding principles must be observed where it becomes necessary to return these children to their original place of birth.

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