

## Review

# Begging and almsgiving in Nigeria: The Islamic perspective

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**This study is provoked by the widespread belief held by general populace that begging in Nigeria is an Islamic phenomenon. Scholars, media, and general public believe that Islamic religious injunctions encourage, promote or at least condone begging. They attribute the thriving of begging in Nigeria to Islamic faith. Against this background, this study investigated the relationship between Islam and begging. It examined the principles, procedures, and modalities provided by Islam on how to earn a living. These are supported and authenticated by Holy Quran with proper interpretation of Hadith of the Holy Prophet. The study revealed that, although Islam made it obligatory for every Muslim to give alms (in form of Zakat and sadaqa), it does not in anyway support begging. The study also unravelled the historical- cum- cultural precedent to their prevalent in the Northern Nigeria. It concluded, however, that begging is not in any way embedded in Islamic injunctions but admitted that the practise of some Muslims in Nigeria makes begging to appear to be part of Islamic culture. The study, therefore, suggested the crackdown on some cultural elements that made begging to be perceived as Islamic phenomenon.**

**Key words:** Begging, almsgiving, Islam, *almajiri*, *mabarata*.

## INTRODUCTION

Street begging, otherwise known in Nigeria as *Bara* and *Maula*, is a social, economic and environmental menace that has become highly visible in Nigeria urban centres, particularly the Northern part of the country. The situation becomes worrisome because not only adult population are engaged in such distress act but even the under aged children (Mudanssir, 2010). Beggars pervade public places like market, motor parks, religious centres and traffic junctions. They are also highly visible in commercial centres, residential neighbourhood (Osagbemi, 2001) and worse still on campus and inside buses (Jelili, 2006). Begging, no doubt, is a downgraded act which leads to the image tarnishing as well as lost of prestige and dignity of any person engaging in it.

Scholars, media and general public have variously linked begging with Islam. Although, beggars are found almost everywhere in Nigerian cities, they believe that beggars are common in Muslim quarters while begging reaches its weekly peak on Fridays (Jelili, 2006). Academic research findings also confirm that bulks of beggars in Nigerian cities are Muslims (Jelili, 2006; Ogunkan, 2009, Ogunkan and Fawole, 2009; Ogunkan

and Jelili, 2010). Not only that, beggars and disabled individuals came mainly from the Northern territories (Ogunkan, 2009) where Islam is predominantly practised.

The above affirmations that begging is an accepted occupation among the Hausas and that very large number of Hausa "beg" should not necessarily be misconstrued as an indication that Islam supports begging. Islam provides principles, procedures and modalities on how one can earn a living. These are supported and authenticated by the Holy Quran with proper interpretations of Hadith of Holy Prophet (SAW). It is clearly provided, accepted and acknowledged in Islamic economic system that earning a living is only through lawful and legitimate use of available resources in decent ways. The system does not accept dependency act by any able but lazy and effortless person on others for livelihood (Mudanssir, 2010).

The question that comes to the fore, therefore, is that why is begging so closely linked with Islam?

Begging in Nigeria is a cultural issue because a great number of Nigerians believe in the goodness of helping the poor and it is the right of the poor to seek for the

assistance of the better off in the society (Ayagi, 1997). Islam values generosity and every Muslim is encouraged to give *zakat* and *sadaqa*. This value of generosity that abounds in Islam, perhaps, makes people to believe that Islam encourages the institution of begging in our communities.

It is pertinent, however, to clarify issues on the position of Islam on begging and almsgiving to get a clearer picture of the relationship between begging and Islam. This study, therefore, reviews literatures on the position of Islam on begging, these are sufficiently supported by Quranic verses and hadith.

## ISLAM IN NIGERIA: AN OVERVIEW

The coming of Islam to Northern Nigeria is dated back as early as 9<sup>th</sup> century (Wikipedia, 2010). This, however, has been contested by Adelabu (2010) that Islam had reached sub - Sahara Africa, including Nigeria, as early as the first century of *hijrah* through Muslim traders and expedition.

Islam was first established in the Kanem Borno Empire during the reign of Humme Jimmeh but became well recognised during the reign of Idris Aloma. However, Islam did not enter Hausa land until 16<sup>th</sup> century (Stride and Ifeke, 1971). The religion was brought to south western Yoruba speaking areas from Mali empire during the reign of Mansa Musa (Wikipedia, 2010), hence the popular reference to Islam as “*esin imole*” which originally was referred to as “*esin Mali*” which means religion from Mali. According to Wikipedia (2010), over fifty percent of population of Nigeria are adherents of Islam with the majority from the Northern territories.

Islam's place in Nigerian society can be understood by the degree to which it pervades other institutions in the society and its contribution to Nigerian pluralism (Wikipedia, 2010). Islam has been established as an institution in emirate societies of Nigeria. Its daily and annual ritual obligation include *hajj* (pilgrimage to Mecca), *Salat* (five daily prayer), *zakat* (giving of alms) among others. It has also established its view on politics, family life, communal order, and appropriate modes and personal conducts.

There is no doubting the fact that Islam has pervaded Nigerians daily life. Most public meetings began or ended with Muslim prayer. An average Nigerian, be it Muslim or not, knows at least the minimum Arabic prayer and the five pillars of the religion. There is also widespread of knowledge of the basic tenets of *sharia* through the help of religion expert or Alkali.

In buttressing, the wide adoption of Islamic faith and traditions, Adelabu (2010), asserts that really all technical terms and cultural usage in Hausa and Fulani were derived from Islamic heritage. To further substantiate his claim, Adelabu cites the under listed words to be Yoruba derivative of Arabic vocabulary:

1. Olohun that is, God or Deity rendered from *Allahu* (الله - لاله لاله)
2. Alaafia that is, Good, Fine Or Health(y) from derivative *Al-Aafiah* (آفياح)
3. Baale that is, husband or spouse derived from *Ba'al* (العاب)
4. Sanma that is, heaven or sky adopted for *Samaa`* (ساما)
5. Alubarika that is, blessing used as *Al-Barakah* (بارك)
6. Wakati that is, hour or time formed from *Waqat* (وقت)
7. Asiri that is, Secrete or Hidden derivative of *As-Sirr* (السِر)

Islamic religion study is taught in many Nigerian universities and colleges of education and many Islamic missionary universities have been established in Nigeria. There are associations formed to promote and propagate Islam tenets in Nigeria, these include NASFAT, AIISLAF, FOMWAN, QUAREEB etc and traditional Islamic associations include the council of ulama, Fityanu Islam, Islamic foundation, Quadriyya and Tijjaniya brotherhood (Gwarzo, 2003). Others are Ansardeen society, Nurudeen society etc.

## Islam and Begging in Nigeria: facts and fallacies

In Nigeria, especially in the Northern part of the country, begging has a religio - cultural backing and encouragement; and beggars are thereby not looked down upon (Jelili, 2006). People give money to street beggars out of piety; real or counterfeit. Others give to beggars just to get them off their neck. Yet, other Nigerians are, simply put, philanthropists. An average Nigerian, irrespective of his socio - political and religious orientations resort to spiritualists for his benefit: to seek spiritual liberations; to seek protection or obtain desire of the heart. Many times than none, the process involve given of alms to beggars.

The current socio- economic realities in Nigeria also perpetuate begging. The world Bank in 2000 estimates that over 45% of the Nigerian population live below poverty level while about two third (2/3) of this group are extremely poor. In order to meet their basic needs, some of the poverty stricken people resort into begging as a major means of livelihood (Ogunkan and Fawole, 2009). Thus, for more than one reason and in more than one way, street begging thrives in Nigeria.

However, many people, including Muslims themselves link and associate, erroneously, begging or *bara* with Islam (Jelili, 2006). To those minds, Islam encourages the adoption of any form of begging as a profession. They believe that Islam is not only associated with begging, but appears to encourage or at least condone it. In as much as this is a clear misconception, the fact remains that the meddling of some cultural and socio – economic factors with Islam as regards begging goes a

long way in this fallacy. The fact that Muslims, especially some leading *Mallams* provided it with a fertile ground to thrive is another factor.

The misconception of the concept of *almajirai* to mean *begging* is one of the factors linking Islam with begging. Many Nigerians have purposely used interchangeably, the concept of or terms *almajirai* and *mabarata* while in actual sense, the two terms were never the same. The wrongful usage may not be unconnected with the acts of some *mallams* taking away children from their parents into major towns or cities and transformed them into *mabarata*. Thus, instead of learning Islamic knowledge, these children are made to beg for money on the streets and perform some menial jobs, The proceed of which the *mallams* extort from them.

A better clarification on the two concepts: *almajirai* and *mabarata* will disabuse the minds of many Nigerians on the wrongful usage of the two concepts. *Almajirci*, the process of being an *almajiri* has its root in the Arabic word *Al- Muhajirun* meaning those who migrate. The term was first used in Islamic history to refer to those who migrated with Prophet Mohammed (SAW) from Mecca to Medina following the *hijrah* of the prophet while the host in medina were called *Ansars* (the helpers of the migrants). The term *Al- Muhajirun* was "Hausanised" to refer to as *almajirai*, the term generally referred today to seekers of Islamic knowledge who leave their towns or villages to be able to concentrate their energy towards acquiring knowledge.

On the other hand, *mabarata*, are professional beggars: those that live by asking people for money and other materials. There is historical cum cultural antecedence to their prevalence in the North. The flow of pilgrims through Sokoto for more than a hundred years, and their consequent offering of alms at Hubare, created a class of beggars that thrive on pilgrims' alms. However, this army of beggars at Hubare were forced to scatter across other Nigerian cities and towns upon abandonment of Sokoto route following the enlightenment of Muslim pilgrims that going through the Sokoto to Ziyarah enroute to Mecca on *Hajj* is wasteful.

Having established the difference between the two terms, it is noteworthy that *almajirai* are essentially house to house beggars of food. The typical *almajiri* is only out to beg for food at most three times a day and once their hunger is satisfied, they return to their classrooms to continue with the learning process. They are different from *mabarata* (professional beggars) who live by begging on the street.

### **Almsgiving: The Islamic viewpoint**

Virtually all religions of the world encourage alms giving. Charity, as preached by every religion of the world is a way of bringing justice to the society. However, the degree by which this is entrenched in their doctrines may vary from religion to religion.

In Islam, charity or almsgiving (*zakat*, in Arabic) is so weighty that it is one of the five pillars of Islam. It is believed in Islam that all the pillars are dependent on one another, therefore, if the pillar of *zakat* falls, the other four falls, and faith, the overall stricture is ruined. The objective of almsgiving in Islam is to purify the soul of a Muslim from greed and miserliness. It is a means of training the Muslims on the virtue of generosity. In other words, Muslims believe that giving to other purifies their own wealth, increases its value, and cause one to recognise that everything we have is a trust from God. Islam therefore, teaches its adherents that it is sacred duty of the wealthy to give part of their possessions to fulfil the needs of the deprived section of the community'

The position of Islam on almsgiving abounds in Quran, the supreme source of authority for Muslims:

"And who are patient in adversity out of a longing for their sustainer's countenance, and are constant in prayers, and spend on others, secretly and openly, out of what We provide for them as sustenance, and (who) repel evil with good" (Quran, surat 13, verse 22).

"The parable of those who spend their possessions for the sake of God is that of a grain out of which grow seven ears, in every ear a hundred grains; for god grants manifold increase unto whom He wills; and god is infinite, all- knowing" (Quran, surat 2, verse 261).

"And who give food- however great be their own want of it – unto the needy; and the orphan, and the captive(saying in their hearts) "We feed you for the sake of God alone: we desire no recompense from you, nor thanks" (Quran, surat 26, verse 8 – 9).

There are two forms of almsgiving in Islam. The first one which is obligatory alms is called *zakat* in Arabic. It is a moral obligation which is required of every adult Muslim who possesses wealth of certain minimum amount (*nisab* in Arabic). A common interpretation of this almsgiving is that 2.5% of one's income, and wealth and between 5 to 10% of one's harvest, should be given to the poor and needy as Zakat (Weiss, 2007). The collected amount is to be managed and distributed by Bait al- mail or state treasury for the *maslaha* (welfare) of the Umma (the community of believers that is Muslim. Most especially, for the eight categories of recipients, as listed in Sura 9:60. These categories of the people are the poor (Fagir), the destitute (*miskin*), the collectors of zakat, Muslim converts, slaves - who want to buy their freedom, debtors, for expenditure in God's cause, and the wayfarers. As reported by Weiss (2003), *zakat al- fitr* or mandatory alms giving is additional Zakat to the "normal Zakat" and it is required of every Muslim at the breaking of Ramadan fasting. Unlike the normal Zakat, *Al - fitr* is levied on persons only, not on wealth or income.

The second form of almsgiving in Islam is the voluntary Charity called *sadaqa* Arabic word for "truth" and

“honesty”. *Sadaqa* is a voluntary act of worship, a choice made of one own free will, *sadaqa*, though, voluntary act of worship, is a very wide term and it is used in the Quran to cover all kinds of charity. It is so vast in scope that even the poor who have nothing tangible to give can offer *sadaqa* in the shape of a smile or glass of water to a thirsty person.

In making comparison of these two forms of almsgiving in Islam it is pertinent to point out that *zakat* is more than just a good deed because it is obligatory whereas *sadaqa* is the decision of the giver alone, thus, in an Islamic order, *zakat* belongs to public sphere and *sadaqa* belongs to the private one.

From the foregoing, it is observed that Islam recognises giving of alms as a weighty injunction and every Muslim is encouraged give to the poor and the needy. With this, the question that comes to mind is that “is Islam not directly or indirectly encouraging begging? If no, then what are the reflections of Islam on begging?”

### **Begging: What does Islam say**

Begging is a popular attitude in Nigeria, particularly in Northern part of the country (Mudanssir, 2010). Although, there are evidences of existence of poverty in Nigeria, the act of begging is suppose to be the last resort for earning a living. Surprisingly enough, those that are engaged in the act are doing it without feeling of humiliation and dishonoured, so much that they have legalised it to be a standard profession and career for survival.

It has been observed that this “business” thrive because people have erroneously linked begging or *bara* with Islam. They believe mistakenly that Islam encourages begging or at least condones it (Galadanci, 1997; Jelili, 2006). This is far from truth; it is therefore, pertinent to attempt to correct this notion by examining the true position of Islam on begging.

In reality, begging is neither a profession nor carrier in Islam, but rather a dubious act that is contrary to the provision of Quran and Hadith. Although, Islam makes it obligatory upon the rich and well - to - do to support poor and the needy, it does not in anyway encourage begging. In actual fact, Islam provides the economic ways that covers the overall individual responsibilities with regards to the way and manner an individual can sustain his/ her life effectively and accordingly without breaching religious order.

Mudanssir (2010) asserts that it is clearly provided, accepted and acknowledge in Islamic economic system that earning a living is only through lawful and legitimate use of available resources in decent way, also the system does not accept dependency act by any able but lazy and effortless persons on others for livelihood. The only condition for one to beg is when he is extremely poor and in dire need, then such an individual can approach others for assistance and once his need is met he goes back to

his normal business. Islam frowns at taking begging as a means of livelihood.

The above, points to the fact that, begging is not encouraged in Islam at all. Even Quran talks about begging in Islam in the most unfavourable terms; it states:

“(And give) unto (such of) the needy wholly wrapped up in God’s cause, are unable to go about the earth (in search of) livelihood. He who is unaware (of their condition) might think that they are wealthy, because they abstain (from begging); (but) thou canst recognise them by special mark they do not beg man with importunity.....” (Quran, Surat 2, verse 273).

Also, Hadith of the prophet is full of instances he discouraged Muslims from begging. For instance, the story of hakim Ibn Hizam, a poor companion of the Prophet, who went to him to beg three times. The Prophet in each occasion granted his request, but on subsequent occasion, the Prophet discouraged him from begging telling him that “the upper hand is better than the lower hand”. The Prophet admonished his followers saying:

“I swear by Allah that is better for one of you to take his rope and gather firewood on his back than to come to a man and beg him whether he gives or refuse to give.”

Quran also warned people not to follow the *shay tan* (devil spirit) especially in our struggle for survival:

“O you, who believe, eat from good and lawful things we have provided the earth for you and never follow the footsteps of the devil spirit (*shay tan*). Verily, he (devil) is a plain enemy to you” (Quran 2: 176).

In the words of Mudanssir (2010), anything which is not good in Islam have the devil in the forefront of it including the unwise act of begging. He believes that begging or *bara* is a devilish act and is Haram in Islam.

With the evidences and Quranic injunctions above, it becomes imperative to close this section by saying that begging is not part of Islam, and Muslim are discouraged from begging. However, the practised of some Muslims in Nigeria has made it to appear to be an Islamic culture and phenomenon.

### **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

This study has given us clear evidences that no relationship exist between Islam and begging. It discovers that the problem of begging in Nigeria is rooted in socio- cultural and socio - economic realities in the country. However, it is observed that the practise of Muslims in Nigeria has made begging appear to be part

of Islamic culture while in the real sense begging is not part of Islam.

To disabuse the minds of many Nigeria on the notion that Islam encourage begging, governments at all levels, Islamic religious leaders and all other stakeholders should embark on an enlightenment campaign to make the populace understand that almajirai and mabarata (professional beggars) are two entire different sets of beggars.

Muslims should also be educated that the crackdown on street begging is not an attempt to obliterate any aspect of Islamic culture or norms, but to make the Muslim public less susceptible to mischievous makers who are bent on tarnishing the image of Islam all in the name of begging.

The almajirci system of Islamic education is an outdated system and has outlived its usefulness. Government should, therefore, not hesitate to replaced it with a more formal, more vibrant, more pragmatic and more relevant Islamiyyah system and be included to form an integral part of UBE programme.

Government, religious leaders, community leaders and the general public should educate the beggars to appreciate the fact that they can earn more decent living at smaller pain than running in the street.

Begging has its root in our culture. It is obvious that Nigerian society encourages too much dependency, the situation that makes begging to thrive. Attitudinal change of Nigerians is, therefore, required to change their orientation. This will go a long way in curbing the activities of begging in Nigeria.

It has also been observed, that begging thrive in Nigeria because of prevailing socio - economic realities in the country. To this end, government should break the cycle of poverty through the restructuring of the economy in order to improve the economic situation in the country. It is also suggested that government should strengthen its social welfare programme in such a meaningful way. This will prevent the situation whereby the physically challenged are forced into begging as the only means of survival.

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