



ALMAJIRI SYSTEM OF EDUCATION, THE OTHER SIDE OF THE COIN: A CALL FOR RESTRUCTURING AND INTEGRATION

Yusuf ABUBAKAR

Department of Human Kinetics and Health Education, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria
Corresponding Author: yakgez337@gmail.com; 08107268049

Abstract

The *Almajiri* system of education in northern Nigeria, a traditional Islamic educational framework, has long been a subject of debate due to its perceived negative social, economic, and educational impacts. Initially designed to provide religious education, the system has evolved into a structure that often leaves its participants vulnerable to poverty, exploitation, and marginalisation. This paper explores the *Almajiri* system from a critical perspective, focusing on its administrative, economic, social, and religious roles within Nigerian society. Rather than advocating for the outright proscription of the system, this paper calls for its restructuring and integration with formal education to enhance its efficacy and provide a more balanced approach to the needs of the children involved. It highlights key strategies for restructuring, including the introduction of a dual curriculum that combines Qur'anic and secular education, the incorporation of vocational training, the improvement of infrastructure, and the training of teachers. The author concluded that combining religious education with practical, skills-based learning, the *Almajiri* system can contribute positively to the development of both individuals and society, ensuring that these children are equipped to participate fully in modern economic and social life. The author therefore recommended that there is a need to integrate formal and Qur'anic Education by the government to help achieve a dual-curriculum approach, where students receive a comprehensive education that includes Islamic teachings alongside literacy, numeracy, and vocational skills. Also, there is a need to improve the infrastructure of *Almajiri* schools by the Government and non-governmental organisations to provide better living and learning conditions, such as adequate shelters, learning materials, and trained teachers who are capable of teaching both religious and secular subjects.

Keywords: Almajiri, Education, Restructuring, Integration, Formal Education, Nigeria, Qur'anic Education, Vocational Training, Socio-Economic Development.

Introduction

The *Almajiri* system of education appeared to be a serious issue of discourse among researchers in the area of history, education, anthropology, civic education, social studies, and political economy, to mention but a few. The word *Almajiri* comes from the Arabic word *al-Muhajirun*, which means "a migrant" or "one who seeks knowledge." Traditionally, it was seen as a noble pursuit of knowledge, where children were sent to religious scholars in different parts of the country to further their understanding of Islam. The children who are part of this system are often from economically disadvantaged families and are provided food and shelter by their teachers in exchange for religious education (Abubakar, 2020).

Conceptually, the meaning was used to refer to those individuals who go about seeking Islamic knowledge (Taiwo, 2013). The *Almajiri* consist of children of the nomad, fishermen, farmers, the haves and the have-nots who have left their homes in search of Qur'anic and Islamic knowledge (Olaniran, 2018). It is a traditional form of education practised in northern Nigeria, where children, mostly boys, are sent to Islamic scholars (Mallams) for religious and Qur'anic instructions. This system, which dates back several centuries, aims to provide religious education and develop literacy in Arabic and Islamic texts. However, the author has observed over the years, the *Almajiri* system has become synonymous with poverty, child labour, and the abandonment of children by their families to fend for themselves in urban areas. Also, the system has evolved in a manner that raises concerns among policy makers, social scientists, and human rights activists (Maigari, 2017).

The Qur'anic schools are those institutions objectively established and managed out of the public budget, operating on a curriculum based on the individual ability of the learner. It gave rise to the popular Hausa adage "*Wanda yaiyaallonsa, yawanke* –that progress come only when one has mastered/memorize what is on his slate. Two types of Qur'anic school were identified (Maigari, 2017). The first was the "basic" made for children to learn Arabic letters in a pattern similar to principle of progression or workload in the conventional western education system – starting from "*Babbaku, Wasulla* and *Tattashiya*" meaning the consonant, consonants with vowels and learning to read the Qur'an. These schools often called the '*MakarantarAllo*' (The slate school) enrolled children from the age of five. The second was the adolescents and adults type operates in a boarding system where memorisation of the Holy Qur'an is given priority. This is the normal *Tsangaya* system, usually established on the outskirts of a town. The conditions in the two schools are dynamic. In a true Hausa community, then, hardly a child grows without passing through this system until recently, when it was being depicted in the most gruesome picture and was beginning to be replaced by the *Islamiyya* system, a day system usually in the evening hours. To the author, no matter how difficult or miserable the lives of such children are, the majority never regret being there because they were made to understand that "nothing good comes easy". They are being prepared for a later life of independence, self-employment while having a heart to sympathise with any less privileged individuals. A lot has been said regarding how bad the *Almajiri* system is. Does that mean it is in no way beneficial?

Today, many *Almajiri* children are forced into beggary or perform menial tasks for their survival. They live in overcrowded and unsanitary conditions, which not only hinder their intellectual growth but also expose them to a range of social and health issues (Omotayo, 2019). The *Almajiri* system has been critiqued for not adequately integrating formal education, skills training, or child welfare into its structure, which limits the future opportunities of these children and contributes to broader societal problems, including poverty, unemployment, and extremism. The Nigerian government, concerned about the adverse effects of the *Almajiri* system on the nation's development, has proposed various solutions over the years, including an attempt to restrict the practice. For instance, the federal government's plan to *proscribe* or abolish the system was discussed, citing concerns over child exploitation and the rising number of street children (Kadiri, 2021). However, while some view the proscription of the system as a necessary measure to protect children, others argue that the solution lies not in banning the practice but in restructuring and integrating it into the modern educational framework.

The call for *restructuring and integration* of the *Almajiri* system into the formal education sector has garnered significant support from various scholars and religious leaders who argue that the existing system can be improved without being discarded entirely. They advocate for incorporating both Qur'anic and secular education in a more balanced manner, ensuring that the children are not only trained in religious knowledge but are also equipped with the skills needed to succeed in a modern economy (Aminu & Ibrahim, 2020). The author is of the opinion that such an approach would ensure that the *Almajiri* system continues to serve its original purpose of fostering knowledge while also addressing the social and economic challenges faced by these children.

The author, who is a pro-*Almajiris*, felt that this system has supported the majority of currently serving Islamic clerics in Nigeria and beyond. Thus, its proscription is considered a violation of human rights. This category of people, as a matter of fact been overlooked, disposed of, maltreated, blamed or persecuted based on what other authors considered unsociable or a miserable life, ignoring the important role played by the *Almajiris*, which he inferred as "the other side of the coin". In this write-up, the author tried to bring strong reasons to clear the misconceptions on the nature of the system and make a call to its resuscitation, restructuring and integrating the *Tsangaya* system in the popular "Inclusive Education".

The author believed that government and general public are not fully aware of the roles played by the product of this system whom are impacting to the lives of people in the immediate communities they live thus, prompting him to come up with this article with a view to educate the public on the roles played by the *Almajiris*, and the need for integrating them into the formal education for balanced literacy and numeracy capable of making their life better.

The Outstanding Roles of the Almajiri System of Education

The products of the *Almajiri* system and the students play a vital role in various fields of human endeavour since its inception in the 11th century in the Kanem Borno Empire, and were later replicated in the Sokoto Caliphate after the triumph of the Jihad led by Sheikh Uthman Dan Fodio (1754 – 1817) (AbdulQadir 2015). The author wished to discuss this under the following:

1. Administrative Roles
2. Economic Roles
3. Social Roles
4. Religions Roles

i. Administrative Roles of *Almajiris*:

The *Almajiri* system contributes to the administrative structures of local communities, primarily through the informal leadership roles filled by religious scholars (Mallams) and their students. These scholars often serve as community leaders, influencing decisions on religious and cultural matters. In many northern Nigerian towns, Mallams are revered not only as educators but also as local administrators who mediate disputes, offer counsel, and play a key role in upholding Islamic values within their communities (Aminu, 2020). The hierarchical structure of the *Almajiri* system, where senior students supervise younger ones, also reinforces a leadership model that mirrors the communal organisation typical of northern Nigeria. Moreover, the *Almajiri* system supports the decentralisation of education in rural and underserved areas where formal schools might not be easily accessible. This decentralised education structure ensures that religious education reaches various parts of the region, even in remote locations, contributing to administrative stability in such areas by providing an alternative form of education (Babatunde, 2018).

The products of the *Almajiri* system of education, past and present, play vital leadership roles in their localities. In addition to their roles as teachers, Imams and preachers, the graduates from the *Almajiri* system of education formed the group of elites that manned various government organs and parastatals in the pre-and post-colonial era in Northern Nigeria. Similarly, they played significant roles during the Indirect Rule introduced by the colonial authorities in the region, as the *Ajami* (way of writing Hausa language using Arabic letters) was widely used throughout the region. The British were left with no option but to recruit them as clerks and office attendants in the heyday of their activities in the area (Abdulkadir, 2015). As stated earlier, this system has undergone. Today, these individuals play the role of supportive staff as messengers and cleaners. When a university graduate spends years looking for a job, they will take the least and manage their family. In essence, they accept low-quality jobs such as nail cutting, cleaning and stewardship, which could never be accepted by any A-level graduate. Above all, the *Almajiris* exercise their franchise duty during elections.

ii. Economic Roles of *Almajiris*

Economically, the *Almajiri* system has both positive and negative implications. On the one hand, the system helps to create a unique form of economic mobility for its participants. *Almajiris* typically engage in street begging or perform small jobs for survival, which has contributed to a labour force that fills various informal roles in the local economy. These children often provide cheap labour for petty businesses, helping sustain small-scale economies in their communities (Mamman, 2020). However, the system also has its economic drawbacks. The large number of children who remain outside formal education limits their potential to contribute to the formal economy in a significant way. Without access to vocational or technical training, most *Almajiris* remain trapped in low-wage, unskilled labour. Consequently, this perpetuates cycles of poverty, especially for those who are unable to transition into higher forms of education or skilled labour (Omotayo, 2019). Furthermore, the state's inability to integrate the *Almajiri* system into the formal education sector hampers the productivity and economic growth of northern Nigeria as a whole. The *Almajiri* system produces graduates who cannot be fully employed by the government, but neither complain of unemployment nor are they counted as unemployed youths. Teachers (*Mallams*) and their pupils (the *Almajiris*) were later (and until today) regarded as a bunch of illiterates due to their inability to read or write in the newly introduced form of education

called *Karatun Boko* (Western education). To make ends meet, both the teachers and their pupils turned beggars, which formed the *Almajiridilemma* today (Taiwo, 2013). At the age of 18 and above, the pupils quit street begging as self-employed.

It is worthy of regard, as observed by the author, that these categories of people do not pose any threat to the government seeking any white collar job. They would rather engage themselves in providing certain services that have a myriad of economic gains to them, and society is fully dependent on their services. As they resort to all forms of vocational art and craft-related business, such as cap making, weaving, dying, shoemaking, farming, laundry services, knitting, fashion designing and many more, in which our Nigerian graduates cannot take many of those jobs. The *Almajiri* also pay taxes (attached) to the government to enable it to provide community developmental services. Shop owners, among those people who pay taxes to the government, are a sign of being good citizens. The product of the *Almajiri* system and those still undergoing the Qur'anic studies give the best services at a cheaper rate. They are always content with the little they get from their sweat and are used to being patient in all hardships. The *Almajiris* (pupils and graduates) take part in street hawking. By so doing, some products reach customers and final consumers through hawking.

iii. Social Roles of Almajiris

The social roles of the *Almajiri* system are multifaceted, serving both as a means of socialisation and a mechanism for social control. In traditional northern Nigerian communities, the *Almajiri* system plays a crucial role in shaping the values and identity of its participants. Through their exposure to religious education, these children are taught not only the tenets of Islam but also social codes and norms that govern their interactions within society (Abubakar, 2020). As they grow older, many *Almajiris* assume leadership roles in the community, continuing the cycle of mentorship and knowledge transfer within their families and broader society. As human beings, the *Almajiris* are also social beings. They relate well with people in society. The social well-being, as far as the author is concerned, outweighed the perceived desocializations which were induced by the government's failure to provide for them their social needs as citizens who chose to take that direction/pattern of life. Their separation from families and friends could in no way deprive them of a means to socialise in the new society. They marry, intermarry and give out their daughters to marriage to others within the new society. They take part in all societal/community developmental projects such as environmental sanitation, agricultural exhibitions, cultural festivals and many other social functions (Abdulbaqi et al., 2024; Amin et al., 2024). On the other hand, the social impact of the *Almajiri* system has often been negative due to the marginalisation of the children involved. Many *Almajiris* are stigmatised as beggars or "street children," and as they grow older, some face difficulties in finding formal employment or integrating into society at large (Aminu & Ibrahim, 2020). The lack of integration into formal educational systems and societal structures leaves many vulnerable to exploitation and social exclusion, contributing to broader issues of inequality, crime, and social unrest.

iv. Religious Roles of Almajiris

Religiously, the *Almajiri* system is fundamentally centred on the transmission of Islamic knowledge. This system is a core component of the Islamic education structure in northern Nigeria and aims to impart Qur'anic teachings, Hadith (sayings and actions of the Prophet Muhammad), and basic Arabic literacy (Kadiri, 2021). The *Almajiri* system is seen as a means of fulfilling religious duties and ensuring the continuation of Islamic traditions. Students (*Almajiris*) who complete their education are often regarded as highly knowledgeable individuals, capable of leading prayers, offering religious guidance, and playing a role in preserving the cultural and spiritual identity of the Muslim community. Additionally, the *Almajiri* system fosters a deep sense of religious solidarity among its participants. *Almajiris* often form tight-knit communities, where relationships of mutual support and shared religious goals help strengthen communal bonds (Abubakar, 2020). This sense of religious duty and community engagement contributes to the spiritual welfare of northern Nigeria's Muslim population. However, the failure to combine religious education with modern skills has led some to question whether the system is equipping children for broader societal roles or merely reinforcing traditional religious teachings without preparing them for contemporary challenges (Mamman, 2020).

The *Almajiri* system of education cannot be separated from learning religious knowledge. It produces most of the Islamic clerics in Northern Nigeria and beyond. To mention but a few is Sheikh Dahiru Usman Bauchi, Sheikh Sherif Ibrahim Sale Maiduguri, who has currently laid the foundation of the first and largest Islamic centre in Abuja, Nigeria – a multimillion Naira project. Other products of the *Almajiri* system were late Khalifa Ishaka Rabi'u, a merchant and a business tycoon, and his family, Sheikh Isa Ali Pantami, Professor Ibrahim Saeed Maqari, the Imam central mosque, Abuja, Nigeria and the author.

Strategies for Integrating the *Almajiri* System with the Formal Education System

A call for restructuring and integrating the *Almajiri* system with formal education is necessary to ensure that these children not only receive religious education but also gain the necessary skills and knowledge to thrive in the modern world. Discussed below are the strategies for such restructuring and integration.

1. Dual Curriculum Approach: Combining Qur'anic and Secular Education

One of the most effective strategies for restructuring the *Almajiri* system is the introduction of a dual curriculum that incorporates both religious education and formal schooling. This approach would provide students with the opportunity to study the Qur'an and Islamic studies while also learning core subjects such as mathematics, science, and languages. By combining both educational streams, the *Almajiri* system can ensure that children are well-rounded, gaining religious knowledge while acquiring skills that are necessary in today's economy (Aminu & Ibrahim, 2020). A model of this integration could involve a system where the time spent on religious education is balanced with formal schooling. For example, students could attend formal schools during the day and religious schools in the evening. This would provide a more holistic educational experience, allowing *Almajiris* to fulfil their religious obligations while also receiving a secular education that prepares them for future opportunities in the formal labour market (Babatunde, 2018).

2. Curriculum Reforms to Include Vocational Training

In addition to academic subjects, the *Almajiri* system should include vocational and technical training to provide students with marketable skills. This would be particularly beneficial for children who are not academically inclined or who may not wish to pursue further formal education. Integrating vocational education with the *Almajiri* system would ensure that students develop practical skills such as carpentry, tailoring, agricultural techniques, or information and communication technology (ICT). These skills are essential for improving the employability of *Almajiris*, empowering them to become self-sufficient and reduce their reliance on begging or informal labour (Mamman, 2020). Vocational training should be tailored to the needs of the local economy, taking into account the specific skills in demand in different regions. Local businesses, government agencies, and NGOs can collaborate to provide training programs and apprenticeships that give *Almajiris* real-world experience and prepare them for productive roles in society (Omotayo, 2019).

3. Improvement of Infrastructure and Learning Environment

A critical aspect of restructuring the *Almajiri* system is the improvement of the infrastructure and learning environments in which the children study. Many *Almajiri* schools operate in overcrowded, unsanitary, and unsafe conditions that hinder effective learning. To ensure that children benefit from an integrated education system, the physical conditions of these schools must be improved. This includes building and maintaining classrooms, providing learning materials (such as textbooks, writing materials, and computers), and ensuring safe, hygienic dormitories for students who reside in the schools (Solomon et al., 2025; Abubakar, 2020). In partnership with state governments and local communities, religious leaders and educational authorities must collaborate to ensure that these schools are adequately resourced. This would also involve establishing health and welfare programs to safeguard the well-being of the children, who often suffer from malnutrition, inadequate medical care, and exposure to disease due to poor conditions (Akorede et al., 2022; Kadiri, 2021).

4. Collaboration between Government, Religious Institutions, and Communities

The integration of the *Almajiri* system with formal education cannot succeed without the active involvement of religious leaders, local communities, and the government. Religious leaders (Mallams) play an essential role in the education of *Almajiris*, and their buy-in is crucial for the success of any reforms. Collaboration between the

state and religious institutions would foster mutual respect and understanding, allowing for a more seamless integration of secular and religious education (Aminu & Ibrahim, 2020). The government must create policies that encourage religious leaders to adopt a more holistic approach to education. This could involve providing incentives for those who participate in the reformation of the *Almajiri* system, such as grants, training, and resources. Additionally, local communities should be empowered to take ownership of the *Almajiri* schools, ensuring that the integration process aligns with local cultural and religious values (Babatunde, 2018).

5. Training and Capacity Building for Almajiri Teachers

Teachers who work within the *Almajiri* system are often not trained in formal pedagogical methods or modern educational practices. For successful integration with formal education to occur, it is essential to invest in the training and professional development of these teachers. This would ensure that they are equipped with the skills necessary to deliver both religious and secular education effectively (Kadiri, 2021). Professional development programs should include training in curriculum development, classroom management, child psychology, and educational technologies. In addition, teachers should be encouraged to adopt child-centred learning approaches that focus on the individual needs of each student. Training religious leaders to become more inclusive and receptive to secular education would also ensure that the *Almajiri* system remains relevant in the 21st century (Omotayo, 2019).

6. Government Incentives and Funding

Finally, the Nigerian government must commit to providing financial support and incentives for the restructuring of the *Almajiri* system. Funding should be allocated to establish and expand schools that offer integrated curricula, enhance teacher training, and improve infrastructure. The government should also provide scholarships, stipends, or subsidies to families who send their children to integrated *Almajiri* schools, ensuring that poverty does not remain an obstacle to education (Mamman, 2020). Public-Private-Partnerships (PPPs) can also play a crucial role in supporting the restructuring process. NGOs, international development organisations, and the private sector can contribute resources, expertise, and funding to create sustainable solutions for the integration of the *Almajiri* system with formal education.

Conclusions

The *Almajiri* system of education in northern Nigeria, deeply rooted in the region's cultural and religious traditions, has evolved into a complex educational structure. Initially designed to offer Qur'anic and religious instruction, the system has become a focal point of concern due to its negative socio-economic implications, including poverty, child exploitation, and social marginalisation. The *Almajiri* children, often left to beg or perform menial tasks for survival, represent a segment of society that is excluded from formal education and is vulnerable to further exploitation. The author concluded that despite its challenges, the *Almajiri* system holds significant cultural and religious value and can continue to play a crucial role in preserving Islamic teachings. However, its current form is insufficient in addressing the socio-economic needs of its participants and the wider society. Proscribing or completely abolishing the *Almajiri* system, as some policymakers have suggested, may not be the most effective solution. Instead, restructuring and integrating the system into the formal educational framework offers a more sustainable way forward. By combining religious education with practical, skills-based learning, the *Almajiri* system can contribute positively to the development of both individuals and society, ensuring that these children are equipped to participate fully in modern economic and social life.

Recommendations

The author, therefore, recommended that:

1. There is a need to integrate formal and Qur'anic Education by the government to help achieve a dual-curriculum approach, where students receive a comprehensive education that includes Islamic teachings alongside literacy, numeracy, and vocational skills.
2. There is a need to improve the infrastructure of *Almajiri* schools by the Government and non-governmental organisations to provide better living and learning conditions, such as adequate shelters, learning materials, and trained teachers who are capable of teaching both religious and secular subjects.

3. The *Almajiri* system should incorporate vocational training to equip children with practical skills such as carpentry, tailoring, plumbing or agriculture. These skills would provide *Almajiris* with alternative sources of income, reducing their dependence on begging and increasing their economic opportunities.
4. Religious leaders must be brought into the conversation for collaboration between government agencies and local communities for the restructuring of the *Almajiri* system.
5. Government and regulatory bodies should establish guidelines to monitor and regulate *Almajiri* schools, ensuring that they adhere to basic educational standards and child welfare requirements. The establishment of oversight mechanisms would ensure that *Almajiri* centres operate in the best interests of the children, protecting them from exploitation and ensuring that they receive a balanced education.

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