

An Exploration of the Socio-Economic Dynamics of Begging in Gambari Quarters, Ilorin, Nigeria: A Historical Perspective

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Abstract

The phenomenon of *Almajirai*, who are often referred to as beggars, has long been a feature of Northern Nigeria's socio-economic landscape, rooted in the traditional Islamic educational system. However, in recent decades, this practice has extended to regions such as Ilorin, where the begging culture has taken on distinct characteristics. Despite its historical significance, the evolution of the begging and its impact on local communities, particularly in Gambari Quarters of Ilorin, which house the largest concentration of beggars in Kwara State, Nigeria remains underexplored. This study aims to address the gap in understanding how the practice of begging has transformed in Gambari Quarters. The key issues to be interrogated include the socio-economic factors contributing to the rise in begging, the changing nature of begging practices, and the implications for both the individuals involved and the wider community. It will also assess communal and government intervention efforts on beggars (*Almajiri*) in the Quarters, and examine the challenges and implication of begging in Ilorin.

Keywords: Begging; Beggars; *Almajiri*

Introduction

The practice of begging has long been a pressing issue in Nigeria, particularly in the northern regions. Children who were often abandoned or separated from their families at a young age, are forced to join groups led by Islamic teachers known as *mallams*, who provide religious education. Due to the typically large size of these groups and the scarcity of resources, *mallams* often instruct the children to beg for sustenance. These children dressed in ragged clothes and sometimes barefoot, roam the streets carrying plastic bowls in search of alms. While *Almajirai* are prevalent throughout the cities, towns, and villages in Northern Nigeria, their presence is increasingly noticeable in other parts of the country as well. They frequently sleep in out-houses

or on the verandas of dilapidated buildings, which also serve as their classrooms during the day. This daily routine of begging for alms highlights the challenging circumstances faced by these children, who are commonly referred to as *Almajirai*, pupils of Islamic education (Taiwo, 2013).

There is a notable distinction between the traditional *Almajiri* educational system prevalent in Northern Nigeria and the contemporary begging culture observed in Ilorin. The *Almajiri* system, rooted in Islamic teachings, originally aimed to provide religious education through the Quran, with pupils learning to read and recite Arabic. To support their education and survival, these students were traditionally sent to beg for alms and perform menial tasks for their *Mallams*. While this system was once a respected part of Northern Nigeria's educational landscape, it has since spread to other regions, including Ilorin, where it has transformed into a prominent begging culture.

In Gambari Ward, Ilorin, begging became a prevalent activity, primarily among highly vulnerable and impoverished individuals. Beggars, often neglected socio-economically and politically, lose their dignity through their reliance on this activity. The begging population consists of full-time beggars, who engage in begging daily, and part-time beggars, who do so irregularly, represent a segment of the population that faces significant socio-economic neglect (Adedibu and Jelili, 2011). This paper using both primary and secondary sources examines the socio-economic and cultural dynamics of begging in Gambari Quarters, Ilorin, 1985-2020. It also examines the settlement pattern of beggars in the quarters, typology in Ilorin and the drivers of begging in Ilorin.

This paper is divided into six sections apart from introduction and conclusion. The first section historicizes the origin of begging. The following section discusses the geography and the people of Gambari Quarters of Ilorin. Section three analyzes the settlement pattern of the beggars in Gambari while section four interrogates the typology of begging in Ilorin. Section five examines the factors that influence begging while section six evaluates the challenges facing the beggars in Gambari Quarters and the government and NGO's interventions on their conditions.

Historical Origin of Begging in Ilorin

Historically, begging has been observed among various cultures, including the Greeks and during the Byzantine era (Johnny, 2008). It gained further prominence in the middle Ages through the Christian and Islamic doctrines of almsgiving (Sikalla, 2009). Over time, begging

evolved into a form of child labor, with children forced to beg to earn money for gangs. With the advent of Christianity, Islam, and colonialism in Africa, begging became more widespread. Before this, begging was unfamiliar to indigenous African people, who gave alms to the poor without requiring them to beg, as beggary was considered taboo. This is reflected in the Yoruba adage, “*iran Yoruba ko ki n sagbe*” (The Yoruba race forbids beggary).

Imported religions such as Islam and Christianity promoted the practice of giving alms. However, colonialism, with its exploitative characteristics and the forced integration of the African economy into the global financial system, drove many societies into debt and poverty. Consequently, religion and colonialism introduced Africa to begging. Traditionally, almsgiving in Africa was performed for spiritual fortification or appeasement. According to the Quran and the Holy Bible, it is sinful for a healthy person to beg. Nevertheless, both sacred texts provide some relief by encouraging the giving of alms to the poor. In addition, the rise of Pentecostalism and prophetic ministries contributed to the proliferation of beggary throughout Nigeria, including Ilorin. Prophet Muhammad (SAW) taught that only three categories of people were permitted to ask for assistance: individuals who were indebted because they had acted as guarantors for others and could not repay their debts, those whose property had been destroyed in a disaster, and those who had become destitute, with their poverty acknowledged by people who knew them. He warned against habitual begging, indicating that such individuals would meet Allah with no flesh left on their faces. Similarly, the Quran and the Bible stress the importance of giving alms to the poor and needy (Adebayo, 2019).

In the post-colonial era, the economic decline triggered by the oil crisis of the late 1970s led to increasingly household poverty and a growing number of destitute individuals across Nigeria. This situation was further worsened by the World Bank’s implementation of the Structural Adjustment Programme in 1986. The widespread poverty forced many families to lose their jobs, ultimately driving them to take up begging as a last resort (Ojanuga, 1990).

In Ilorin, particularly in the Gambari quarters, many beggars originated from the northern territories for various reasons. While it was acknowledged that begging was an accepted occupation among the Hausas, this should not be misconstrued as an endorsement of begging by Islam. Islam outlined principles for earning a living through lawful and legitimate means, and it did not condone dependency on others for livelihood. Begging in Nigeria was also a cultural

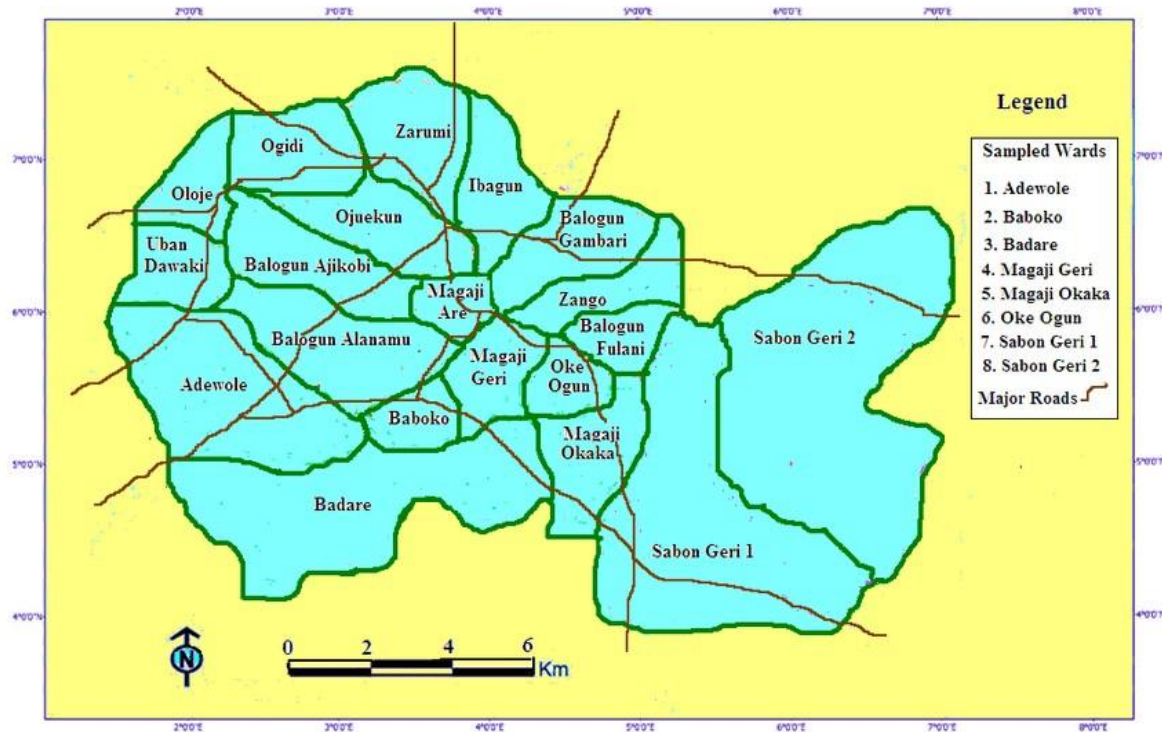
issue, as many Nigerians believed in helping the poor and saw it as the right of the poor to seek assistance from the more fortunate. Islam valued generosity, and Muslims were encouraged to give *zakat* and *sadaqa* (Fawole, Ogunkan, and Omoruan, 2011).

Begging in Ilorin had a religio-cultural foundation and was encouraged, this led to beggars not being looked down upon. People gave money to street beggars out of a sense of piety or philanthropy (Fawole, Ogunkan, and Omoruan, 2011:10). An average Ilorin man often turned to spiritualists for personal benefit, which frequently involved giving alms to beggars. Islam enjoined Muslims to give alms to the needy, encouraging them to assist the poor with food, clothing, or cash. The Quran instructed followers to give to those who asked and those who were in need but reluctant to ask. Begging, whether linked to religion or not, has been a social and cultural phenomenon. It featured in most societies but was particularly prevalent in third-world countries. Historically, begging involved pitiable, poverty-stricken and physically handicapped individuals seeking alms for survival. However, it evolved to include well-dressed, able-bodied individuals who begged in streets and public places, often viewing begging as a profitable business. This development necessitates a consideration of the typologies of *Almajiri* or begging (Onagun, 2016).

Geography and the People of Gambari Quarters of Ilorin

The Gambari Quarter is located in Ilorin, Kwara State, Nigeria. It stretches between Oja-Oba and Ipata market on one side, and Balogun Fulani to Sobi motor garage on the other. It falls within the Ilorin-East Local Government Area. Gambari is one of the oldest communities in Ilorin.

Figure 3: Map of Ilorin showing Gambari Ward



Source: (Usman, Malik and Alausa, 2015)

The Gambari community was initially established by Ibrahim Bako, a Hausa migrant from Zamfara, who brought his royal emblems and established himself as the head of the Hausa community in Ilorin. He brought with him all his official regalia and royal symbols from Zamfara when he relocated to Ilorin. Initially, he became the head of the Hausa community in Ilorin and was later known as Sarkin Hausawa, a title which eventually evolved into Sarkin Gambari. The establishment of the Gambari community preceded the arrival of Sheu Alimi in Ilorin. It is important to note that the Gambari Community was not predominantly Hausa (Jimoh, 2012). When Ibrahim Bako first arrived with his Hausa followers, the area was initially perceived as a Hausa settlement, and he was designated Sarkin Hausawa. However, with the subsequent influx of immigrants from Nupe, Kanuri, Kembri, and Gwari, the demographic composition of the settlement diversified, leading to a harmonious coexistence among the different groups. As a result, the name of the community was changed to “Gambari,” signifying a

settlement of non-Yoruba tribes in Ilorin, and their leader's title was also revised from Sarkin Hausawa to Sarkin Gambari (Interview with Mallam Maisamari, 2024)

The name 'Gambari' had different meanings to various people. Some believed it was originally spelt 'Kwamberi,' derived from a minority tribe in Zamfara. Over time, Gambari became synonymous with 'Hausa' (Interview with Alhaji Mohammed Aliyu Danladi, 2024). The importance and influence of the Gambari community in Ilorin could not be overstated. For example, Ilorin was divided into four distinct quarters, each led by a Balogun: Balogun Alanamu, Balogun Ajikobi, Balogun Fulani, and Balogun Gambari. Initially, these Baloguns served as war commanders without political authority, but around 1828, they became the political heads of their respective wards. The first Balogun Gambari in Ilorin was a Nupe man named Duche, who, upon arriving in Ilorin, stayed with Sarkin Gambari and was later given a residence near Awodi market. Duche led several war expeditions, commanding both the Gambari warriors and the Ilorin armies, and fought many successful battles to defend Ilorin. He was succeeded by Ali-Mayaki, a brilliant soldier and war commander, who was later conferred the title of Balogun Gambari. Ali-Mayaki fought in the battle of Ogele and led the Ilorin armies to many victories (Jimoh, 2012).

Aside from the Balogun of Gambari, the area had several other chiefs, including Tiri Amida, who were Fulanis. Seriki Zango was responsible for the Zango, managing those who sold cow meat, goat meat, ram meat, and so on. Gambari served as a significant source of cows and goats during festive periods. Additionally, there were Alangbua Zango and Seriki Karumo. It is noteworthy that every title began with "Seriki," a Hausa term, indicating the predominantly northern influence in Gambari. The northern settlers in Ilorin predominantly resided in Gambari, leading to the widespread use of the Hausa language. Most northern settlers in Ilorin were concentrated in Gambari, bringing with them a distinct culture, especially the almajiri culture. Consequently, if one were to perform "Sara" or Sadaqah, Gambari would be the place to go (Jimoh, 2012).

In Gambari Quarter, Ilorin, they had a structure for the blind known as Makaho, with "Makafi" being the plural term in Hausa. The Seriki Makafi, or king of the blind, served as the chief administrator akin to a governor. In Kwara State, the Seriki Makafi presided over all blind Hausa individuals. The Hausa community, both within and outside Kwara State, had associations

with designated leaders. When the government needed to communicate with them, they contacted the Balogun of Gambari. During the pandemic, his son led a government delegation to assist the poor (Salihu, 2015). There was a specific area called Koro Afoju where blind settlers primarily resided, although there were also some non-blind villagers. Every household in Gambari was known for unique businesses such as leather crafts (making bags and shoes), blacksmithing (producing axes, cutlasses, and guns), and food preparation involving mortars. Gambari boasted a thriving market specializing in northern products like *kayamanta* and *jalabia*. The settlers of Gambari had distinct ways of conducting their activities, with each household having special names related to Hausa culture. Although Ilorin was a melting pot of ethnicities including Fulani, Hausa, Yoruba, Kemberi, Tapa, Nupe, and Baruba, the Fulani were the rulers. This was also true for the Balogun Fulani in Gambari. Tribes found in Gambari included Kemberi, Hausa, Tapa, and Baruba (Salihu, 2015:13).

Settlement Pattern of Beggars in Gambari Quarters, Ilorin

The settlement pattern of the beggars in Ilorin was exemplified by the community known as *Koro Afoju*, a colony for the blind that had existed for decades in the Ojagboro area of Ilorin, Kwara State. This community started with the migration of blind individuals from various parts of northern Nigeria, including Zamfara, Sokoto, Borno, and Kano, driven by challenging socio-economic conditions in their home regions. These migrants were drawn to Ilorin, particularly to Gambari, due to the supportive environment provided by fellow northerners and the presence of ethnic groups such as Hausa, Kanuri, and Fulani (Ilorin. Info, 2014).

Koro Afoju became a notable community within Ilorin, where blind individuals cohabited and shared a common heritage. Many of them arrived as infants, grew up, married within the community, and multiplied. Despite their blindness, the residents engaged in daily begging activities to sustain themselves, often flouting laws against street begging due to their reliance on alms. Some members of the community were born blind, while others lost their sight due to various afflictions. They established a self-regulating society with traditional chiefs who oversaw their affairs and ensured orderliness. While some owned houses, others rented accommodations, living in crowded conditions prone to disease due to the lack of social amenities (Onagun, 2016:6).

The community faced several challenges, including the absence of health facilities and dilapidated housing. Despite these hardships, the residents strove to provide education for their children, sending them to primary schools and enrolling them in vocational training such as automobile mechanics and tailoring. However, further education remained a challenge due to financial constraints. Individuals like Ibrahim Yakub from Zamfara State lived in Koro Afoju for decades, finding a sense of belonging among people with similar experiences. The residents expressed a desire to find alternative livelihoods if the government could provide support, as begging was currently their only means of survival (Interview with Mallam Maisamari, 2024). Several factors contributed to the choice of Gambari as their settlement. Firstly, Gambari was traditionally a settlement area for *Sarkis* from northern Nigeria, who often chose this locality when they moved to Ilorin. Secondly, the Gambari ward provided a welcoming environment for these migrants, and many began to ask for alms, particularly on market days. This led to the establishment of *Koro Afoju*, a section of Gambari where emigrants could communicate freely in their native languages. Over time, *Koro Afoju* became a notable colony in Ilorin, especially recognized for its blind residents, who were also referred to as *Almajiri* (Beggars) (Interview with Yakub Ibrahim, 2024).

The population of the beggars, *Almajiri* community in Gambari grew as they got married and had children, who also participated in begging to support their families. Unlike their northern counterparts who often slept on the streets, the *Almajiri* in Ilorin had a designated colony where they returned after their daily begging activities. Another pattern observed in Gambari was the presence of seasonal or itinerant beggars (Oral Interview with Iya Ibeji, 2024). These individuals did not permanently settle in Gambari but came occasionally to beg and returned to their home states during festive periods or other times. As part-time beggars, they did not rely solely on begging for their livelihood. Some of their children, influenced by western education, chose to stay in Ilorin to start a new life, becoming shop owners, bike men, or even representatives of the beggars to the government. Furthermore, some beggars were compelled to move to Ilorin due to civil unrest in their home towns, finding refuge in the city of harmony (Interview with Yakub Ibrahim, 2024). These diverse settlement patterns highlighted the adaptive strategies of the *Almajiri* in Gambari Quarters as they navigated socio-economic challenges and sought better opportunities in Ilorin.

Typology of Beggars in Ilorin

Ilorin had a considerable number of beggars, who were categorized based on age, gender, and status, both ethnic and social. These classifications were further divided according to their begging methods and attitudes. Some engaged in begging actively or passively, either as an occupation or due to physical challenges such as blindness or disability. Additionally, even those facing financial difficulties often gave alms. First on the typology of beggars in Ilorin, *Inherited beggars* comprised individuals who had inherited the culture of begging from their parents. Born and raised in this practice, they earned their daily income and shared it with their parents, siblings, and guardians, thereby adopting begging as a way of life (Interview with Muhammed Sanni, 2024).

Besides, *Royal offers* is another type, it is referred to a group, typically from the Sarki's family or his chiefs, who received daily remittances after their wards begged in designated areas. This represented a form of patronage begging where the leaders of the beggars appointed relatives to manage the proceeds from specific areas. The beggars in those areas would give a portion of their earnings to the appointed agent of the Sarki leader in exchange for the right to beg there. This system constituted an organised form of begging (Interview with Muhammed Sanni, 2024).

Figure 1: The Blind Seriki (King of the Beggars) at Koro Afoju, Gambari



Source: Picture taken by the authors, 2024.

Another is the one which could be described as *Fine beggars*, also known as executive beggars, they were well-dressed and appeared in good health. They often moved from one office to another or from one major city centre to another, presenting themselves smartly and formally but fabricating stories about being stranded. These beggars were usually recognised by their neat appearance, nice clothes, attractive demeanour, smooth talk, and impeccable use of English or Hausa. They could be classified as “stranded professionals” because of their modus operandi, which involved claiming to be stranded or unfortunate travellers in need of funds. Often, these beggars used the money for smoking, drinking, or gambling. Another subset of executive beggars included children carrying school bags, pretending to be stranded. These children usually walked in groups, claiming to be on their way to school or lost. Studies revealed that these children were part of an organised syndicate orchestrated by adults (Interview with Muhammed Sanni, 2024).

Sit-at-a-Place Beggars are individuals typically remained stationary, soliciting alms from passersby. Benefactors often sought them out at their usual locations, and any absence, especially if the beggar was solitary, was quickly noticed. Elderly beggars frequently sat in one place while their children or wards roamed the streets in search of potential benefactors. Sometimes, these beggars informed locals of their whereabouts to ensure they could be located. If they travelled, they made sure to notify their benefactors (Interview with Muhammed Sanni, 2024).

Babiyala Street Beggars are the beggars who went from house to house, chanting phrases like “*Salam Alekum, Banbiyala, Asiris Abo, Bambi Allah, Asiri Abo*” to solicit alms and blessings from God in return. They also targeted social gatherings, shops, and stalls. Also, Professional beggars are individuals treated begging as their sole occupation. Some even hired twins or babies to solicit alms, sharing the proceeds with the parents who lent their children. Elderly women, despite being healthy, often made dubious claims to garner sympathy. The most alarming cases involved perpetrators giving substances to children to temporarily bloat their stomachs, eliciting public sympathy. When begging became a profession, physically able or challenged individuals continued to beg even after receiving financial assistance or empowerment. For instance, in Abeokuta, a professor persuaded a woman to attend a church service where she received money to start a business. However, after two months, the professor found her begging again. When

questioned, the woman confessed she could not succeed in any other business but begging (Interview with Muhammed Sanni, 2024).

Occasional Beggars is another typology of beggars, which turned to begging sporadically, particularly during unproductive periods in their businesses. A food vendor among the beggars recounted how she sometimes resorted to begging to supplement her income (Interview with Aisha, 2024).

Figure 2: Sit-at-a Place Beggars at Gambari



Source: Picture taken by the authors, 2024.

Another type of beggars in Ilorin is *Aged Beggars*. Elderly beggars were often compelled to beg due to unemployment, disengagement, or various disabilities or conditions. Muhammadu Ibrahim, an elderly beggar, recounted that he had experienced a severe health issue that forced him to rely on alms to afford a surgical procedure. In addition, to this, *Mental and Physically-Challenged Beggars* are another types of beggars. They have mental or physical challenge, such as sight or hearing impairments and so they resorted to begging as they could not find other

means of livelihood. Some challenges were not immediately visible, residing inside the body or becoming apparent only when the beggar removed their clothing. Beggars with cancerous, urinary, or other health issues, whether visible or hidden, often showed pictures of their health status themselves to convince passersby of their genuine need. Drug abuse sometimes contributed to physical difficulties, leading beggars to collect alms and then frequent smoking and drinking establishments. Unlike stationary beggars, these individuals moved across major roads and streets, making them visible in traffic. There were also mentally and physically challenged beggars who had suffered bodily harm. Some were accompanied by able-bodied individuals, while others were with colleagues having similar impairments. Occasionally, the beggar moved independently (Interview with Muhammed Sanni, 2024).

Begging existed in two forms: full-time and part-time. Full-time beggars lacked any support from family or friends and relied entirely on begging. Part-time beggars, on the other hand, used begging as a supplementary income for their households. This group often engaged in personal businesses, such as carrying loads, or depended on their beggar parents or guardians for support. Family support was intended to dissuade them from begging, though it was not always effective. Regardless of the form, children were the primary recipients of these types of begging, and tracing the trajectory of child beggars in Ilorin inevitably connected to northern Nigeria. Child begging, in any typology, was a form of child labour (Onagun, 2016:6).

Figure 3: Child Beggars and their Parents' sit-at a place in Ilorin



Source: (Oyekola, 2022)

Factors Influencing Begging in Ilorin

The begging system in Ilorin is driven by multiple interrelated factors. Predominantly, poverty plays a crucial role, compelling many families to send their children into the streets to beg. Cultural and religious traditions also underpin this practice, where child begging is seen as a means to fulfil certain religious obligations. Parental consent often accompanies these cultural norms, especially in broken homes where guardians may prioritise survival over education. Greed, both from parents and the children themselves, further exacerbates the issue. In addition, the absence of inclusive social policies for children, the poor, and the vulnerable leaves many with no support. High unemployment rates, widespread illiteracy, and uncontrollably large family sizes contribute significantly to the perpetuation of this system. Moreover, displacement due to conflicts forces families into situations where begging becomes a necessary means of survival. These conditions collectively drive the persistence of begging in Ilorin.

Poverty drove the proliferation of begging in Ilorin. Poverty is the state of being extremely poor and the inability to meet basic needs such as food, clothing, and shelter. The World Bank defined poverty as living below the US\$1.90 daily poverty line. (The World Bank, 2022)). In Nigeria, four in ten citizens lived below the national poverty line, with rural areas

having a higher concentration of poor people compared to urban areas. This urban poor group increasingly resorted to begging for survival. Many beggars earned less than US\$1.90 daily, insufficient to support their large families. Children in these families, incorporated into begging, became impoverished mentally, physically, and psychologically. The National Bureau of Statistics believed that children were significantly poorer than adults, with 67.5 percent of children being poor compared to 58.7 percent of adults aged 18 and above. Poverty was the primary motivation for child beggars. The Nigeria Bureau of Statistics noted that most poor people in the country resided in the north. Growing poverty, particularly in the north, drove many into begging, and to increase their earnings, parents involved their children, especially babies (National Bureau of Statistics, 2022). For instance, Saratu Senni observed that when she started begging in Ilorin, there were only eight beggars at her spot, but their numbers rapidly increased after the lockdown, swelling to more than 100 (Interview with Saratu Senni, 2024).

Cultural beliefs also perpetuated begging. Deeply rooted traditions and beliefs that there was nothing wrong with the practice and that people should give alms made the practice intractable. Since the arrival of Islam in Ilorin, many impoverished individuals turned to almsgiving. The Quran, in verses 107:1 and 107:7, emphasizes the importance of caring for orphans and the poor, urging almsgiving. Similarly, Christian teachings in Proverbs 9:17 and Acts 20:35 promote supporting the weak and giving alms. In addition, the “twin” (*ibeji*) begging culture contributed to the prevalence of begging. Some parents of twins were mandated to beg to appease the gods of the twins (Orisa *ibeji*), believing that this practice would ensure the babies’ survival. Many exploited this cultural practice to engage in begging.

The physical health of parents, guardians, and even the children themselves was one of the major factors contributing to child beggars in Ilorin. An elderly beggar, Muhammadu Ibrahim, recounted that he had resorted to begging since his health began to fail. He also mentioned that he engaged in begging alongside one of his two wives. It was observed that one or both parents or guardians of these child beggars often suffered from either full or partial physical disabilities.

During the interview, numerous health challenges observed among many beggars and their parents included blindness, physical disabilities caused by polio, and amputations, among

others. It is important to note that northern Nigeria had widespread cases of blindness and polio. In fact, the region was the last stronghold of polio in Africa in 2020 (Punching, 2015).

Figure 4: Some Blind Beggars at Gambari, Ilorin Metropolis



Source: Picture taken by the authors, 2024.

Another significant factor driving begging in Ilorin was the consistent permission of many parents of child beggars for their children to engage in begging. These parents believed that begging was essential for their survival, as it contributed to the family's income. Female children, in particular, were often pushed into begging due to their natural sympathy for their mothers, leading them to be more readily involved in this practice. Most child beggars, especially girls, lived with their mothers, while the fathers' lack of objection to the use of children for begging suggested a form of institutional approval. Furthermore, broken homes sometimes resulted in guardians exploiting their dependents, especially female children, by using their sympathetic appearances to gain alms from passers-by. Rukayat Seriki, for instance, noted that she did not reside with her parents, as they lived separately; instead, she lived with her ageing grandmother due to these circumstances (Interview with Rukayat Seriki, 2024).

The lack of inclusive social policies affecting gender, status, and age significantly contributed to begging in Ilorin. Firstly, the government failed to make adequate social investments for vulnerable populations, including women and the physically challenged. Secondly, there were insufficient social policies to support the poor, unemployed, and sick. Thirdly, the provision for the elderly was inadequate. These groups fall under the category of the vulnerable population. One of the interview beggars stated that she had fled to Ilorin with her elderly grandmother, highlighted that her grandmother's condition forced her to beg in order to care for both herself and her grandmother (Interview with Rukayat Seriki, 2024).

Some of the child beggars in Gambari Quarters of Ilorin were victims of displacement, having fled from the northern regions of Nigeria due to various crises. The conflict in the north, driven by Boko Haram insurgency, banditry, farmer-herder clashes, and natural disasters, resulted in significant loss of life and widespread displacement. Statistic reveals that approximately 8.8 million individuals, including 5.4 million children and 3.4 million adults, were affected by conflict in the northeast and armed violence in the northwest of Nigeria (UNICEF, 2022). Over 2.6 million people were displaced across these regions, with an additional 1 million living in inaccessible areas of the northeast. Between 2012 and March 2022, about 60,000 people had died in 18 states in northern Nigeria (CDD, 2022). One of the interviewees reveals that she had been receiving a western education in the north before her community's conflict forced her to beg in Ilorin and enrol in an Islamiyya School (Interview with Rukayat Seriki, 2024). Saratu Senni fled from Borno State during the height of the Boko Haram insurgency, which led to the death of her parents and three siblings (Interview with Saratu Senni, 2024). Mariam Sokoto arrived in Ilorin to stay with her grandmother, a beggar, after fleeing banditry in her village in Sokoto State, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic (Interview with Mariam Sokoto, 2024). While many of the beggars in Ilorin are Hausa migrants from the north, only a few were born and raised in the city.

During the interviews, it was observed that uncontrollable family size significantly influenced the prevalence of begging. Evidence indicated that the parents of all participants had numerous children, with the smallest number being four and the largest reaching 20, averaging around 12 children. This considerable family size, coupled with unemployment among parents or guardians, often resulted in inadequate care for the children, leading many to become beggars.

With reference to, the girl child seemed to dominate the begging culture in Ilorin. For instance, Balkisu Abdullahi, whose mother had 20 children, recounted that her mother, who had been blind for as long as she could remember and was unemployed, had no means of support other than begging. Consequently, Balkisu and her siblings were similarly forced into begging (Interview with Bilikisu Abdullahi, 2024).

Challenges of Beggars in Gambari Quarters, Ilorin

Beggars, particularly in Gambari Quarters, Ilorin, have faced numerous. The *Almajiri* community has been significantly affected by increased poverty and financial instability, leading to heightened levels of illiteracy and ignorance about the virus. Moreover, issues such as sexual harassment, child marriage, unwanted pregnancies, and extended periods out of school have become more prevalent. The health and well-being of these children are at risk due to inaccessible healthcare, poor and unsanitary living conditions, and increased exposure to health hazards. They also face social challenges, including discrimination, stigmatisation, abuse and extortion. The compounded effects of hunger, malnutrition, and, in extreme cases, death further highlight the urgent need to address the plight of the *Almajiri* in Gambari Quarters.

The beggar community in Gambari Quarters has faced significant challenges due to increasing poverty. Many individuals in this community rely solely on begging for survival. For example, Fatimah, who sells food and engages in native cosmetics (*lele*), noted that her business struggled as fewer people patronized her. This was compounded by the fact that those who used to give her alms also faced financial difficulties, reducing the assistance she received. Fatimah mentioned that she had to depend on her male partners and elder ones for support (Interview with Fatimah Abdullahi, 2024). Similarly, participants involved in informal jobs complained about low sales and bad credit, contributing to their financial instability. Another respondent highlighted that begging was their primary means of survival, and any disruption in this activity brought untold hardship upon them (Interview with Nana Abdullahi, 2024).

Illiteracy, particularly in Western education, is another significant challenge faced by child beggars in Gambari Quarters. Many child beggars do not know their ages and are unaware of certain social norms, such as the implications of wearing rings on their married fingers. Despite a willingness to attend Western schools, many children are not enrolled because their parents cannot afford the fees. This lack of education hinders their ability to grasp basic

information from sources like the radio or billboards, making it difficult for them to understand government policies and public health information. The struggle for education extends to their Islamic studies as well. In addition, it was also reveal disruptions in attending *Islamiyya* School affected her ability to retain what she had learned, illustrating the broader educational challenges these children face (Interview with Aisha Umar 2024). Also, interview revealed that after completing Karuma LGEA Primary School, the only local school, her children cannot advance to Secondary School due to the age restriction, which only admits children up to 6 or 7 years old. Consequently, her children are left to wander the streets of Gambari (Interview with Jumai, 2024). Also, beggars (*Almajiri*) faced harassment, with several instances reported where individuals sought to exploit their vulnerability. Some were betrothed due to poverty. For example, one of the respondents stated that she was betrothed to a man who supported her family (Interview with Aisha Umar, 2024). Similarly, another respondent was betrothed with her mother's approval, despite her father's lack of awareness (Interview with Awawu Muhammadu, 2024).

However, the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the challenges faced by beggars in Gambari Quarters, Ilorin, notably through an increase in the number of out-of-school children. The pandemic's impact led many young beggars, who were previously enrolled in either Western or Quranic (*Islamiyya*) schools, to abandon their education. For instance, some pupils prioritized immediate survival and feeding over returning to school. Interview by one the respondents revealed that she had never attended either an *Islamiyya* or Western school. Although some benevolent individuals had arranged for her to attend a Western school, her blind mother refused the opportunity. The family could not afford the education, and she needed to contribute financially through begging (Interview with Baliquees Abdullahi, 2024). This shift in priorities was driven by the acute economic hardships that forced families to focus on securing daily sustenance rather than education. The resulted to increase in the number of out-of-school children underscores a significant concern in the community, as these children are now more vulnerable to exploitation and further marginalisation.

In addition, interview reveals that beggars face significant health hazards and challenges related to inaccessible healthcare. The physical and environmental risks they encounter are severe, as they often work in close proximity to dumps site and are exposed to harsh weather

conditions, including rain, sun, and storms. This constant exposure to adverse environmental factors contributes to their overall health vulnerability. When it comes to healthcare, the beggars often struggle to access adequate medical services. For critical health issues, they are required to pay approximately ₦3000 for treatment, while non-critical cases cost around ₦2000 (Interview with Baliquees Abdullahi, 2024). This financial burden exacerbates their difficulties, as many beggars cannot afford even these basic medical expenses. The combination of harsh working conditions and limited access to affordable healthcare highlights the urgent need for improved support and resources for these vulnerable individuals.

One of the significant challenges confronting the Almajiri in Ilorin is the unsanitary condition of their living environments. These children often reside in makeshift shelters and overcrowded rooms, which exacerbate their difficulties. COVID-19 pandemic compounded this crisis, as the situation worsened, having access to clothing from wellwishers was restricted. Those who might have provided assistance were also grappling with their own hardships, and restrictions on movement made it difficult for them to distribute aid. The situation was further aggravated by unreliable power supply, which impaired the operation of government and civil society-provided water schemes (Interview with Rukayat Seriki, 2024). Consequently, the already poor conditions of their living environments deteriorated, as the lack of access to laundry and cleaning supplies, such as detergents and mops, left their homes in a state of disarray. The individuals who might have offered such essentials were similarly constrained by financial difficulties and movement restrictions, compounding the *Almajiri's* plight.

Figure 4: Shabbily Dressed Child Beggars in their Quarters



Source: Picture taken by the authors, 2024.

Observations during the field work reveal that the toilets in the area are pit toilets, which are now overflowing. In addition, refuse dumping is widespread around the residences of these children and their families, creating significant health risks that threaten their survival, livelihood, and development.

Figure 5: Unsanitary Condition of Toilets at Beggars' Colony in Gambari, Ilorin



Source: Picture taken by the authors, 2024.

During the interviews, it is revealed that the area near the toilet serves as a dumpsite for human waste. Beggars often defecate into paper bags or nylon pouches in their rooms, particularly during rain or at night, and subsequently discard the waste at this site (Interview with Awawu Muhammadu, 2024). This dumpsite attracts domesticated animals, flying insects, and crawling insects, which may then come into contact with the beggars' food, worsening their already precarious health and sanitary conditions.

In addition, beggars (*Almajiri*) face significant challenges, with hunger and malnutrition being one of the predominant issues. Many of these children struggle to obtain adequate food and nutrition, which directly impacts their health and survival. One of the interviewees reveals that she lived with her grandmother, and face severe hardships. Which include the death of some younger family members due to starvation and malnutrition. She lost two siblings which she attributed their deaths to these conditions (Interview with Rukaya Maigida, 2024).

Government and Non-Governmental Intervention on the Beggars' Condition in Gambari Quarters

Over the years, both government and non-governmental organizations have recognized the urgent need to address the plight of beggar children, who often face issues such as lack of education, poverty, and exploitation. Various interventions have been implemented to improve their living conditions and provide educational opportunities. This introduction explores the efforts made by these bodies to alleviate the struggles of Almajiri children in Gambari Quarters, highlighting the impact and ongoing challenges of these initiatives.

In 2005, the Kwara State Government enacted the Child Rights Act (CRA) into law, recognizing the significant issue of street begging in Ilorin. In 2006, under the administration of Bukola Saraki, a specific law was passed to prohibit street begging across Kwara State. However, the government has been hesitant to enforce this law, influenced by public sympathy for the beggars and political considerations (Ahmad, 2019). In 2024, under the administration of Abdulrazaq Abdulraham as the Governor of Kwara State, the Kwara State Ministry of Social Development, Culture, and Tourism launched a policy program to systematically remove beggars, drug addicts, the mentally ill, and other destitute individuals from major streets in the Ilorin metropolis. The targeted areas included Ibrahim Taiwo Road, Ahmadu Bello Way, Murtala Mohammed Way, Unity Road Roundabout, Maraba Market, General Post Office, Challenge Bus Stop, and Tanke Roundabout. As part of this initiative, 158 young beggars were evacuated from the streets and repatriated to their respective Nigerian States of origin (Oyekola, 2023). Many found in possession of dangerous weapons such as guns, daggers, and charms. The majority of these beggars originated from northern states like Bauchi and Kano and were considered a social menace. The state has since repatriated these individuals to their respective states. Moreover, the government treated and repatriated five lunatics who were posing a threat to the peace of the Ilorin metropolis (Oyekola, 2023).

Beggars are removed from the streets and placed in government resettlement homes. At these facilities, they undergo counselling for approximately seven days, with the duration depending on the number of individuals brought in and the specific nature of their condition. Those identified as mentally unstable are transferred to government-approved trado-psychiatric centres in Ilorin, located at Eiyenkorin and Alagbado, for treatment. While the mentally ill

receive training, beggars who are physically capable are repatriated to their home states or to other states within the federation (Kannike, 2013).

The Abdulrazaq-led administration has undertaken significant efforts to improve conditions for the Almajiri in the Gambari quarters. Notably, a water project was established by this administration. However, its utility has been limited due to its reliance on infrequent operation, as it lacks solar or generator power. In 2019, the Kwara State House of Assembly called for urgent implementation of the state child rights law to better protect children's rights. The Speaker, Engr. Yakubu Danladi Salihu, emphasised the need for immediate action to address child abuse and related issues. The House also instructed relevant agencies to fulfil their responsibilities in safeguarding child rights and mandated the Ministry of Information and Communication to raise public awareness about the law's provisions to ensure compliance (Ahmad, 2019).

Figure 6: Water Provision for the Beggar Community



Source: Picture taken by the authors, 2024.

Despite these efforts, there is concern about whether beggars in Ilorin metropolis, particularly those who are children and thus highly vulnerable, received adequate support. The Secretary of the Beggars' Association reported some relief during the lockdown, but evidence suggests that assistance was unevenly distributed. On the other hand, the administration has demonstrated responsiveness to the needs of the beggars' community by providing social infrastructure. Notable interventions include the installation of a borehole, provision of a bus for health emergencies, and the improvement of the *Koro Afoju* (blind colony) community, which had previously been in poor condition (Interview with Abdulazeez, 2024). The Kwara State Government has made efforts to assist the Almajiri community in Gambari Ward, notably by interlocking the previously deteriorated road connecting Gambari to Oja-Igboro and Awodi. This infrastructural development represents a significant achievement. However, despite this progress, a considerable number of children in the community still lack access to education. As a result, many of them follow in their parents' footsteps, engaging in alms-seeking, while others turn to scavenging or become involved in illegal activities to survive. The Kwara State

Government, under the leadership of Governor Abdulrahman Abdulrazaq, has shown consistent support to vulnerable groups, including the beggars in Gambari Quarters. The government's contributions have included the distribution of food palliatives, such as maize, millet, and sorghum, through the Kwara State Emergency Management Agency, in line with federal directives. The Almajiri community, alongside other vulnerable groups, has benefited from these initiatives, especially during critical periods like *Ramadan*, when the government provided essential food items such as rice, semo, and sugar. Community representatives have expressed their gratitude, highlighting the government's dedication to their welfare (9japarrot, 2024).

The contributions to the beggars in Gambari Quarters by the Ilorin-based Non-Governmental Organization, House and Street Kids Welfare Initiative, have been significant. The NGO, led by Executive Director Funmi Olusope, has made commendable efforts to improve the lives of vulnerable groups, including blind individuals and street children. They registered about 135 blind persons into a health insurance scheme, providing them with access to affordable healthcare at Temitope Hospital in Gambari. Additionally, the NGO has plans to establish a school for street children in Ilorin, offering basic education with the aim of reintegrating them into the public school system after six months. Their work in the community, including providing medical assistance and collaborating with the National Health Insurance Scheme (NHIS), demonstrates a strong commitment to improving the welfare of the Almajiri and other vulnerable groups in Gambari Quarters (Adeyemi, 2018).

In 2020, the Kwara branch of the Federation of Muslim Women's Association of Nigeria (FOMWAN) intervened. Shortly before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the association enrolled 200 children in elementary education at Karuma LGEA Primary School, Ilorin, which located 500 meters from their residential places. During a ceremony attended by state government officials, community members, and representatives from neighboring areas, the children were provided with uniforms, textbooks, exercise books, and other essential learning materials. Hajia Halima Yusuf, Chairperson of the Almajiri Education Committee within FOMWAN and a former Commissioner for Education in Kwara State, explained the rationale behind the intervention. She noted that the presence of these children on the streets had become a concern, as they were often engaged in begging in areas such as Gambari, Ojagboro, OjaOba,

and Post Office. Yusuf criticised this practice as a violation of the children's rights to education, health, security, food, and dignity (Aliyu, 2021).

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have made significant contributions to the beggars in Gambari Quarters, particularly through the efforts of organizations like Team HSKi. Their initiative, TOSA (The Olive Seed Academy), was established on 15th March 2019 in the Koro Afoju community, a settlement known as a blind beggars' colony with its immense challenges. Upon visiting the community, the NGO recognized the untapped potential and deep longing for education among the children. TOSA was determined to provide education to these children. Over five months, TOSA brought about significant transformation, with the children showing a remarkable passion for education. The NGO's presence also attracted attention to the community, bringing in visitors and earning the gratitude of the community leaders. Looking ahead, TOSA plans to resume in September as a fully-fledged primary school, aiming to nurture these children towards a future beyond their dreams (Home Street Kids Welfare Initiatives). Hajia Sa'adatu Modibo Kawu, through her foundation "Making a Difference (MAD) Initiative," has made significant contributions to the Almajiri community in Gambari quarters, Ilorin. During Ramadan, she distributed foodstuffs and relief materials, including rice, beans, noodles, salt, Semovita, grains, sugar, beverages, and vegetable oil. These packages were aimed at supporting the needy, including the Almajiri, within the community. Her efforts reflect a commitment to assisting vulnerable groups during critical times and encouraging others to engage in charitable acts within their communities (Oluwatoyin, 2022). In addition to this, in recent time, community service was exercise by 300-level students from the Department of Public Health, Kwara State University (KWASU). These students, as part of their fieldwork, undertook public health sensitisation and environmental cleaning in the Koro Afoju. The students engaged with the beggars, providing health talks, and emphasised the importance of personal hygiene and overall well-being (Oluwatoyin, 2024).

Conclusion

The historical origins of begging in Gambari Quarters, Ilorin, were rooted in a confluence of cultural and religious practices. Initially begging which was not known to the indigenous Africans became more prominent with the introduction of Christianity, Islam, and colonialism. Both religions promoted almsgiving but did not endorse habitual begging. The

Almajiri education system, which originated in Kanem-Bornu and later spread to the Sokoto Caliphate, initially focused on Qura'nic and vocational training. However, it encountered obstacles due to colonial restrictions.

In Gambari, the settlement pattern of *Almajiri* beggars included the Koro Afoju community, which had been established by blind migrants from northern Nigeria. This community, existing for decades, confronted notable challenges such as inadequate health facilities and substandard housing. Despite these difficulties, residents engaged in begging and sought alternative means of livelihood, though financial constraints remained a significant impediment. In Ilorin, various types of beggars emerged, including inherited beggars, royal offer beggars, fine beggars, sit-at-a-place beggars, *babiyala* street beggars, professional beggars, and occasional beggars. These categories illustrated the diverse methods and motivations for begging, ranging from organised systems to individual choices. The drivers of begging in Ilorin encompassed poverty, cultural and religious traditions, health challenges, lack of social support, and displacement due to conflict. These factors collectively perpetuated the *Almajiri* system, with profound effects on the children and families involved.

The study, highlighted the challenges facing by the beggars in Gambari Quarters, Ilorin. Some of the challenge facing the beggars exacerbated by poverty, illiteracy, and poor living conditions. Children in this community are vulnerable to sexual exploitation, child marriage, and unwanted pregnancies, which compound their already difficult circumstances. The lack of access to education, both Western and Islamic, leaves them unable to grasp basic information, contributing to their marginalization. Health risks are heightened by unsanitary living environments, limited access to healthcare, and exposure to environmental hazards. These issues are further intensified by the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, which led to an increase in out-of-school children, deepening the cycle of poverty and neglect.

Government and non-governmental organizations have made efforts to address the plight of the *Almajiri* in Gambari Quarters, but challenges remain. Initiatives include the Kwara State Government's enactment of the Child Rights Act and the prohibition of street begging, although enforcement has been inconsistent. Other interventions include the provision of food palliatives, healthcare, and educational opportunities, such as the establishment of a school by an NGO and support from various foundations. Despite these efforts, the *Almajiri* community continues to

struggle with poverty, lack of education, and health hazards, highlighting the need for more comprehensive and sustained interventions to improve their living conditions and future prospects.

The history of the *Almajiri* beggars in Gambari Quarters, Ilorin, reveals a complex interplay of cultural, religious, and socio-economic factors that have shaped their existence. Originating from a blend of indigenous and external influences, the practice of begging in this community became prominent with the spread of Christianity, Islam, and colonialism, all of which, while promoting almsgiving, did not support habitual begging. The *Almajiri* education system, despite its initial focus on Quranic and vocational training, faced significant obstacles due to colonial restrictions and post-colonial economic downturns exacerbated by World Bank policies. In Gambari, the *Koro Afoju* community exemplifies the settlement patterns of *Almajiri* beggars, who have long dealt with challenges such as inadequate health facilities and poor housing. The diverse types of beggars in Ilorin—ranging from inherited to professional—reflect various motivations and methods of begging, influenced by poverty, cultural practices, and lack of social support. These factors have perpetuated the *Almajiri* system, significantly impacting children and families.

The study highlights the severe challenges faced by the *Almajiri* community in Gambari Quarters. These challenges, exacerbated by poverty, illiteracy, and poor living conditions, contribute to the vulnerability of children to exploitation, child marriage, and health risks. The COVID-19 pandemic further intensified these issues, increasing the number of out-of-school children and deepening the cycle of poverty and neglect. Efforts by government and non-governmental organisations to address these issues, such as the Kwara State Government's enactment of the Child Rights Act and various humanitarian interventions, have made some progress. However, inconsistent enforcement and limited resources have hindered significant improvements. To effect meaningful change, there is a pressing need for more comprehensive and sustained interventions that address both the immediate needs and underlying causes of the *Almajiri* phenomenon, ultimately aiming to improve living conditions and future prospects for this vulnerable community.

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