

The Socio-Economic Dynamics of Begging in Gambari Quarters, Ilorin, Nigeria: A Historical Perspective in the Contemporary Era

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Abstract

The phenomenon of *Almajiri*, 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*

Conceptual Clarification

Almajiri system refers to an educational system and a begging culture. While much attention had been devoted to understanding the educational system of Almajiri in Nigeria, the focus of this paper is on Almajiri as a begging culture. The act of begging and beggars are referred to as *Almajiri* in Ilorin and so they are interchangeably used in this paper.

Street beggars are the beggars go from house to house, chanting phrases like “*Salam Alekum, Banbiyala, Asiris Abo, Bambi Allah, Asiri Abo*” to solicit alms. These type of beggars also referred to as *Banbiyala* in Ilorin while professional beggars are those individuals who treated begging as their sole occupation.

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 beggars 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 influx and settlement of beggars in Gambari while section four interrogates the types of beggars 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 during the Byzantine era (Johnny, 2008). It gained further prominence in the middle Ages through the Christian and Islamic doctrines of almsgiving (Sikalla, 2009). 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. 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 types of begging (Onagun, 2016).

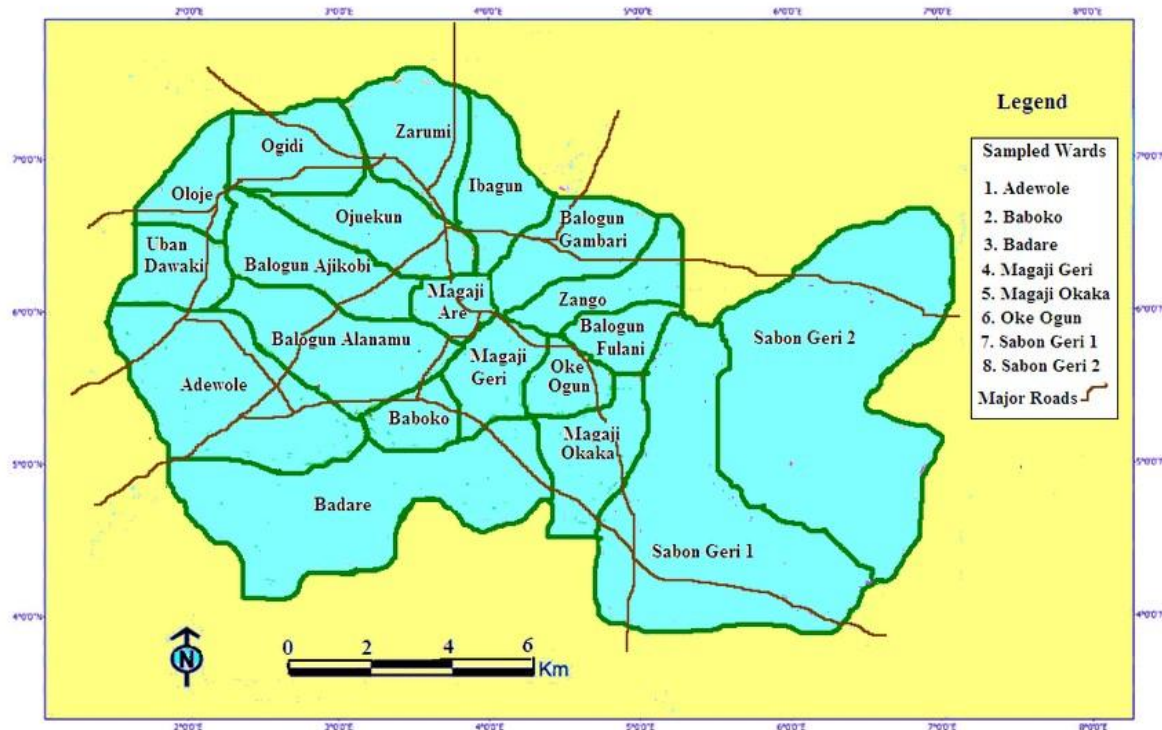
Geography and the People of Gambari Quarters of Ilorin

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. 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)

In Gambari Quarters, 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 residents. 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, Kembri, Tapa, Nupe, and Baruba, the Fulani were the rulers. This was also true for the Balogun Fulani in Gambari. Tribes found in Gambari included Kembri, Hausa, Tapa, and Baruba (Salihu, 2015:13). Figure one below is the map of Ilorin, showing Gambar Quarters.

Figure 1: Map of Ilorin showing Gambari Quarters



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ce: (Usman, Malik and Alausa, 2015)

The Influx and Settlement of Beggars in Gambari Quarters, Ilorin

The migration and settlement of beggars in Ilorin was exemplified by the community known as *Koro Afoju* in Gambari Quarters, 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 had 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.

Type 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.

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. This category of beggars could be classified under “professional beggars” (Interview with Muhammed Sanni, 2024).

Royal beggars 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).

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 also 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).

Stationary Beggars are individuals typically remained stationary, that is, they are beggars who were at a fixed spot, 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 type of beggars, who 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 two below is the picture of the king of beggars at Gambari, Ilorin while figure three shows a picture of stationary beggars at Gambari, Ilorin.

Figure 2: The Blind Seriki (King of the Beggars) at Koro Afoju, Gambari



Source: Picture taken by the authors, 2024.

Figure 3: Stationary Beggars at Gambari, Ilorin



Source: Picture taken by the authors, 2024.

Aged Beggars comprised of elderly beggars who 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 type, was a form of child labour (Onagun, 2016:6). Figure four shows a picture of beggars and their children in Ilorin.

Figure 4: Beggars and their Children 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

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 Belief

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.

Health Issue and Physical Disability

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, explained that his health decline led him to begging. 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. Beggars and their children faced various health issues, including blindness, polio-induced physical disabilities, and amputations. 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).

Parental Permission

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).

Inadequate Provisions for the Vulnerable

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).

Conflict-Driven Displacement

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.

Uncontrollable Family Size

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). Figure five below is a picture of blind beggars at Gambari Quarters, Ilorin.

Figure 5: Some Blind Beggars at Gambari, Ilorin



Source: Picture taken by the authors, 2024.

Challenges of Beggars in Gambari Quarters, Ilorin

Beggars, particularly in Gambari Quarters, Ilorin, have faced numerous challenges. The *Almajiri* community has been significantly affected by poverty and financial instability, leading to heightened levels of illiteracy and ignorance in their midst. Moreover, issues such as sexual harassment, child marriage, unwanted pregnancies, and extended periods out of school have become more prevalent. For example, Fatimah, who sells food and engages in native cosmetics (*lele*), noted that her business struggled, and so 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. Many of the beggars in Gambari Quarters community rely solely on begging for survival since their informal jobs experienced low patronage. Their problem was compounded by the fact that those who used to give alms also faced financial difficulties, reducing the assistance they received. Beggars highlighted that begging was their primary means of survival, and any disruption in this activity would bring 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 did not know their ages and were 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 also revealed that disruptions in attending *Islamiyya* school affected their ability to retain what they had learned, illustrating the broader educational challenges these beggars face (Interview with Aisha Umar 2024).

In addition, after completing Karuma LGEA Primary School, Ilorin, the only nearby local school, beggars' children cannot advance to Secondary School due to the age restriction. Consequently, their children are left to wander the streets of Gambari (Interview with Jumai, 2024). Further still, beggars (*Almajiri*) faced harassment, with several instances reported where individuals sought to exploit their vulnerability. Some were even betrothed due to poverty to a

man who supported her family (Interview with Aisha Umar, 2024). There was an instance when a female was betrothed by her mother without father's knowledge (Interview with Awawu Muhammadu, 2024).

However, the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the challenges faced by beggars in Gambari Quarters, Ilorin, notably through an increment 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. It should be noted that some beggars' children wished to acquire western education but they were prevented by their parents. Interviews by one the respondents revealed that she had never attended either an *Islamiyya* or Western school and some benevolent individuals had arranged for her to attend a Western school, but her blind mother denied her of the opportunity by refusing, and so she needed to contribute to the family 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. This increment 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, beggars faced significant health hazards, including unsanitary living conditions and challenges accessing healthcare. The physical and environmental risks they encountered were severe, as they often worked in close proximity to dumps site and were exposed to harsh weather conditions, including rain, sun, and storms. This constant exposure to adverse environmental factors contributed to their overall health vulnerability. When it comes to healthcare, the beggars often struggled to access adequate medical services. For critical health issues, they were required to pay approximately ₦3000 for treatment, while non-critical cases cost around ₦2000 (Interview with Baliquees Abdullahi, 2024). This financial burden exacerbated their difficulties, as many beggars could not afford even these basic medical expenses.

The *Almajiri* that is beggars in Ilorin faced significant challenges: they and their children often lived in makeshift, overcrowded shelters, worsening their difficulties. The COVID-19 pandemic compounded this crisis, restricting access to clothing from well-wishers. Those who

might have provided aid were grappling with their own hardships, and movement restrictions made it hard 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 six is the picture of shabbily dressed child beggars at Gambari Quarters, Ilorin.

Observations during the field work revealed 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 threatened their survival, livelihood, and development. Figure six and seven show pictures of shabbily dressed child beggars and the unsanitary condition of their toilets at Koro Afoju (Blind Colony) in Gambari Ilorin, respectively.

Figure 6: Shabbily Dressed Child Beggars in their Quarters



Source: Picture taken by the authors, 2024.

Figure 7: Unsanitary Condition of Toilets at Beggars' Colony in Gambari, Ilorin



Source: Picture taken by the authors, 2024.

During interviews, beggars revealed that they often defecate into bags in their rooms, especially at night or during rain, and dump waste near the toilet- a site also used as a dumpsite for human waste (Interview with Awawu Muhammadu, 2024). This attracts animals and insects that come into contact with their food, worsening their health and sanitary risks. Beggars struggled with hunger and malnutrition, affecting their health and survival. Many including children, lacked adequate food and nutrition. One interviewee shared her personal hardship living with her grandmother; some younger family members died from starvation and malnutrition, including two of her siblings (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 section explores the efforts made by these bodies to alleviate the struggles of *Almajiri* children in Gambari Quarters.

Fisrtly, the Kwara State Government in 2005 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. Though, the government has been hesitant to enforce this law, due to 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 programme 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). 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).

Some of the beggars removed from the streets were placed in government resettlement homes for about seven days of counseling, depending on their number and condition. Those identified as mentally unstable were transferred to government-approved trado-psychiatric centers at Eiyenkorin and Alagbado in Ilorin for treatment (Kannike, 2013).

It is pertinent to mention that borehole water project of the Governor Abdulrazaq-led administration was a significant efforts to improving conditions for the *Almajiri* in the Gambari Quarters. However, the borehole is underutilized due to irregular power supply without solar or generator backup. Figure nine is the picture of a borehole provided for the beggars in their Gambari community.

Figure 8: 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, receive adequate support. The government has demonstrated responsiveness to the needs of the beggars' community by providing social infrastructure. Notable interventions apart from the installation of a borehole was the provision of a bus for health emergencies, and the improvement of the *Koro Afoju* (blind colony) community road that connect Gambari to Oja-Gboro and Awodi (Interview with Abdulazeez, 2024). This infrastructural development represented 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 followed their parents' footsteps, engaging in alms-seeking, while others turned 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 Organizations like House and Street Kids Welfare Initiative, have been tremendous. 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).

The Kwara branch of the Federation of Muslim Women's Association of Nigeria (FOMWAN) intervened in 2020 to improve living conditions of beggars at Gambari Quarters, Ilorin. 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, Oja-Gboro, Oja-Oba, and Post Office. Yusuf criticised this practice as a violation of the children's rights to education, health, security, food, and dignity (Aliyu, 2021).

In general, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) have made significant contributions to the beggars in Gambari Quarters. For example, the efforts of another NGO called Team HSKi through its initiative, The Olive Seed Academy (TOSA), which was established on 15th March 2019 can never be overemphasised. Upon visiting Koro Afoju (blind colony) 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 establish 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 performed by 300-level students from the Department of Public Health, Kwara State University (KWASU). These students, as part of their service, undertook public health sensitisation and environmental cleaning in Koro Afoju, Gambari Quarters, Ilorin. The students engaged with the beggars, providing health talks, and emphasised the importance of personal hygiene and overall well-being (Oluwatoyin, 2024).

Conclusion

This study provides a historical account of begging in Gambari Quarters, Ilorin in the contemporary era. Begging became more prominent in Nigeria with the introduction of Christianity, Islam, and colonialism, as both religions promoted almsgiving but did not endorse habitual begging. The study highlighted the drivers of begging in Ilorin which included poverty, cultural and religious traditions, health challenges, lack of social support, and displacement due to conflict.

With the aid of available written sources and oral accounts, the work examined the types of beggars in Ilorin, the challenges facing the beggars at Gambari Quarters, Ilorin, and the government and the non-governmental interventions on the plight of the beggars in Ilorin. This study succinctly showed that poverty, illiteracy, and poor living conditions worsened challenges faced by the beggars in Gambari Quarters, Ilorin. Limited access to Western and Islamic education hindered their ability to access basic information, contributing to marginalization. The study recommended government-led initiatives such as education and vocational training, improved healthcare access, social support and welfare programmes, and economic empowerment. These measures aim to reduce begging in Ilorin society.

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