



Faith-Based Responses to the Persistence of Almajiri Education in Northern Nigeria through the Role of Islamic Organizations in Child Welfare Advocacy

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ABSTRACT

This study examines reasons for the persistence of Almajiri education in northern Nigeria. The Almajiri system faces challenges such as inadequate educational standards, limited socio-economic opportunities for participants, and cultural resistance to reforms. Despite these issues and various strategies taken to reform the Almajiri system of education, the issue has persisted. Existing literature has not adequately looked into these reasons or faith-based organisations such as the Nigerian Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs and Jama'atu Nasril Islam. The qualitative design was used with data obtained from relevant academic literature and analysed using content analysis. Findings show that the reasons for the persistence of the Almajiri system of education include a quest for survival, deep religious and cultural roots, lack of political will, resistance from Islamic religious leaders, and migration. As part of the recommendation, faith-based leaders can make it clear that street begging by children is not a requirement of Islamic education. By providing authoritative teachings, they can distinguish between authentic Qur'anic learning and harmful social practices that have evolved over time.

Keywords: *Almajiri education; Almajiri children; child education; faith-based organisations; northern Nigeria.*

INTRODUCTION

Education in Northern Nigeria presents a complex landscape shaped by historical, socio-economic, and cultural factors. The Almajiri system, an example of traditional Islamic education, is the foundation of the educational system in Northern Nigeria. Quranic education, which was first implemented in pre-colonial times, was crucial in passing on cultural values and religious knowledge. However, the region's educational landscape underwent significant changes during British colonisation, which introduced Western education primarily for administrative and missionary purposes (Falola & Heaton, 2008). Equal access to high-quality education is a challenge in northern Nigeria. Urban and rural

communities differ significantly in terms of learning resources, teacher quality, and educational infrastructure. Cultural norms and socio-economic factors contribute to lower enrolment and retention rates for girls in schools. Early marriages and gender disparities in educational opportunities persist despite efforts to promote gender equality (UNICEF Nigeria, 2020). The region's instability due to insurgency, particularly from groups like Boko Haram, has disrupted educational activities. Attacks on schools, abduction of students, and displacement of families have further marginalised educational opportunities (Human Rights Watch, 2018).

In Northern Nigeria, the Almajiri system has been a longstanding cultural and educational practice deeply intertwined with Islamic traditions. Almajiri children, typically boys, are sent away from their homes to Islamic scholars known as Mallams to receive Quranic education. This system, while rooted in religious teachings and community support, has faced significant challenges and criticisms over the years. Historically, the Almajiri system was established with its good intention as an organised and comprehensive education system for learning Islamic values and jurisprudence, principles, and theology as a school curriculum modelled after Madrasahs in Muslim societies (Muhammad, Sanusi, Sanni & Ohadugha, 2023). In Quranic schools known as 'Tsangaya', students learn Arabic, Islamic theology, and Quranic recitation from Mallams, reflecting a communal approach to education. However, the Almajiri system has come under increasing criticism due to the large number of Almajirai sleeping on verandas and in incomplete houses and becoming graduated beggars who wander around hotels, marketplaces, bus stops, and car parks (Hoechner, 2013). In the event of a social, political, or religious rebellion, these unemployed young people can be a powerful force. Some of them work as porters or pickpockets or perform other low-paying professions.

Under the Almajiri system, parents send their children, mostly boys aged 4-12, to distant locations to acquire Qur'anic education. Many rural and poor families who cannot afford formal schooling have made this choice. While parents may believe they are fulfilling their obligation to provide a religious and moral education to their children and that the learning is provided free of charge, Almajiri children are often forced by their teachers (Mallams) to beg in the streets to fund their education (UNICEF, 2020). Many Quranic schools are frequently underfunded, lacking basic amenities, skilled teachers, and adequate infrastructure. Furthermore, societal problems like poverty, child neglect, and susceptibility to exploitation have been linked to the Almajiri system. According to Onu & Ani (2025), these days, a typical Almajiri can be identified by his repulsive look; he wanders the street pleading for charity while wearing ragged clothing, suffering from illness, and carrying a plastic plate. The Almajirai are socially viewed as an

annoyance and are frequently driven away by decent people. They spend much of their time sleeping on abandoned cardboard or bare floors at restaurants, marketplaces, stores, gas stations and homes. Some Almajirai become commercial errand boys, wood hewers, or water fetchers (called locally "mai ruwa") as a result of these social and economic hardships. Many turn to thuggery, thievery, and the sale of dangerous drugs (Aghedo, Iro & Eke, 2013). The economic hardships faced by families, coupled with misconceptions about the system, have contributed to ongoing debates and calls for reform.

One major approach has been the integration of Qur'anic and Western education. The Nigerian government introduced the Almajiri Education Programme (AEP) under the Universal Basic Education Commission. This initiative aimed to build Almajiri Model Schools that combine religious instruction with subjects like mathematics, English, and science, while also providing meals and boarding facilities. Also, many non-governmental organisations and international partners supported reforms through funding, teacher training, and advocacy for child rights and education access. Unfortunately, all these initiatives failed. In 2017, Nigeria's President Goodluck Jonathan constructed a record 165 modern Almajiri schools in northern Nigeria (Obiejesi, 2017), with 8 of these schools in dilapidated conditions (Vanguard, 2025). This initiative also failed. Despite all these initiatives, the Almajiri children were not seen attending those schools; instead, they continue to insist on focusing on Islamic education in the Almajiri schools. Scholarship has looked into the developing nature of Almajiri education (Katami & Teke, 2023; Maigari, 2017; Gomment & Esomchi, 2017); having literature is yet to clearly provide reasons for the failure of the policy frameworks aimed at reforming Almajiri education. Furthermore, literature is yet to define the role the religious leaders can play in reforming the Almajiri system in northern Nigeria.

METHODS

This study adopted the qualitative design so as to understand the reason for the lack of adaptation of Almajiri education to reforms. The study will include peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, policy reports, and credible institutional publications that focus on the Almajiri system, Islamic education in Northern Nigeria, child welfare, religion and inequality, and education policy responses. Studies were included because they focus on Nigeria, particularly Northern Nigeria, or comparable Islamic educational systems; discuss the Almajiri system, Qur'anic education, or informal religious schooling; address themes of poverty, inequality, religion, governance, or education reform; and are scholarly (peer-reviewed journals, academic books, government/NGO reports).

Studies will be excluded if they are not directly related to Almajiri or informal religious education, lack academic credibility (non-scholarly blogs or opinion pieces without evidence), or are duplicates or irrelevant to the research objectives.

The literature search will focus on studies published between 2000 and 2025. This period is selected because major policy interventions and academic attention to the Almajiri system intensified in the early 2000s, especially with education reforms and poverty-related studies in Northern Nigeria. However, earlier foundational works (pre-2000) may also be included if they are highly relevant to the historical understanding of the Almajiri system. The data obtained were analysed using content analysis because it systematically interprets texts and documents in a structured way, enabling objective comparisons, revealing hidden trends, and supporting evidence-based decisions.

The aim of this study is to examine the reasons for the persistence of Almajiri education in northern Nigeria and its implications for faith-based organisations. First, this study examines Almajiri education in northern Nigeria. Secondly, it looks at the reasons for the persistence of the Almajiri system. Third, it looks at the role of religious leaders in reforming the Almajiri system of education.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Almajiri Education in Northern Nigeria

The Almajiri system, prevalent among Muslim communities in Northern Nigeria, has complex causes deeply rooted in historical, socio-economic, and cultural contexts. This system involves sending young boys away from their homes to Quranic schools where they receive Islamic education under the guidance of Mallams (teachers). The primary aim of the Almajiri education system is to provide Qur'anic education and familiarise pupils with the teachings of the Qur'an (Aminu, 2023). The Almajiri system depends on parents and guardians choosing to send their male children to traditional Islamic schools of their own volition. The state government, parents and guardians, and the host community where the Almajiri schools are situated all actively participate in it.

The Almajiri system in Northern Nigeria has deep historical roots in Islamic scholarship and predates colonial rule. The term Almajiri is derived from the Arabic "al-muhājirūn", meaning "migrants" or "seekers of knowledge", reflecting the tradition of students leaving home to study the Qur'an under a learned teacher (mallam). But the word of Al-Muhajirun is going to a person who migrated from one place to another, like someone who migrated from Nigeria to London; he is 'Muhajir' in the Arabic word (Umar, 2020). Before colonialism, the system was highly organised and respected, particularly during the era of the Sokoto Caliphate (1804–1903). Islamic education was state-supported, and Qur'anic teachers

received resources from emirs and the broader community. Almajiri pupils were not beggars; instead, their welfare was collectively supported through structured systems like zakat (charity). The system produced scholars, judges, and administrators, playing a central role in governance and intellectual life.

With the advent of British colonial rule in the early 20th century, this system experienced significant disruption. Shehu Dan Fodio strengthened the Almajiri education system and transformed it into a free, well-funded and adequately staffed universal Muslim primary education in the Sokoto Empire, of which present-day Northern Nigeria was a political, religious, educational and commercial nerve centre (Safiyanu & Bugaje, 2020). Colonial authorities introduced Western-style education but largely neglected Islamic institutions. Funding and administrative support for Qur'anic schools declined, weakening the traditional support structures that had sustained Almajiri students.

After Nigeria's independence in 1960, rapid population growth, urbanisation, and increasing poverty further strained the system. Many Qur'anic schools became informal and under-resourced. Without adequate state or community support, Almajiri children increasingly relied on street begging for survival, marking a major shift from the system's original intent. Today, the Almajiri system exists in a transformed and often challenged state. While it still provides religious education, it is also associated with issues such as child welfare concerns, educational exclusion, and poverty. Government reforms and policy interventions have attempted to integrate formal education, but the system persists due to its deep cultural and religious significance.

Boko Haram and Formal Education in Nigeria

Boko Haram is a militant Islamist group based in northeastern Nigeria, known for its insurgency activities aimed at establishing an Islamic state adhering to strict Sharia law. The group's name, "Boko Haram", translates roughly to "Western education is forbidden" in the Hausa language, reflecting its opposition to secular education and Western influence in Nigeria. Boko Haram emerged in the early 2000s under the leadership of Mohammed Yusuf, who preached against what he perceived as the corrupting influence of Western education and governance.

The group initially operated peacefully, advocating for a strict interpretation of Sharia law and criticising the Nigerian government for its perceived corruption and oppression of Muslims in the north (Falola & Heaton, 2008). The group's tactics escalated to violence in 2009 when clashes with Nigerian security forces in Maiduguri resulted in hundreds of deaths, including that of Mohammed Yusuf. After Yusuf's murder, Abubakar Shekau took over as commander of Boko Haram and escalated the group's violent campaign, which included bombings,

kidnappings, and attacks on government buildings, security personnel, and civilians.

Boko Haram's ideology includes a strong opposition to Western education, which they perceive as incompatible with their vision of Islamic governance. This ideology has had a devastating impact on education in northeastern Nigeria. First, it led to attacks on schools in northern Nigeria. Boko Haram has targeted schools, teachers, and students perceived as symbols of Western education. A violent Islamic fundamentalist group in Nigeria is known as Boko Haram. The group's official name is Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad, which translates to "People committed to the propagation of the Prophet's teachings and Jihad" in Arabic. "Association of Sunnas for the Propagation of Islam and for Holy War" is the exact translation (Oarhe, 2013). Second, it led to the disruption of the education system in northern Nigeria. The violence and insecurity caused by Boko Haram have disrupted the educational system in northeastern Nigeria. Many schools have closed, and students, particularly girls, are afraid to attend classes due to the risk of abduction and violence (Human Rights Watch, 2018). Third, it increased the number of internally displaced persons in Nigeria. The conflict has displaced millions of people in northeastern Nigeria, including many children and families who have sought refuge in IDP camps. Displacement has further exacerbated barriers to accessing education and disrupted children's learning and development (2020).

The Nigerian government, with support from regional and international partners, has undertaken military operations and implemented educational initiatives to counter Boko Haram's influence and rehabilitate affected communities. Efforts include rebuilding schools, providing psychosocial support to affected children, and promoting alternative education programmes. Boko Haram's insurgency in Nigeria has had profound humanitarian and socio-economic consequences, particularly in relation to education. The group's opposition to Western education has not only disrupted the schooling of thousands of children but has also undermined efforts to promote development and stability in the region.

Reasons Almajiri System has Continued Despite Policy Responses

The Almajiri system has persisted in Northern Nigeria despite multiple reform efforts because the forces sustaining it are deeply social, economic, cultural, and institutional. One major factor is widespread poverty and inequality. Many families cannot afford formal schooling costs or basic child upkeep, so sending children to Qur'anic teachers becomes both an educational and survival strategy. According to Njoku, under the Almajiri system, parents send their kids—mostly males between the ages of 4 and 12—to far-off places to get Qur'anic instruction. This decision has been taken by numerous impoverished and rural families who

cannot afford formal education. Although the exact number of Almajiri children in Nigeria is unknown, some estimates place it at over 10 million, or roughly 81% of the nation's over 10 million out-of-school children (Njoku, 2020). In some cases, it also reduces the household's economic burden. Corroborating further, Gomment (2020) noted that most children (both the fake and 'genuine' Almajirai on the streets) and adults flock into the cities from the villages in search of alms for survival because of the acute and excruciating poverty in the countryside.

A second reason is the deep religious and cultural legitimacy of the system. The Almajiri tradition is seen by many communities as a respected pathway to Islamic knowledge. Because of this religious grounding, attempts to replace or restructure it are sometimes viewed with suspicion or resistance. The Almajiri education system gradually declined as a result of colonial masters introducing western-style education and the states' eventual removal of financing and infrastructure assistance (Perekeme, 2015). The running of the Almajiri education system was then taken over by Quoranic teachers known and was supported by the host communities, which provide accommodation and food for the pupils (Elechi & Yekorogha, 2013). Due to the fact that things became difficult and the Qur'anic teachers could not sustain their students, they sent them out to beg. In contrast to the long-standing system that served as the basis for the generational transmission of Islamic knowledge and culture, Abuh reveals that the average almajiri grows up to become a menial worker, hewer of wood, and drawer of water. This has turned the Almajiri system into a source of child abuse, child labour, child exploitation, neglect, and impoverishment (Abuh, 2015).

Another important factor is limited access to quality formal education in rural areas. The British invaded and colonised northern Nigeria in 1904, seized control of the treasury, and declared the Almajiri educational system to be merely a religious institution. Instead, Boko, a type of Western education, was implemented and supported (Gomment, 2020). Where schools are distant, under-resourced, or poorly staffed, families often prefer the traditional system, which is more locally available and culturally familiar. Unfortunately, in northern Nigeria, even while formal education is crucial, parents and Almajiri Mallam would view its incorporation into the tsangaya system as yet another attempt to usurp their power and give it to people who are more suited for administrative roles and possess formal literary abilities (Umar & Maaji, 2025). The conditions of the schools that Almajirai attend are not good for habitation. It functions in an unofficial, quasi-legal environment where protections for children's rights are sometimes ignored in the name of cultural relativism or religious freedom. Nigeria is a signatory to both the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, two international

conventions on child welfare that many of these youngsters live in violation of (Omotola, 2025).

There is also the issue of weak policy implementation and governance gaps. Abubakar & Ladan (2026) observe that the integration of Almajiri education within the Universal Basic Education (UBE) programme framework has been one of the most important policy changes. Furthermore, they explained that this integration aims to overcome Almajiri children's long-standing exclusion from mainstream school systems by providing them with formal literacy, numeracy, and vocational skills in addition to Qur'anic training. Although government programmes exist, they are often underfunded, inconsistently implemented, or lack long-term sustainability. Aliyu lamented that even the UBE-Almajiri interface has implementation gaps, weak administrative alignment and stakeholder unawareness, which limit its effectiveness. Furthermore, coordination between federal, state, and local authorities is also limited.

What are The Needed Faith-Based Responses

Religious leaders play a central role in addressing challenges within the Almajiri education system in Northern Nigeria because they hold strong influence over community beliefs, parenting decisions, and educational practices.

First, one key role is advocacy and reorientation of public perception. Imams, Qur'anic scholars, and Mallams can help communities understand that integrating Islamic education with formal schooling does not undermine religion. Their endorsement reduces resistance to reform efforts. Second, they also serve as gatekeepers of the system, since many Almajiri schools are run by them. This positions them to directly support reforms such as improved welfare for pupils, better learning conditions, and reduced reliance on street begging. Third, religious leaders are also important in promoting curriculum integration, where Qur'anic education is combined with subjects like literacy, numeracy, and life skills. When respected scholars support such integration, it becomes more culturally acceptable.

Fourth, another role is mediation between the government and communities. In some cases, distrust exists between state authorities and local populations. Religious leaders help bridge this gap by explaining policies and encouraging cooperation. Fifth, they can also contribute to ethical guidance and child protection, emphasising Islamic teachings that support dignity, care for children, and the importance of education without exploitation. And the last, religious leaders are essential in mobilising community support and resources, including encouraging wealthy individuals and Islamic organisations to fund reforms, schools, or welfare programmes.

CONCLUSION

The Almajiri system of Quranic education in Northern Nigeria has long been a cornerstone of Islamic tradition and cultural heritage. However, it faces significant challenges that threaten the well-being and future prospects of Almajiri children. These challenges include educational deficiencies, socio-economic disparities, and cultural complexities that impact their overall development. The way forward for Almajiri children of Muslim Northern Nigeria requires a collaborative effort involving government agencies, communities, educators, NGOs, and international partners.

The traditional Quranic education provided in Tsangaya schools often lacks integration with formal education curricula, resulting in limited literacy, numeracy, and critical thinking skills among Almajiri children. Their capacity to compete in a world that is modernising is hampered by this educational disparity, which also prolongs socioeconomic vulnerabilities. Poverty remains a fundamental driver of the Almajiri system, compelling families to send their children away for Quranic education due to economic hardship. Inadequate access to social services, healthcare, and basic amenities exacerbates this poverty cycle, further marginalising Almajiri children and reducing their chances for socioeconomic mobility.

The Almajiri system is deeply embedded in Northern Nigerian culture and Islamic traditions, reflecting communal values and religious practices. Efforts to reform or modernise the system must therefore respect these cultural sensitivities while promoting educational quality and child welfare. In order to promote sustainable solutions that strike a balance between tradition and modern educational requirements, community involvement and awareness are essential. To ensure a brighter future for Almajiri children, comprehensive reforms and concerted efforts are necessary through the promotion of the integration of Quranic education with formal curricula to enhance educational outcomes and equip Almajiri children with the skills necessary for their future.

Also, there is the implementation of poverty alleviation programmes, vocational training, and social welfare initiatives to uplift families and reduce the economic pressures driving the Almajiri system. There is a need to engage local communities, religious leaders, and stakeholders in discussions and initiatives that promote educational reforms while preserving cultural traditions. Through these efforts, we can envision a future where every child, regardless of background, has access to quality education and the opportunity to thrive in a rapidly changing world.

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