

Can Democracy Help the Almajiri Child in Nigeria?

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Abstract. The all-round anguish an average Almajiri child is suffering in Nigeria has attracted sharp interrogations: internationally and otherwise. The fact that the age-old almajiranci system needs a life-saving reformation is a point that have been made severally by certified child rights activists, the past and current governors of the northern states and the religious authorities. The believe, that, democracy and its “fall-outs”, which was recently ushered in as a governance system in 1999 will help to revitalize the almajiranci system towards the liberation of the victims, the children and the adolescents, is still a gospel truth to some authorities. Hence, it was the core focus of this study to interrogate this belief, the trust that, ordinarily and inherently, democracy has the wherewithal to positively help the Almajiri child in Nigeria. The interrogations that were done to answer the central question; were done through a comprehensive analysis of the salient tenets of democracy vis-à-vis it Nigerian brand. The study concluded that, until Nigeria decides to practice a kind of welfare democracy that will jettison some extreme capitalistic components of the democracy it is currently practicing, the Almajiri system will be the lot of the nation for a long time.

Keywords: Almajiri, almajiranci, democracy, governance and Nigeria.

1. Introduction

In Nigeria, the sociological phenomenon of the Almajiri children in the northern part is comparable to some forms of predicaments and similar abuses with under-aged children that do fishing in the Niger Delta region, children that are “herdsmen” among the Fulani ethnic group and children that are used as “farm hands” and for hawking petty goods on the streets in the Middle Belt, in the eastern and western parts of the country. Hence, what is true about the Almajiranci system in terms of the negative consequences to the overall development of the Almajiri child is true to most deprived children across the nation.

In fact, the Almajiri child and his abusive system have some advantages when his scrape, unfortunately, is compared to some of the abusive systems in other parts of the Nigeria. For instance, unlike the Almajiri child, the migrant fishermen children in the lower Niger Delta region of Nigeria have no organized form of education behind their own abusive system. Also unlike the Almajiri child, there is no “religious charity” component supporting the children that are used for fishing or who do fishing to help themselves in the Niger Delta. Somehow, also, the plight of the Almajiri child has attracted a lot of attention, and periodically, the children of this system do get some direct succor (in forms of skills acquisition and other vocational training programmes) from the government and from other international do-

gooders. This is not applicable to victims of other abusive systems in other parts of the nation.

However, the children from other parts of the country that are under some forms of abusive system like that of the almajiranci system have been suffering without any organized help because there is a collective denial, something like a conspiracy of silence from the authorities concerned. To all intents and purposes therefore, the summary of the conclusions of this study is also diametrically influenced by all other forms of long-standing child abuse systems in the country. The idea that democracy will somehow help to reduce organized socially approved abuses that are cultural and otherwise such as the almajiranci system, gender discrimination and poverty, is an ongoing axiom (Richard, 2017). Can the current brand of democracy being practiced in Nigeria help the Almajiri child? The answer to this question, will be the main thrust of this here.

In order to comprehensively address the central foci of this paper, it will be divided into four major sections. Section one, will adequately situate the almajiranci system in Nigerian historiography and the recent narratives. While section two, will cover the negative and the positive effects of the system under interrogation. Democracy and its overall formations and dimensions will be presented in the third section which discusses an overview democracy. How far democracy could help the Almajiri child? Enveloping almajiranci system inside western liberal democracy will be the concern of section four. And finally, the paper will make its summations in the concluding section.

2. Rationale and Methodology of the Study

It is safe to conclude that the Almajiri child has been “over-researched” in the last century. No aspect of the Almajiri child has been spared to a reasonable level. This explains why, literature on the socio-economic, political and the educational challenges the Almajiri child is facing are in abundance. Recently most scholars

have started to study the nexus between the almajiranci system and terrorism in Nigeria. Tons of literature have also been produced in this regard. However, so far, little has been done in the area of how democracy can help the Almajiri child. In essence, the conviction that democracy has the means to salvage the Almajiri child has not been properly dissected. Therefore, the key interest of this paper is to try to answer this question, can democracy help the Almajiri child? Finding out the answer to this question is very important because, at present, Nigeria is in the fast-line of the democratization process and a lot is expected from the process. Thus, this takes a socio-historical approach. This is appropriate as it looks at the plight of Almajiri child holistically before diving into what democracy portend for him.

3. The Almajiranci System in the Nigerian Narratives

That the Almajiri child is one of the most abused children in the whole world is no longer in doubt. This declaration is in tandem with the summation of the study done by Zakir, et al (2014). Like most abused children, the Almajiri child lacks all the basic, life-saving, materials. But unlike most deprived children, the Almajiri child lacks also the needed psychological guardianship to nurture his self-esteem when he becomes an adult. He is subjected to vigorous begging through a well-oiled conspiracy of uncaring political and traditional leaders and carefree: economically muzzled parents throughout his formative years. The unfortunate lot of the Almajiri child is that, his tortuous life has seen ages, and no relieve is in sight at the moment. Hence, future Almajiri children are always manufactured to replace the current ones, it is a case of the continuity of the vicious cycle of exploitation and deprivations. It will not be out of place, therefore, if one labeled the almajiranci system an organized crime and a crime against humanity. This is not to input that the Almajiri child has not attracted some haphazard forms of favours from public-spirited individuals, Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and the government. According to Sulaiman, (2006), the first official attempt to put a halt on the practice of migrant Qur’anic

schooling system in Nigeria was started by Kano Native Authority as far back as 1959; also in July 1980, the Sokoto State government signed into law an edict regulating the movement of Almajiri. On May 24, 1988 the Kano State government inaugurated a 10-man Committee on Almajirai comprising all stakeholders too to officially find a way to regulate the system (Sulaiman (2006: 65). The former President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, Goodluck Jonathan (2010-2015) according to some authorities did a lot for the Almajiri child (Asogwa & Asogwa, 2015). However, all these efforts, indeed, only scratch the back of the piles of depravity the Almajiri child is convoluting in at present.

The lot of the Almajiri child has been the same in the last 100 years or more, however before 1904 when the colonial invaders invaded the remaining leadership structure of the then northern Nigeria, the Almajiri education system, originally called the Tsangaya was, an organized and inclusive system of education for learning Islamic beliefs, values, jurisprudence and theology. It was a facsimile of Islamic learning centres in many Muslim countries such as the madrasah in Pakistan, Malaysia, Egypt and Indonesia etc. (Asogwa, & Asogwa, 2015). In fact, it has been an intermediate of early childhood holistic Islamic education in Northern Nigeria since the 11th century where Kanem-Bornu rulers first practiced it before it was introduced into the Hausaland in the early 19th century, after the famous jihad of Uthman Dan Fodio (Bolujoko, 2008 cited by Thomas, and Obi 2017). Today, there are well over 9 million children in the Northern Nigeria alone in this category who mostly depend on the host communities to contribute plates of food for the Mallams and his students (Alao, 2017; Iliyas, Rabi'u and Adio, 2017; Ammani, 2016).

The Qur'anic school child, now the Almajiri child, of the pre-colonial era was a child of allure and pride because, the school system was funded by the then State treasury and the State's zakkat funds, and was under the control of the emirs of the traditional government system that existed before the coming of the British (Abdullahi, 2006: 29). Currently the Almajiri child has attracted so many characterizations, however, for the sake of this study, the

following definitions will be adopted because the overall depict the Almajiri child of our focus.

The Almajiri child is any child below the age of 18 years (male) in most cases sent to an old-fashioned Qur'anic school by the parents at a very early age to study outside his parental care. He is easily identifiable with tattered clothes, no shoes, dirty, unkempt, holding a bowl to beg for food. He is in most cases having one kind of skin disease due to the crowded rooms in which he sleeps (if he is lucky to get a roof over his head). The Almajiri child is usually trafficked from state to state and from country to country all in search of knowledge (Saudatu, 2006:25).

An Almajiri is a young child leaving his home and family to learn Qur'anic education in a new environment in the traditional way. These children live in colonies far away with their mallams. The age of these children vary from 5 years to 18. The living condition of these children is an eyesore. They live in rooms with no proper ventilation (Asma'u, 2006:80).

The disaster in the life of an Almajiri child in whole northern zone of Nigeria is essentially a product of the incongruity of the socio-economic, political and cultural alterations taking place in the Nigerian society of the pre and post independent eras (Abdullahi, 2006: 29). Hence, what we have as an almajiranci system is a product of many phenomena. This explains why the Almajiri phenomenon is hydra-headed in nature and manifestations.

The violent colonial conquest of northern Nigeria, like it happened in most parts of sub-Saharan Africa, actually gave birth to the Almajiranci system that is currently in operation, because it made nonsense of the original welfare-oriented communal system that revolved around the traditional Qur'anic education system that abhors begging directly and indirectly (Abdullahi, 2006: 37). This explains why Sulaiman (2006: 65) argument is very germane. Sulaiman pointed out that:

It has already been argued that seasonal, migration of children and youth from rural to urban areas was never part of the feature of

Islamic education in the pre-colonial Hausa society. The existence and perpetuation of almajiranci could therefore be explained by the logic of capital, the need for cheap labour, rural proletarianization and incasing poverty which are the direct result of the capitalist development policies (Sulaiman (2006: 65).

At the moment, the Almajiri child in Nigeria, is at a crossroad, of no fault of his, he could not go back to his farming country home because of climate change and its attendant repercussions, he could not recall and enjoy his pre-colonial existence too, he could not also break the back of capitalism that according to Sulaiman, is perpetually throwing him to, and exposing him

to, the vagaries of the open street for unprecedented dehumanization.

4. Positive and Negative Effects of the Almajiranci System

The positive effects of the almajiranci system to be enumerated below in a table are not signs of its wellbeing. The end-beneficiaries of these positive effects are, unfortunately, the leaders in the: low-upper, middle and upper classes of the Nigerian State that are perpetuating the abuse with cultural and religious sentiments and vain data that needed to be actually discarded in this current century.

Table 1: Positive and Negative Effects of Almajiranci System in Nigeria

Positive and Negative Consequences of Almajiranci System in Nigeria	
<p>Positives</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -It is avenue to learn the Quran; -It helps the children to learn the Arabic language; -it helps to equip the learners with Islamic jurisprudence; -it sometimes provide an avenue for vocational education; -it enables the children to know their country; -it helps the children to learn other languages, such as English and Yoruba. 	<p>Negatives</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -it destroys the psychological wellbeing of the children; -it exposes the children to drugs; -it exposes them to sexual abuse; -it destroy the children’s love for their parents -it exposes them to gangsters -it makes the learners to be violent; -it is an avenue for the children to be recruited to terrorists organizations; -it makes them to dislike “western” education; -it is an avenue for a poor and one-sided religious knowledge; -it breeds hatred for non-Muslims; -it makes the products to be subservient to their “real” oppressors; -it makes the children to dislike farming; -it obliterates the love for local communities from the hearts of the beneficiaries; -it exposes the children to diseases; -it makes them to be less ambitious; -it makes them to be dirty men in their adult lives; -it makes the children not to have family history; -it makes the children to love poverty in their adult lives; -it makes them to be bad fathers in the future. -it celebrates and encourages joblessness

Source: Authors (2017)

Imam Shafi, one of the major proponents of that system argues that its benefits are numerous including that it gives the student knowledge as he emigrates from home; good manners that reliefs him from sorrow, guarantees his livelihood and friendship with the famous scholars of the day (Alao, 2017).

5. Democracy: An Overview

The term, democracy, had been used in more than 100 contexts. Therefore, it is very significant for every country to consciously

create its own contextual ethos-oriented democracy designed to reflect its culture, size, complexity, and level of political complexity (Iyanda, 2017). However, countries in sub-Saharan Africa are “forced” to kowtow the line of western liberal democracy. The international and national enforcers of western capitalism-loving liberal democracy on most parts of the continent do not actually care whether it will be favourable or not, in terms of overall development of the continent.

Bernard Crick (1964: 56, cited in Christian, et al, 2009) has described democracy as the most licentious word in the world of public affairs. Therefore, this study will not belabour any definition, it will rather throw in as many definitions as possible that will aid the achievement of the focus of the study.

Usman (2009:8) define democracy as an institutional arrangement that involves open political competition, multi-party participation, legally sanctioned political rights, a mechanism for ensuring the transparent conduct of public affairs, all mediated by periodic elections where citizens elect, re-elect or depose their representatives. By extension, 'democratic expansion' refers to institutional and attitudinal transformations aimed at providing maximum democratic rights and institutions for the people. It depends largely on dialogue and negotiation as well as actions and reactions (protests, policies, programmes) of citizens aimed at influencing the choices and behaviour of state institutions and actors. Also, democracy carries the potential for alternating governments.

While to Dahl (1989: 220-222) and Gasiorowski (1996: 471) a nation is practicing democracy when there are:

- Elected political officials
- Free and fair election
- Inclusive suffrage (the right to vote for virtually all adults)
- The right to run for public office
- Freedom of expression
- Alternative sources of information
- Associational autonomy (the freedom to form organizations)

For Gasiorowski (1996: 471 cited in Christian, et al, 2009) a regime is democratic if:

- Meaningful and extensive competition exists among individuals and organized groups for all effective positions of government power at regular intervals and excluding the use of force;
- A highly inclusive level of political participation exists in the selection of leaders and policies such that no major (adult) social group is excluded; and
- A sufficient level of civil and political liberties exists to ensure the integrity of political competition and participation.

To Huntington (1991:34), a government is democratic, when, "its most powerful collective decision-makers are selected through fair, honest, and periodic elections in which candidates freely compete for votes and in which virtually all the adult population is eligible to vote."

Democracy has been practiced globally, as it developed. The history of democracy is embedded in discriminations, absolutism and lack of majority participation (or what is now known as universal adult suffrage). Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778), the Enlightenment French social and political theorist and one of the leading intellectuals to question the basis of the undemocratic and absolute power wielded by Europe's monarchs, limited his belief of democracy to property owners while John Stuart Mill (1806- 1873), the British philosopher-economist, called for the only the inclusion franchise to the property class in all his summations (Marc, 2010: 84).

This may be perhaps the reasons why, Marxist scholars such as Walter Rodney and Claude Ake casted aspersion on the adoption of western-style liberal democracy in Africa and other former colonies. Ake postulated that:

- Democracy in the Western sense may be antithetical to Africa's brand of democracy based on communal traditions of consensus building... traditional African political systems were imbued with democratic values, such as patrimony and communalism, a strong emphasis on participation and standards of accountability. "Chiefs were answerable not only for their own actions but for natural catastrophes such as famine, epidemics, floods, and drought" ... (Ake, 1991 p: 34).
- Democracy has also been classified and declassified into different forms, natures and styles. The debate about the style and nature democracy could sometimes take or manifest was in the late 1990s shaped by Fareed Zakaria's introduction of the term "illiberal democracy" to characterize regimes that now choose their rulers through practically open and

impartial elections, but are deficient in the rule of law and the protection of individual and minority rights (Fareed, 1997). This means the principle of majority rule does not by itself constitute democracy; there are so many tyrannical regimes that enjoyed the support of a majority (Marc, 2010: 84). The current USA government of Donald Trump, is a precise worthy example.

6. Enveloping Almajiranci System inside Western Liberal Democracy: Any Success?

One of the attendant friends of capitalism is western liberal democracy. Due to the liberating power attributed to western liberal democracy, it is believed that, it will help the Almajiri child in Nigeria to walk its way up. Dembisa Moyo, the economist, indorsed this line of reasoning when she said “Economic prosperity is the prerequisite for a successful democracy” (Richard Chilee, 2017:2) and what Sulaiman reiterated, it is clear that any attempt aimed at tackling the phenomenon of almajiranci must first attack it from its socio-economic root (Sulaiman, 2006: 77).

Unfortunately, about almost two decades later, the Almajiri child is still waiting for western liberal democracy to take him close to the promise land. In fact from the statistics available, the Almajiri child’s conditions in the country is nose-diving according to the Human Development Index summaries that has been published from 1999 to 2015. Olukunle Iyanda (2017) commented that:

...the most indicative summary statistics of the development and well-being of a nation is the Human Development Index published annually by the UNDP. In the latest published index for 2015, Nigeria ranks 152 out of 188 countries, one rank below that of 2014....Nigeria had remained around the same rank of 150s since 2010. It actually declined by one rank in 2015 (Iyanda, 2017).

The above assertion is true because, poverty “is the root of all evils” in Nigeria. The fact that modern western liberal democracy has not helped the Almajiri child and others may be explained in the following prisms put forward by some democratic studies’ theorists such as Christian, et al (2009). The middle section of Table 1, which displays the different dimensions of liberal western democracy, to some extent explicate the issue raised in the earlier part of this paragraph:

Table 2 Dimensions of Democracy

Definition of democracy	Democracy is not:	Democracy’s necessary preconditions are:
The government is held accountable to citizens by means of free and fair election	Socio-economic equality Capitalism Small government Property rights Economic efficiency and growth Political and administrative efficiency Freedom of religion Stability Peace	the right to vote for virtually all adults the right to run for public office for virtually all adults freedom of association freedom of expression freedom of the press

Source: Christian, et al (2009: 31)

Despite the summations in the middle section of Table 2, which by some means excuses, the inability of the current liberal democracy being practiced in Nigeria to help the Almajiri child out of the wood; the warning from Omotola reverberates the central argument of this study. To Omotola (2008), “the African condition today in terms of poverty is extremely alarming. Unless something fundamental is done to tame

the expanding monster of poverty in Africa, no amount of democracy promotion can make the people imbibe and exhibit a democratic ethos (Omotola, 2008: 48). Also as Takashi, Edward and John (1998) advance that:

The wider conception of peace and security embraces all spheres of life – economic, political, social, and environmental in addition to territorial and military security – and

democracy is increasingly seen as an integral part of this matrix (Takashi, Edward and John, 1998).

However, this falling matrix, magic actually attributed to liberal democracy is now a suspect, because before the reintroduction of democracy in Nigeria in 1999, virtually all advocates put out in all seriousness that western liberal democracy will work out a way for the Almajiri child, in particular and other deprived people in general in Nigeria. It is now actually, getting clearer that the trust western liberal democracy commanded before now in Nigeria is eroding very fast, hence, a reevaluation of the whole situation in the country needed to be done. The concluding section of this study will deal with this dilemma.

7. Conclusion

The Republic of India, like Costa Rica and Venezuela has been good examples of enduring western style liberal democracies without corresponding economic development. Bradley explained that, "India, despite the steady erosion of democratic institutions ...continues to stand as the most surprising and important case of democratic endurance in the developing world. And I might add that democracy in the developing countries of Costa Rica has been in place since 1948 and in Venezuela since 1958 (Bradley, 2011).

This means that the mere practicing of a "copy-cat democracy" will not seriously help to improve the economic lot of most people in the developing nascent democracies in most so-called developing countries. This invariably means that the lot of the Almajiri child in Nigeria has a long way to go.

As Bernard (1962) famously opined decades back:

Democracy is perhaps the most promiscuous word in the world of public affairs. She is everybody's mistress and yet somehow retains her magic even when a lover sees that her favours are being, in his light, illicitly shared by many another. Indeed, even amid our pain at being denied her exclusive fidelity, we are proud

of her adaptability to all sorts of circumstances, to all sorts of company (Bernard, 1962:52).

This means developing nations such as Nigeria can re-modify the western liberal brand of democracy to suit her socio-cultural and economic traditions and current realities. Hence, any modification of the current democratic ethos that can help the Almajiri child in Nigeria, to uplift his dehumanizing globally imposed condition, will be a welcomed relive. This position is to a large extent, is in tandem with that of Claude Ake (1996) who argued that, "any democracy that cannot bring food to the table of the common people stands the risk of collapse". Hence, the current liberal western democracy in operation needs to buckle up to be still relevant in the future.

Plea just made above in the forgoing paragraph, for the modification of the extreme capitalism-oriented so-called western style democracy currently in operation in Nigeria, which is still suffocating the poor Almajiri child, is in harmony with the provisions of Chapter 11 (Fundamental Objectives and Directive Principles of State Policy) of the 1999 constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria.

Finally, a rational excursions to the democracies in most parts of the materially developed nations show that, their forms of democracies cannot naturally tolerate such inhumanities that the Almajiri child in Nigeria is still subjected to in the current dispensation. This is predicated on the fact that, most of the democracies currently in operations in the developed jurisdictions are pro-poor, welfare-oriented democracies.

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