

The Metamorphosis of Roving-Studentship (*Yawon Almajiranci*): an Islamic Historical Challenge of the 21st Century Experience in Northern Nigeria

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Abstract: *This research sets out to examine some aspects on the origin and development of roving-studentship¹ (popularly known in Hausa language as Yawon Almajiranci), as well as its transcendence into a substantial chain of institutionalized beggary (Yawon bara or roko) in the 21st century northern Nigeria.² The research has also looked at the insidious effects of beggary on the Hausa-Fulani Muslim community and the entire northern region, thereby tarnishing the regional image.*

Beggary has eaten deep into the fabrics of some northern Nigerian societies who mostly today transformed the begging manner into a profitable business. The practicability of begging syndrome has now become part and parcel of livelihood in some remotely impoverished Nigerian society. This act has become prevalent among the Hausa/Fulani Muslims. For more than a couple of centuries, it was the tradition of some West African Muslim parents to send their children to far places to pursue Islamic religious education (mastering Qur'an and other related Islamic literatures) but unfortunately, since from the middle of the 20th century the golden culture began to collapse due to the changing nature of its ideology. Some of the children only ended up becoming specialized street-beggars, who were prone into a number of dangerous acts, causing public disturbances in the society.

With the shortage of written evidences, the research has been completed with the help of oral traditional method of reconstructing history.

Keywords: *Roving-Studentship, Northern Nigeria, Beggary.*

1. THE WORD ALMAJIRI: ITS HISTORICAL CONCEPT

Primarily, the Hausa word 'Almajiri' (*Almajirai*: plural, *Almajiranci*: the act) usually refers to a person who often migrates from the luxury of his home to other places or to a notable teacher in search of Islamic knowledge. It is a reflection of the Islamic idea of migration which is widely practiced in search of Islamic knowledge, especially when the acquisition of knowledge at home is either inconvenient or insufficient. Imam Shafi, the chief proponent of migration, is quoted as extending this migration concept to business, among other things. He likened it to a precious stone which to him is nothing unless it is mined and transported away from its soil. This, he summarized in two verses:

"Emigrate from your home in quest of excellence, and travel for in travel there are five benefits: relief from sorrow and earning a livelihood, then knowledge, good manners and friendship with the famous".³

The act of travelling in search of knowledge in Islamic perspective has also been proven in many of the Prophetic traditions (*Ahadith*), in which one of them commands Muslims to "*Seek knowledge even as far as China*".⁴ This is where most West African Muslim communities relied on in sending their children away home for Islamic scholarship.

2. ORIGIN AND DEVELOPMENT OF ROVING-STUDENTSHP (YAWON ALMAJIRANCI)

The history of roving-studentship (*Yawon Almajiranci*) in Western Sudan has been dated back to the 11th century following the introduction of Islam by the Maghrebian Arab merchants.⁵ Islam first gained prominence in Kanem-Borno Empire under the influential leadership of their rulers (the *Mais* and *Shehus*), who made enthusiastic efforts in developing the system of Qur'anic literacy aimed at training future scholars for the propagation of Islam within and beyond their region.⁶

In its relations with the Maghreb, the Kanem-Borno extended its diplomatic deals with countries like Egypt, Morocco, Tunis, Algeria and Libya and in the middle of the 13th century, Kanem was said to

have built a *riwaq* (hostel) in Cairo for students from Kanem and some Hausa States of Kano and Katsina.⁷ This sparked off the light of literary tradition of Islamic scholarship as the tradition received great impetus among the Western Sudanese Muslims. It was not surprising that, from the beginning of the 14th century other West African Muslim kingdoms and States like Mali, Songhay and Hausaland began to send their male children for a similar errand. By the beginning of the 16th century, Kano and Katsina became recognized as the great centers of Islamic learning that attracted scholars and many disciples from the Maghreb, the Middle East, as well as from other areas of Western Sudan. Similarly, since the beginning of the 19th century, the Sokoto Caliphate succeeded in nurturing other areas within its stronghold that later emerged as new centers of Islamic learning.⁸

Many of the disciples who were engaged in *Yawon Almajiranci* have successfully returned as learned men who have also acquired other specialized skilful jobs like itinerant trading, weaving, architecture and masonry among others. They were also used in spreading Islam in their non-Muslim neighbouring communities, and later struggled during the era of Islamic revivalisms in the 19th century in northern Nigeria.⁹

Recent researches have revealed the existence of two (2) major types of *Almajiranci*, which constitute traditional and modern roving-studentships.

The traditional roving-studentship only concerns the pursuance of Islamic education (roving minds on the tenets of the Qur'an and other related texts). Parents mostly send their male children to faraway places in order to help them concentrate more on studies. This is quite similar to modern Western boarding school system. Also parents used to visit their children occasionally to supplement their teachers with a considerable amount of foodstuff after farm harvest. This constitutes part of the food mostly used in feeding their students.¹⁰

However, that could not prevent the students from going round from house to house begging for additional food occasionally. That was the nature of *Almajiranci* which existed since the advent of Islam in West Africa in the 11th century. The practices persisted up to the last quarter of the 20th century.¹¹

3. THE EVOLUTION OF MODERN ALMAJIRANCI

This is a modernized approach to *Almajiranci*, which is believed to have been rooted from northern Nigeria in the middle of the 20th century or perhaps earlier following the introduction of Western education that contributed to the collapse of the *Almajiri* education system.¹² It has now widely sprouted into different parts of Nigeria and neighbouring areas of Niger Republic. Its aim is totally dispensable to the pursuance of Islamic knowledge. It gives preference towards the accumulation of wealth and worldly booties. Its main features were display of despicable manners like idleness (redundancy), betrayals such as lying, flattery (sweet talk), stealing and dissimulation. These attitudes first prevailed especially among the physically disabled individuals but later hijacked by the able-bodied healthy individuals who rubbished themselves in hawking from streets to streets, motor parks, airport entrances, churches and mosques and house to house, begging for sustainability.¹³ Though began in the north but its effects is still been felt all over the country and even reached its international borders of Niger, Cameroon, Chad and Benin Republics.¹⁴ North African countries have been experiencing the outbreak of such group of short and long distance beggars (*Almajirai*) from the neighbouring West African countries.¹⁵

Its needs to be noted that beggary has been posing difficulties in the original homes of its practitioners as most able-bodied men and women have abandoned agricultural practices and other economic activities at the expense of beggary. Moreover, most of those who were involved in either short or long distance beggary hardly returned homes in good time. They have been advancing into other unknown destinations where certain mischievous and harmful luxuries such as prostitution, smoking and alcoholism existed. Most long distance beggars who left their countries of origin were never heard of to date by their relatives. They left in the name of performing some religious acts.¹⁶

A major factor that transformed the traditional acts of roving-studentship into a more expensively and materialistic beggary business was the role of the earliest beggary practitioners' informants, who mostly engaged into the begging business and emerged victorious. They returned to their homes of origin as successful 'wealthy business men and women'. This still has been influencing the flight of people *en masse*, moving into a highly organized way along with their children. They have been concentrating into major capital cities and towns begging on the streets.¹⁷

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According to some interviewed veteran youthful beggars, the year 1999 was a turning point in the history of begging expeditions in Nigeria because many avenues of wealth accumulation were opened up in that year. Perhaps this was due to the restoration of a democratic government that ensured the circulation of money in the hands of their dependees as most Western economic embargos were lifted. About 35 beggars interviewed were confirmed to have left their villages moving into major cities and towns, in search of menial jobs. However, some of them only haphazardly ended up into begging, moving from house to house and mosque to mosque in order to sustain themselves.¹⁸

4. EFFECTS OF BEGGARY AND SOME RECOMMENDATIONS

Opinions sought on the position of begging in Islam has shown that, out of 25 elderly beggars, only 6 respondents viewed begging as a social attitude which must be distanced from religious cycle. The begging syndrome has been for long attached to Islamic religion. They (veterans) believed that they were doing the right religious act where the giver be rewarded abundantly by Allah. Islamic religion has a rider to this because it strongly condemns idleness and encourages Muslims to strive for sustenance. That was why Prophet Muhammad and his wife Khadijah engaged themselves in trade during their lifetime.¹⁹

The northern Nigerian society needs serious rethink of their miserable situation in order to re-strategize their decadent Islamic norms and values, towards the attainment of a truly modernized Hausa-Fulani society who are totally free from such unbecoming destitute attitudes. Much energy in community awareness needs to be sacrificed by their State governments and religious leaders so as to restore the defunct northern Nigeria's exemplary glorious past. Religion has the institutional power to direct the future course of any nation because it is volatile and so, if properly harnessed it can play a pro-active and beneficial role of consolidating the northern Nigerian society.

It is quite saddened that the Hausa-Fulani community who for many centuries were specially known for hard work and courage who ventured most of their lives in agriculture, rearing and promoting knowledge have now turned into beggary-dependant people. During the early introduction of Western education in the north, the painstaking fear was that Muslim children would lose their Islamic identity and embrace anti-social behaviours that negated the values and principles of Islam. For this reason, many parents refused to send their children to such Christianized schools. Instead they were sent out for *Almajirci* where they also had contacts with similar fearful Western values. The modern *Almajirci* could not run away from such dreadful experience as some beggars have already embraced prostitution, hard-drugs dealing business, smoking and stealing on part-time basis so as to escape from becoming victims of hunger and starvation.²⁰

Some of the Christian counterparts in the south and east have been judging Islam as the religion that approves destitute culture such as laziness and idleness as most begging attitudes have been practised by the Hausa-Muslims. They no doubt contributed in tarnishing the image of Islam in the eyes of their non-Muslim counterparts who dared to embrace Islam, but denounced their impending plans.²¹

Perhaps, it is not surprising to see that the security challenge facing the country has been compounded by the *Almajirci* syndrome as most parents interviewed during this research do not know the whereabouts of their children and other close relatives. However, they were confirmed to have gone out for beggary. Perhaps they joined the *Boko Haram*²² militants where they were easily convinced and brainwashed on the prohibition of Western education. A considerable number of the beggars interviewed have denounced the preeminence of Western education, seen it as disbelief (Hausa, *Kafirci*) without any tangible reason.

5. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it is pertinent to note that the analytical discussions at our disposal have provided a striking balance between the two similar ambiguous factors- "roving-studentship and beggary". For almost a decade, the 2 factors have become debatable subjects, thereby, posing conceptual misunderstanding among many individuals. Most of these local acts of *yawon bara* which have been wrongly attached to the Hausa-Muslim culture are sometimes taken to represent the whole of northern Nigerian society, particularly by Nigerian and international observers. In the real sense it is far from the case. Beggary has now been proven to be a total misrepresentation of the Hausa-Muslim culture.

The Hausa-Muslim culture of roving-studentship is no doubt a beneficial phenomenon, which has provided a great impetus to the development of trade and other related specialized human skills and

foremost, educational awareness to the northern regional community. Beggary on the other hand has provided hardship and sacrilegious difficulties in the region that unless more precautionary measures are taken, before it can be invigorated.

REFERENCES

- [1] Roving-Studentship (*Yawon Almajiranci*) is as old as the creation of this world. It is an act of wandering about of humans with an aim of benefiting new developmental ideas, through the exchange of ideas and skills among human beings. This no doubt is what often leads to the establishment of an ideal society. The major aim of this culture is the acquisition of knowledge. This should therefore, not be misunderstood or misguided with the word 'beggary' (*Yawon bara or roko*), which automatically means a situation where one shoulders poor qualities such as idleness, dependent-laziness and sluggish manners, thereby moving from one place to another 'seeking for help' to sustain his/her daily needs.
- [2] What became the British protectorate of Northern Nigeria (*Arewacin Nigeria*) in 1900 was carved out of the greater part of the erstwhile Sokoto Caliphate and the Borno Empire. Both were originally polities of some sorts; the Sokoto Caliphate was established to replace the then existing non-Islamic governments of the Hausa States and with the aim of re-invigorating the spirit of Islam throughout that part of *Bilad al- Sudan*. The preparation for this took almost two decades and the caliphate was ushered in following the Jihad, early in the 19th century. See: Alkali, Nura, *Islam in Africa: Proceedings of the Islam in African Conference*, Ibadan, Spectrums Ltd., 1993, p.1. Also see: 'Northern Nigeria', in Wikipedia Free Encyclopedia, retrieved from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Northern_Nigeria_Protectorate, accessed 24/6/2011. Beside the Hausa-Fulani, other tribes that live in Northern Nigeria are the Igala, the Jukun, the Gbagyi, Nupe, Igbirra, the Idoma, Tiv, Bura, Bata, and many smaller ones at varying stages of political formation, are all part of the region. See: G.A. Kwanashie, *The Making of the North in Nigeria*, Kaduna, Arewa House, ABU Press, 2002, p.1.
- [3] Imam Shafi was quoted by E.G, Elechi & R.L., Yekorogha, "The Almajiri Model Schools in Nigeria: Matters Arising", in *International Journal of Educational Foundations and Management*, Vol.I (1), 2013, p.72.
- [4] See Hadith of *Riyadu us-Saleheen*, no 245, *Al-Tirmithi*, nos. 107, 108, 148, 422 and many others.
- [5] See S.A. Balogun, "History of Islam up to 1800", in Obaro, I.(ed), *The Groundwork of Nigerian History*, Ibadan, Heinemann Educational Books Plc., 1980, p.210.
- [6] See: I. A. Balogun., in R.A. Doi, (ed.), *Nigerian Journal of Islam*, vol. 1, No. 1, June, 1970, p.37.
- [7] Balogun, "History of..."p. 214.
- [8] See: K. A. Muhammad, *The Intellectual Origin of Sokoto Jihad*, Ibadan, Iman Publication, 1994, p.22.
- [9] Examples of such literary writings of the 19th century Jihad *Ulama* (scholars) and their disciples who gained a lot of significance from their roving-studentship (*Yawon Almajiranci*) were *Infraq al maysur, Jala'ussudur, Tahqiqul Muribin wal Mushakkikin, Fathul bab fil dhikr, Wathiqatu li amirulmu'minina* of Sultan Muhammadu Bello, *Ulumul Mu'amalat, Tariqul Jannah, Hisnul Afham, Ajwabatil Muharrara, Ihya'ussunnah, Umdatul Hayan* of Sheikh Uthman Ibn Fodio, *Tazyinul Waraqat, Tahdibil Ihsan, Sabilin Najat, Alamatil Muttabi'in* of Abdullahi Ibn Fodio. Waziri Junaid had *Urful Rihan. Raudul Jinan* was written by Gidado Ibn Lema etc. See many of their write-ups in Kaura, J.M., "The Sufi Dimension in the Sokoto Caliphate", Sokoto, Usmanu Danfodiyo University, Department of Islamic Studies, *Ph.D Thesis*, 1991, Pp. 457-459. The manuscripts of most of these workers are currently being preserved in Nigerian Universities and National Archives awaiting critical edition and translation by interested scholars, who have already started the translation and transliteration works.
- [10] In a group discussion with Malam Jibo Utono (a retired Arabic Teacher, 85 years), at Utono Town in Yauri Emirate of northern Nigeria, 22/8/2012.
- [11] *Ibid*.
- [12] In discussion with Late Malam Muhammadu Bello Jabbo (A retired Fulani *Kora'nic* Teacher, over 100 years), 'Neganji Village, in Borgu Emirate/ Benin Republic Border, 08/2/2010. He added that the major northern States of Nigeria with highest number of beggars were Sokoto, Borno, Zamfara, Kano, Bauchi and Zaria. Today, all the major cities of Nigeria have been

experiencing the outbreak of such groups of individual beggars. They were homeless and therefore, spending their times on the streets and under bridges begging for alms. He was of the view that the situation worsened due to insufficient burden of trust and caring for the children, a tradition that was in existence for more than a couple of centuries. It was embarrassing that children were made to fend for themselves by begging. Today, they roam about, extremely dirty, tattered, often battered and walking bare-footed.

[13] *Ibid.*

[14] In discussion with a group of Veteran Beggars: Malams Alakoro, Danladi Makaho and Hajiya Lamishi Matan Audun Tahoua, along Jibiya/Maradi Border, 12/12/2014.

[15] *Ibid.*

[16] In interview with Malam Muntari Kawo (57 years), 13/5/2014. He was a retired beggar who claimed to have visited 12 States of Nigeria during his youthful age conducting his begging profession. He was now a laundry attendant in Kaduna City, Unguwar Shanu.

[17] Among the early beggary returnees were those who bought cows, built houses, vehicles, wearing embroidered clothes and performed Hajj. In short discussion with Hajiya Mamu (a beggar from Konni Town of Niger Republic, over 60 years), Lagos, 02/3/2014 who has been into the business since in the 1980s. She accompanied her husband Mai-Akwai to Lagos where they lived at Obalende Bridge, adjacent to Dodan Barraks Lagos. She stated that many of their allies become rich through beggary.

[18] In interviews with some veteran beggars like Dan Mallam, Isah, Sha'ibu, Audu and Ali among many others, between 14/2/2013 to 28/2/2013. They added that what motivated their flight was the developmental nature of the country in 1999 as there were signs of good condition of living. That they noticed about the wages increase of government workers, seeing good houses coming up and many vehicles moving on streets. Quite a number of such kind of energetic beggars were said to have succeeded in reaching the Maghrebian countries, across the Saharan desert. They transited in the Maghreb for a while working in the Arabs homes and earned some money. According to Dan Mallam, 2 of his childhood friends Abbas and Ali Dogo from Agadez (in Niger Republic) were reported to have earned some reasonable amount of wealth while living in Libya, which after the death of President Muammer Ghadafi (1969-2011), they later used in paying their ferry travelling-agents in order to set their foots in Europe. He last received their phone calls during the American invasion of Libya in 2011. It was not known if they were among the victims of boat-capsize at the southern Italian Island of Lampedusa in 2013. See Squires, Nick, "Italy Mourns 300 dead in Lampedusa Migrant Boat Tragedy", in *The Telegraph*, Rome, Oct. 2013, Pp. 1-3

[19] For details about the Prophet Muhammad's life as a trader, see Sofea, Nur Z., Shah, Ridwan et al., "The Prophet Muhammad S.A.W: Life As A Trader and Entrepreneur in the Perspective of Business Ethics", in *Introduction to Muamalat*, MacGraw Hill, Kuala Lumpur, 2008, Pp. 1-8.

[20] Similar Western *Almajirci* model schools were established in April 2012, inaugurated in Sokoto by the Nigerian government. About 102 schools were approved across the country, specifically aimed at controlling the menace of widespread *Almajiranci* syndrome that became much worrisome. Children below 10 years were increasingly seen roaming about in all the corners of Nigeria begging for alms. See E.G, Elechi & R.L., Yekorogha, "The Almajiri Model Schools in Nigeria...p. 73. Nonetheless, most of such *Almajirci* model schools were found almost deserted.

[21] In group discussion and short debates with some intellectual Christian communities on their perception over the *Almajirci*, at Federal University Dutsinma, Katsina State, 14/1/2015.

[22] Boko Haram is claimed to have been an Islamic religious sect whose major aim is to establish a fully Islamic State in Nigeria. It is popularly known as Jama'atu Ahlul Sunnah Lidda'awati Wal Jihad, which was created in 2002 by Late Sheikh Muhammad Yusuf (1970-2009). It first came into physical confrontation with the Nigerian security forces in January 2010 at Maiduguri. See Ford, John, "The Origins of Boko Haram", in *The National Interest*, USA, June 6, 2014, Pp. 2-4.