



The Phenomenon of Almajirci in Northern Nigeria: A Historical Perspective

Umar Muhammad Jabbi (PhD)^{1*}, Buhari Bello Kware (PhD)¹

¹Department of History and International Studies, Usmanu Danfodiyo University, Sokoto, Nigeria

<p>Abstract: The <i>Almajirci</i> system is an ancient tradition of Islamic scholarship that dates back to the early period of Islam in the Western Sudan. It is characterized by itinerancy, with scholars and their students traveling in search of knowledge. This practice initially yielded positive results, cultivating a large number of indigenous scholars in the region, particularly in Hausaland. However, the current form of <i>Almajirci</i> education, where children are left in dire conditions, often naked and more concerned with survival than with acquiring spiritual knowledge—the primary aim of the system—is foreign to Islam and the original <i>Almajirci</i> tradition in Northern Nigeria. Today, the phenomenon of <i>Almajirci</i> has evolved into a social problem, leading to the abandonment and exploitation of children, many of whom become easy recruits for criminality and violence. Previous government efforts to regulate and address the worsening situation—through integration, control, or legislation—have largely been half-hearted and politically expedient, failing to provide a lasting solution. This paper explores the historical development of the <i>Almajirci</i> system of education in Northern Nigeria, identifying the material conditions that led to its transformation from a productive educational system to its current, deteriorated state, and examining the reasons for the failure of previous attempts to resolve the issue. The findings of this study could help suggest a viable solution to the problem. The paper asserts that solving the <i>Almajirci</i> problem requires a concerted effort: a combination of genuine government action, intervention by non-governmental organizations, support from philanthropic individuals in society, and continued exhortations by respected Muslim clerics, reminding parents of their responsibilities toward their children.</p>	<p>Review Paper</p>
	<p>*Corresponding Author: Umar Muhammad Jabbi Department of History and International Studies, Usmanu Danfodiyo University, Sokoto, Nigeria</p>
	<p>How to cite this paper: Umar Muhammad Jabbi & Buhari Bello Kware (2024). The Phenomenon of Almajirci in Northern Nigeria: A Historical Perspective. <i>Middle East Res J. Humanities Soc. Sci.</i>, 4(5): 150-154.</p>
	<p>Article History: Submit: 26.08.2024 Accepted: 25.09.2024 Published: 27.09.2024 </p>
<p>Keywords: <i>Almajirci</i>, Hausaland, Islam, Northern Nigeria, Western Sudan.</p>	
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INTRODUCTION

The word *Almajirci* is a Hausa term referring to the system of Islamic education in which students, commonly known as *Almajiri*, move from one scholar to another in search of knowledge. This explains why anyone on the path of seeking knowledge in Hausaland would proudly refer to themselves as an *Almajiri* (seeker of knowledge). The *Almajirci* system was a well-established educational framework in Northern Nigeria, preparing young people for greater responsibilities. From its early beginnings in 11th-century Hausaland, with support from the government and other stakeholders, the system achieved remarkable success, shaping the lives of the majority of the population and producing numerous indigenous scholars, jurists, reformers, and influential politicians in Northern Nigeria.

This system, however, faced a major setback with the establishment of colonial rule over the region.

The colonial rulers held Islamic education in contempt, including associated practices like the Ajami style of writing, and instead promoted Western-style education through Christian missions (Muhammad, 2010). Furthermore, the British colonial administration abolished the institution of Zakkah, which had been a primary source of funding for *Almajiri* schools, replacing it with a colonial tax system. With the loss of government support, which had been vital during pre-colonial times, the system was forced to seek alternative means of sustenance.

This situation was exacerbated by the periodic Sudano-Sahelian famines of 1972-1974 and the post-colonial economic stabilization policies implemented by Nigerian governments, which caused significant hardship and widespread poverty. These conditions led to complex patterns of social mobility, with many people moving in search of sustenance (Cin rani). It was under these circumstances that the practice of sending small

children from rural areas to urban and semi-urban centers in the name of *Almajirci* began.

Today, the *Almajirci* phenomenon has evolved into a social problem and a source of concern. Previous government efforts to regulate and address the worsening situation through integration, control, and legislation have largely been half-hearted, driven by political expediency, and have failed to provide a lasting solution.

This paper will explore the historical development of the *Almajirci* system of education in Northern Nigeria, identifying the material conditions that contributed to the system's transformation from a successful educational model to its present unfortunate state, and examining the reasons for the failure of previous attempts to address the issue. The paper argues that with proper intervention, integration, and modernization, the system can be redeemed. Achieving this will require the combined efforts of all stakeholders, including the government, non-governmental organizations, philanthropic individuals, and parents. Through these concerted efforts, we can build a vibrant, sustainable, and functional education system that ensures a prosperous future for our society.

Origin of *Almajirci* System of Education

A number of scholars have elaborated on the antiquity of the *Almajirci* system of education. A synthesis of their works indicates that the term *Almajirci* is coined from the Hausa name for pupil or student (*Almajiri*), the participant and direct beneficiary of the *Almajirci* system. The word *Almajiri* has its root in the Arabic term “Al-Muhajirun,” meaning the migrant. The word Muhajirun was used by the Prophet Muhammad to describe those of his companions who migrated with him from Mecca to Medina during the early days of Islam (Maildoki, n.d.). Moreover, the Prophet of Islam is quoted as instructing his followers (Muslims) to “go in search of knowledge even to China” (Ifijeh & James, 2012). The above-quoted Hadith shows that the quest for knowledge in Islam knows no geographical, social, or religious boundary. This and many other similar sayings of the Prophet of Islam propelled Muslims to go out in search of knowledge. The name Muhajirun later came to refer to those knowledge seekers who moved from one place to another in quest of knowledge, mainly Islamic. In its original form, the *Almajirci* system involved mainly single adult youths moving out of their towns and villages to other places in search of knowledge (ibid.). For instance, Shehu Usman Danfodiyo and his brother Abdullahi, the two prominent leaders of the Sokoto Jihad, were reported to have visited Agades in present-day Niger Republic, where they studied under the famous Sheikh Jibril bn. Umar, their mentor (Sulaiman, 1986, p.16). The fact that these itinerant students were grown-ups and mature meant they worked to earn a living instead of begging for their subsistence. The *Almajirai* (pupils) partook in some economic activities such as laundry, cobbling, masonry, gardening,

manicuring, weaving, tailoring, and were temporarily employed as laborers in various forms (Dan Asabe, 1997, p.178). They did these things for their own upkeep and sustenance and at times as charity to the community that funded the scheme. In practical terms, it was a case of reciprocal gesture; they paid the society back for helping them with their academic and religious pursuits. The truth, therefore, is that although the *Almajirci* system was funded by traditional institutions through the proceeds of Zakkat (religious tax) collected and redistributed by the state, it was not over-dependent on them. There was no need for begging by the students. The pre-colonial era could no doubt be seen as the glorious stage of the *Almajirci* system. These itinerant students rarely moved in groups. Hence, they didn't constitute a nuisance to society.

Furthermore, the discipline, ethical orientations, as well as the quality of Islamic education offered to the students helped to give rise to enterprising elites. Consequently, the products of the system formed the group of elites that controlled the economy, bureaucracy, and politics then. In the education sphere, it should also be noted that it was through the *Almajiri* schools that people, for the first time, started to read and write. This explains how and why literacy came to the North first before any other region in Nigeria.

Makarantun Allo (slate schools) for small children are mostly day schools, and students immediately after school hours return to their parents' homes. This is a Qur'anic school without the problem of begging and roaming the streets. This type of Qur'anic schooling is the most common in both the rural and urban centers of Hausa society (Khalid, 2020, p.3). The purpose of this type of education was to transmit moral and religious values, as well as discipline, to the children. It was established as an organized and comprehensive system of education for learning Islamic principles, values, and ultimately, the recitation and memorization of the Glorious Qur'an. Revolving around the Qur'an are various sciences, including Tafsir (exegesis), Hadith (prophetic traditions), jurisprudence, Nahw (grammar), Sarf (morphology), Balagha (rhetoric), Hisab (arithmetic), Falaq (cosmology), Tibb (medicine), and many others (Kaisina, 1997, p.37). These disciplines are mainly for senior students. The Qur'anic school comprised seven honors or classes from Kolo (nursery), Titibiri (primary), Gardi (secondary), Malam (first degree), Alaramma (second degree), Gagarau (PhD), and Gwani Na Gwanaye (Professor) (Dankano, Daily Trust, 2012, p.51). The Qur'an has been the core curriculum of the *Almajirci* system of education since its inception, primarily because it plays a central role in the life of a Muslim—spiritually, politically, socially, economically, and otherwise.

The current practice, where itinerant Mallams (scholars) move to urban areas with herds of young and small children under their care and education, is

relatively a later development in the tradition of Islamic scholarship in Northern Nigeria. This is a product of changes in the socio-economic base of the Caliphate education sector by the British colonialists, which weakened the family and community economic base, thereby leading to a deterioration of the quantity and quality of community contributions to traditional Qur'anic education (Abdullahi, 2021, p.7). In addition to the negative policies of the colonialists, there were the recurrent famines in the Sudano-Sahelian region, including the 1914, 1927, 1950s, and 1972-74 droughts. These led to the pauperization of the society and the traditional *Almajirci* system, forcing the *Almajirci* students to beg for subsistence (Watts, 1983, 374-387).

In the case of Makarantar Allo (the day Qur'anic school), the schools usually hold two sessions: morning and evening sessions, after which the students go back to their parents' or guardians' homes. But in the case of Qur'anic boarding schools, the teachers had the privilege of taking in children brought by parents for Islamic education with a small stipend for the accommodation and feeding of the child (*Almajiri*). With the increasing number of *Almajirai* (students), it became a burden on the teachers. With no support from the community or the government, the system degenerated. It was this material condition that provided the opportunity for some of these teachers to exploit the *Almajirci* system as a means of sustaining themselves. Consequently, the *Almajiri* (students) were made to beg for alms for their sustenance (Yandaki, 1997, p.42). *Almajirci* is now erroneously seen as synonymous with begging. *Almajirci* today is seen as a social menace because of the large number of *Almajirai*, who are found in all nooks and crannies of towns and cities, in mosques, motor parks, restaurants, filling stations, and other public spaces in state capitals and large cities, without parental care. The system is regarded as a breeding ground for foot soldiers of criminality, such as the *Maitatsine* riots, the Boko Haram insurgency, and other forms of violent conflicts in the society (Comolli, 2015, 72-73).

Colonial and Post-Colonial Situation

Following the invasion of northern Nigeria during the early part of the twentieth century by the British colonialists, the *Almajirci* system of education, which had previously been prospering, began to witness a negative twist. The new regime did not recognize *Almajirci* education, but rather introduced and funded Western education (Boko) to the utter disappointment and disapproval of many Islamic scholars who were at the helm of affairs during the pre-colonial regime. The introduction of the Western education system affected earlier Islamic education negatively. This could be seen in the way the curriculum content, teaching methods, teacher qualifications, and infrastructure were designed. Qur'anic education came to be looked down upon as inferior and archaic.

Thirdly, the colonialists destroyed the traditional institutions in place. They did this by killing and deposing all Emirs who opposed foreign rule, while those who submitted were reduced to mere subjects or made to accept their new roles as agents of British rule, as provided under the Indirect Rule System. Moreover, the non-recognition of the *Almajirci* education system by the new British regime undermined the position of many Islamic scholars who were at the helm of affairs during the pre-colonial era. Their status changed with the new dispensation since they were now considered illiterate or uneducated in the new scheme of things. The new system made them not only unemployed but unqualified to participate in politics, even though they could read and write Islamic numerals. Consequently, a new set of people came to control the bureaucracy, while the Mallams (scholars) became unemployed because they were not qualified in the Western education system, which was the only criterion for white-collar jobs.

Following the loss of government support, the reduction of the authority of Emirs, who were the principal patrons during pre-colonial times, and the increasing number of *Almajirai* to cater for, the upkeep of the pupils/students became overwhelmingly burdensome for teachers. They were left with no choice but to send these young pupils out to beg for alms and perform menial jobs to fend for themselves.

During the post-colonial era, the situation regarding the *Almajirci* system continued to worsen. Today, the system has even become a menace to society, whereas it was initially conceived for the religious and character development of children as they grew. The 1972-74 Sahelian droughts caused significant social dislocations and further impoverished the region's population, sapping their capacity to sustain their children's education (Watts, 1983, 374). The Mallams (scholars) also suffered the same fate as they could no longer support themselves, having lost the traditional support they enjoyed in the past.

Moreover, the oil glut in the late 1970s resulted in a fall in government revenues, worsening the economic situation in the country. By the early 1980s, the Shagari government introduced austerity measures in a bid to salvage the economy of the country from collapse. The economic crunch resulted in the emergence of a swarm of destitute individuals who roamed the streets, some in the name of *Almajirci* and others as migrants from villages fleeing hardship in rural areas (Kano, 2021, 3-4). It was under these extreme conditions that *Almajirci* began to manifest as a societal problem, and the outbreak of the *Maitatsine* riot in Kano, followed by skirmishes in different parts of the northern states, clearly revealed the seriousness of the problem and the need for immediate action.

The Search for an Antidote

The need for the reform of traditional Islamic education in Northern Nigeria began to be recognized by Muslim individuals themselves by the mid-twentieth century. Colonialism had altered the socio-economic and political landscape, and traditional Islamic education failed to respond positively to the onslaught of colonial imposition. The system became ossified in the past, with all the negative consequences that entails. As a result, graduates from traditional Islamic schools lack the skills or certificates needed to compete successfully in the labor market with graduates from Western-style schools. This brought to the forefront the need to devise new techniques and tools for imparting knowledge and skills to meet the requirements of the rapidly changing social order.

In light of this, Malam Aminu Kano, a scholar with the benefit of both Islamic and Western education, opened a school in 1950. The school was organized into classes, providing lessons in Arabic and Islamic Studies in the first year, and in the second year, alongside these subjects, other modern subjects were introduced. Malam Aminu aimed to promote Islamic-oriented primary and secondary schools (Khalid, 2020, p.8).

The first government attempt at integrating traditional Islamic education with Western-style education came in 1962 when the defunct Northern regional government set up a ministerial committee to investigate the problems of Qur'anic schools and Islamic education. The committee members visited several Muslim countries, including Egypt, Libya, and Sudan (ibid). They observed that in all the countries they visited, there were no Qur'anic Mallams moving about with children. Part of the committee's recommendations included:

- a. Reorganizing Qur'anic education with specific age and learning standards for entry
- b. Diversifying the curriculum to include arithmetic, reading, and writing
- c. The regional government and Native Authorities (N.A.) should assist in building classrooms and ensure effective planning and supervision
- d. Imposing stricter measures to prevent Mallams from moving from place to place with young children (ibid, 9-10).

In 1964, the government began implementing the committee's recommendations by providing a capital grant of 150 pounds to each approved Qur'anic school for classroom infrastructure. Additionally, a recurrent grant of 25 pounds per year was paid to N.A. for each approved school, with 10 pounds paid to the teacher, and an additional 3 pounds contributed by the N.A. Islamiyya schools were also allocated grants to assist in paying teachers (ibid, 8-9).

The military takeover in 1967 subverted this laudable effort to address the problems of the *Almajirci* system. The fate of Qur'anic education was pushed to individual state governments. Many state governments in the North established boards for Arabic and Islamic education charged with promoting Islamic education. However, in most states, poor funding thwarted the achievement of the desired objectives.

The *Maitatsine* uprising in Kano in 1980 reignited discussions on the problem of *Almajirci* in Northern Nigeria. State governments like Kano and Sokoto responded with a series of legislative measures aimed at curtailing the rampant migration of school children and their Mallams. In 1980, the Kano State Government enacted an edict tagged: Qur'anic Schools Registration. Sokoto State also signed into law an edict in July 1980 titled: The Control of Juveniles Accompanying Qur'anic Mallams Adoptive Rules. These measures aimed to impose stricter control on the movement of Mallams with children (ibid, 10-11).

In addition to government efforts, individuals continued experimenting with the process of integration with some remarkable success. In 1984, Sheikh Malam Yakub Musa Kafanchan established the Riyadul Qur'an (Garden of al Qur'an), a school originally dedicated to the recitation and memorization of the Qur'an. Starting in a garage, philanthropic individuals later volunteered to build classrooms, a playground, a library, and hire teachers. Eventually, the school became an Islamiyya school, expanding its curriculum to include both Islamic and Western education. The school's running costs were sourced from tuition and boarding fees paid by parents, as well as donations from individuals and organizations (Muhammad, 1997, 191-199).

In 2008, the Federal Government took bold action to address the *Almajirci* and out-of-school children problems by committing approximately five billion Naira for the construction of over 400 *Almajiri* schools across the 19 Northern states. On April 10, 2012, President Jonathan conducted a symbolic commissioning of the 64 nearly completed *Almajiri* schools (Onitade, 2015, 10). The schools were planned as boarding institutions under the FGN/UBEC *Almajiri* Integration Programme.

Although various efforts by the government and non-governmental organizations towards improving the *Almajirci* system of education have yielded some success, their failure to eradicate or even reduce the number of *Almajirai* on the streets remains a great concern.

In recognition of this, the Sokoto State Government continued the search for a workable and environment-friendly program to address the *Almajirci* problem in the state. In March 2020, the government dispatched a study team to Indonesia, the most populous

Muslim country in the world, to study their Qur'anic school system. The Islamic education system of Indonesia, known as Pondok-Pesantren, is believed to be an improved version of the *Almajirci* system of education in its original form. It blends Islamic and Western education as well as local institutions operating within the community by religious leaders (Abdullahi, 2021, 11).

The curriculum for this type of Islamic education includes traditional religious education, a government-recognized curriculum, vocational skills training, and character development (Maidoki, nd). The funding sources for this system include contributions from students in cash or kind, donations from school alumni, zakat and waqf contributions, small-scale businesses, government grants, and donations from parents.

CONCLUSION

The *Almajirci* system of education used to be a vibrant system that met educational needs and promoted societal advancement. The British colonialists struck the earliest blow to the system by smothering it and destroying its sources of funding. With the introduction and promotion of Western education in the area, graduates of the *Almajirci* system were dismissed as illiterates and unemployable. Later, the Sudano-Sahelian droughts, coupled with the Nigerian government's pursuit of IMF and World Bank-inspired capitalist policies, further plunged the masses into destitution.

This situation not only pushed the *Almajirai*, who are mainly students of Islamic schools, into begging but also led to millions of destitute individuals roaming the streets. An all-encompassing poverty alleviation program is needed to confront this dire situation. Despite various government efforts to address the problems of the *Almajirci* system, there has yet to be any significant impact. There seems to be a lack of genuine commitment on the part of the government to address the issue, with political motives and corruption overshadowing a commitment to service.

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