



Resilience in Adversity: Survival Strategies among Almajiri Children in Sokoto and Kano States, Nigeria

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Abstract

Almajiri children in Nigeria's Sokoto and Kano states face extreme poverty, exploitation, and limited access to basic necessities. This study investigates the survival strategies employed by Almajiri children to cope with these challenges. A mixed-methods approach was employed, combining: Survey research among Almajiri children; In-depth interviews with Almajiri children, Islamic leaders, and community members; Observational studies in Almajiri schools and communities. Almajiri children employ diverse economic (begging, menial jobs), social (forming alliances, seeking patronage), and coping (resilience, spiritual) strategies. They suffer limited access to education, healthcare, and nutrition which exacerbates vulnerability. Exploitation by adults and poor living conditions persist. Almajiri children demonstrate remarkable resilience in the face of adversity. However, their survival strategies are often inadequate, highlighting the need for sustainable support systems. The study recommends that Government should provide education and healthcare services; economic empowerment Programmes for Almajiri children, as well as community-based initiatives promoting child protection and welfare should be enhanced. There is also a need for integration of secular education into Qur'anic schools and policy reforms addressing child poverty and exploitation.

Keywords: Resilience, Survival, Strategies, Almajiri, Sokoto and Kano.

Introduction

Education as a source of knowledge all over the world is the only key to unlock the door of development and progress of any nation. Knowledge serves as fundamental sources of socio-economic status where development depend on. No nation in the world today can achieve greatness if the youth therein, its greatest asset and successor generation can't access quality education. This is more understandable in today's knowledge-driven world. Despite this acknowledgement, seven and half million children are reported to be roaming about aimlessly on the street of Nigeria, without access to quality education particularly in Northern part of the country as a result of learning Islamic injunction known as "Almajiri".¹

Brief History of Sokoto

The history of Sokoto is deeply rooted in the political, religious, and cultural evolution of what is now northern Nigeria and neighboring areas. Sokoto rose to prominence in the early 19th century under the leadership of the Islamic scholar and reformer Usman dan Fodio, whose movement laid the foundation for the Sokoto Caliphate, a major West African Islamic state.

Origins and Background

Before the rise of Sokoto as a center of Islamic governance, the region was part of the Hausa city-states, which included prominent cities like Kano, Katsina, and Zaria. These city-states were known for their trade networks, agriculture, and

¹I. T. Onitada, "A Pilot Study of the Challenges of Infusing Almajiri Educational System into the Universal Basic Education Programme in Sokoto, Nigeria" in Journal of Education and Practice, Vol. 6, No. 16, p. 10.

political structures. Islam had spread to the region by the 11th century, but local Islamic practices were often syncretic, mixing Islamic beliefs with local traditions².

The Fulani Jihad and the Rise of the Sokoto Caliphate (1804–1808)

The Fulani Jihad, or the Sokoto Jihad, was led by Usman dan Fodio, a Fulani Islamic scholar and teacher. Dan Fodio preached against the perceived moral corruption and religious laxity of the Hausa rulers, calling for a purer form of Islam based on Sharia (Islamic law). His preaching attracted a large following, particularly among the Fulani, who felt marginalized by the Hausa aristocracy.

In 1804, Usman dan Fodio declared jihad (holy war) against the Hausa rulers, initiating a widespread uprising. The movement rapidly gained momentum, with dan Fodio's followers capturing various Hausa city-states. By 1808, they had successfully established the Sokoto Caliphate, centered in Sokoto and eventually encompassing much of present-day northern Nigeria and parts of Niger, Cameroon, and Chad. Usman dan Fodio became the spiritual leader, while he appointed his son, Muhammad Bello, and his brother, Abdullahi, to govern different regions of the caliphate.³

The Structure of the Sokoto Caliphate

The Sokoto Caliphate was a theocratic state based on Islamic law and governance. It was divided into emirates, each ruled by an emir who owed allegiance to the caliph in Sokoto. This governance structure promoted a centralized form of administration, helping to unify the various ethnic and linguistic groups within the caliphate.

Under the leadership of Muhammad Bello, who succeeded his father as the caliph, the caliphate became a highly organized state with an emphasis on Islamic education, trade, and justice. Sokoto itself became an important center of learning and religious scholarship, attracting scholars and students from across West Africa⁴.

The British Conquest and the End of the Caliphate (1903)

In the late 19th century, British colonial forces began expanding their influence in West Africa. By the early 20th century, British colonial ambitions reached northern Nigeria. In 1903, after several military campaigns, British forces captured Sokoto, ending the political independence of the Sokoto Caliphate.

Although the caliphate was officially dissolved, the British retained the traditional emirs in a system of indirect rule, which allowed the emirs to maintain some degree of power over their people under British colonial oversight. The British appointed Sultan Muhammadu Attahiru II as the head of Sokoto, establishing the title of Sultan of Sokoto as a respected spiritual leader, even though the caliphate itself had lost its political sovereignty⁵.

Sokoto in Post-Colonial Nigeria

After Nigeria gained independence in 1960, Sokoto continued to play a significant role in the country's politics and culture. The Sultan of Sokoto remains an influential spiritual leader, particularly for Nigeria's Muslim population in the north. Today, Sokoto is the capital of Sokoto State and an important cultural and historical center in Nigeria, reflecting its legacy as a hub of Islamic scholarship, trade, and political power in West Africa⁶.

Legacy and Influence

The Sokoto Caliphate left a lasting legacy on the region, with its influence on Islamic education, governance, and legal practices still evident in northern Nigeria. Many aspects of the emirate system established during the caliphate era continue to influence regional governance in contemporary Nigeria, blending Islamic law with traditional Nigerian practices⁷.

Brief History of Kano

Kano's history is both extensive and intricate, spanning over a millennium and marked by periods of political, economic, and cultural transformation. As one of West Africa's oldest urban centers, Kano has evolved from a small settlement to a prominent emirate within the Sokoto Caliphate, and later to a critical city in post-colonial Nigeria. Here's a more comprehensive look at Kano's historical journey:

1. Ancient Origins and Founding

² T. Hodgkin, *Nigerian Perspectives*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1960, p. 129

³ M. Last, *The Sokoto Caliphate*, Longmans, London, 1967, pp. 30-34

⁴ H. A. S. Johnston, *The Fulani Empire of Sokoto*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1967, pp. 47-49

⁵ R. A. Adeleye, *Power and Diplomacy in Northern Nigeria 1804–1906*, Longman, London, 1971, pp. 120-125

⁶ J. Paden, *Religion and Political Culture in Kano*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1973, p. 78

⁷ R. G. T. Oliver & A. Atmore, *Africa since 1800*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1967, p. 144

Dala Hill and Early Settlements: Archaeological evidence suggests that human activity in the Kano area began around 500 BC, especially around Dala Hill, which would later become central to the city's founding myths. Early settlers were hunter-gatherers, and over time, a settlement grew, likely due to the area's fertile land and access to resources⁸.

Barbushe and the Establishment of Kano: Oral tradition credits a hunter named Barbushe, who lived around Dala Hill, as the city's founder. According to the **Kano Chronicle**, a semi-mythical record of Kano's early history, Barbushe worshipped a deity associated with Dala Hill. Later, a figure named Bagauda—regarded as a prince from nearby Daura—established the Bagauda Dynasty in 999 AD, solidifying Kano as a kingdom⁹.

2. Development as a Hausa Kingdom (11th-15th Century)

Emergence of Hausa City-States: By the 11th century, Kano was recognized as one of the Hausa Bakwai, or the Seven Original Hausa Kingdoms, which included cities like Zazzau, Katsina, and Gobir. Each kingdom was independent but shared cultural and linguistic ties, often engaging in trade and warfare with each other¹⁰.

Spread of Islam and Cultural Growth: Islam likely entered Kano in the 14th century through traders and missionaries from North Africa. This was a transformative period, as Islamic practices and institutions began to influence the city's administration, legal systems, and culture. By the end of the 15th century, Kano had emerged as a hub of Islamic scholarship and religious learning¹¹.

3. Kano's Golden Age and Economic Dominance (15th-17th Century)

Trans-Saharan Trade Routes: Kano became a significant node in the trans-Saharan trade network, connecting West Africa with the Mediterranean and North Africa. Goods like gold, leather, textiles, salt, and later slaves were traded, enhancing Kano's wealth and reputation. These trade connections brought not only economic prosperity but also cultural exchanges with the Maghreb, Sudan, and beyond¹².

Artisan and Craftsmanship Excellence: Kano was known for its highly skilled artisans, especially in leatherworking, dyeing, and textile production. The renowned **Kano leather** was prized for its quality and durability, sought after by traders across North and West Africa. The dye pits, dating back hundreds of years, were essential to the textile industry, where indigo-dyed cloth was a major export.

Architectural Flourishing: During this period, Kano developed much of its distinctive architecture, including the construction of its ancient city walls, mosques, and administrative buildings. The city walls, originally built as defense structures, enclosed an area of over 24 kilometers, becoming a symbol of Kano's strength and prosperity¹³.

4. Fulani Jihad and the Establishment of the Sokoto Caliphate (19th Century)

Fulani Jihad: In the early 19th century, Islamic reformer Usman dan Fodio launched a series of religious and political campaigns, known as the Fulani Jihad, across the Hausa city-states. Dan Fodio's movement aimed to purify Islam, establishing Sharia law and overthrowing the traditional Hausa ruling elites, whom he saw as corrupt¹⁴.

Kano as an Emirate in the Caliphate: In 1807, Fulani forces defeated Kano's Hausa rulers, and Kano became part of the Sokoto Caliphate. The emirate was governed by an emir loyal to the Sultan of Sokoto. This reorganization reshaped Kano's political structure and integrated it further into the wider Muslim world. During this time, Kano continued to be a thriving trade and learning center, benefiting from the Caliphate's stability and governance¹⁵.

5. British Colonization and the Protectorate of Northern Nigeria (20th Century)

British Conquest In 1903, Kano was conquered by British colonial forces as part of the British campaign to subdue the Sokoto Caliphate. Kano became part of the Protectorate of Northern Nigeria. Though the British established colonial

⁸ A.M. Adamu, *Kano and Some of her Neighbours*, Ahmadu Bello University Press, Zaria, 1978, p. 14.

⁹ B. Barkindo, *Studies in the History of Kano*, Heinemann, Ibadan, 1983, p. 24.

¹⁰ H. Palmer, *The Kano Chronicle*, Government Printer, Lagos, 1908, p. 33

¹¹ A. Smith, *The Early States of the Central Sudan*, Longman, London, 1965, p. 49.

¹² R.A. Adeleye, *Power and Diplomacy in Northern Nigeria*, Longman, London, 1971, p. 78.

¹³ P. Lovejoy, *Salt of the Desert Sun: A History of Salt Production and Trade in the Central Sudan*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1986, p. 92.

¹⁴ J.S. Trimmingham, *The Influence of Islam upon Africa*, Longman, London, 1980, p. 102.

¹⁵ M.G. Smith, *Government in Kano, 1350-1950*, Westview Press, Boulder, 1997, p. 89.

rule, they maintained the emirate system as part of an indirect rule policy, allowing traditional leaders to govern local affairs¹⁶.

Infrastructure and Economic Changes: British rule brought new infrastructure to Kano, notably the construction of a railway line connecting Lagos to Kano in 1912. This railway facilitated the export of Kano's agricultural products, such as groundnuts and cotton, and opened the city to even more extensive trade networks. However, colonial rule also imposed new economic and administrative policies, often disrupting traditional industries and reorienting Kano's economy toward exports to Britain.

Changes in Social Structure: Under colonialism, Kano's social fabric began to change. Christian missionaries arrived, introducing Western education, while urban migration brought people from various ethnic backgrounds. Despite these influences, Kano retained its Islamic identity and traditions, with the emirate playing a central role in the city's social and religious life¹⁷.

6. Post-Independence and Modern Kano (1960-Present)

Independence and Industrial Expansion: Nigeria gained independence in 1960, and Kano quickly established itself as an industrial powerhouse in the post-colonial era. Manufacturing, textile production, and agriculture flourished, making Kano one of Nigeria's economic capitals. The *Kano Groundnut Pyramids*, large stacks of groundnuts awaiting export, symbolized this era of economic prosperity.¹⁸

Religious and Ethnic Tensions: As Kano grew, its diverse population led to episodes of religious and ethnic conflict. Tensions occasionally arose between the Muslim majority and the Christian minority, as well as between indigenous residents and migrants from other regions. These conflicts were often fueled by political and economic competition.

Cultural Heritage and Modernization: Despite these challenges, Kano has maintained its rich cultural heritage. The city is known for its festivals, traditional music, and arts. The ancient dye pits, leather markets, and historic mosques remain important symbols of Kano's past, even as the city embraces modernity with infrastructure development, expanded educational institutions, and a growing tech industry¹⁹.

7. Contemporary Kano

Economic Influence and Development: Kano is Northern Nigeria's largest city and remains a significant contributor to the country's economy. Its markets, including the famous Kurmi Market, are some of the largest in West Africa, attracting traders from across Nigeria and beyond. Although Kano's traditional industries, like textiles, have faced challenges from globalization, the city's resilient spirit has kept it economically relevant²⁰.

Educational and Religious Center: Today, Kano is an Islamic educational center, home to prominent religious institutions and scholars. Madrasas and Islamic universities coexist with secular schools, offering diverse educational opportunities for residents and students from across West Africa.

Political Influence: Kano continues to play a vital role in Nigerian politics. Its political leaders, including the emir, remain influential in regional and national politics, reflecting Kano's historical importance as a center of power²¹.

Kano's history is a testament to the endurance of its people and the strength of its institutions. From its origins as a Hausa city-state to its role as an emirate within the Sokoto Caliphate, and later a vital part of Nigeria, Kano has continually adapted to changing circumstances while preserving its unique heritage. This blend of tradition and modernity makes Kano one of Africa's most remarkable cities, rich in culture, resilience, and history.

The Concept of Almajiri Phenomenon

The Almajiri system, a traditional Islamic education model, has been criticized for perpetuating child poverty and vulnerability. This study investigates the survival strategies of Almajiri children in Sokoto and Kano States. The almajiri

¹⁶ R. Heussler, *The British in Northern Nigeria*, Oxford University Press, London, 1968, p. 116

¹⁷ A.H.M. Kirk-Greene, *The Principles of Native Administration in Nigeria: Selected Documents, 1900-1947*, Oxford University Press, London, 1965, p. 141

¹⁸ E.E. Osaghae, *Crippled Giant: Nigeria since Independence*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1998, p. 172.

¹⁹ R.A. Ola, *Local Government Administration in Nigeria*, Kegan Paul, London, 1984, p. 163.

²⁰ I. Yusufu, *Kano: 1000 Years of Traditional City and Trade Center in Nigeria*, Spectrum Books, Ibadan, 2003, p. 207.

²¹ H.B. Johnson, *The Changing Face of Kano: From a Traditional Emirate to a Modern Nigerian City*, University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, 2005, p. 198.

practice is an old tradition that remains attractive to certain segments of the population. The word “almajiri” is an adulterated spelling of the Arabic word “almuhajir,” which refers to a person who migrates for the purpose of learning or for the sake of propagating Islamic knowledge. Every year, usually after harvest, people inhabiting a particular neighborhood would gather their children, mostly school-age males (from age six upward), and hand them to an Islamic scholar (mallam). The mallam’s purpose was to teach the children the basics of Islam and how to write and recite the Arabic alphabet. In order to escape the distractions of life, the mallam would take the almajirai out of the city to a camp where they were taught self-reliance as well as discipline. Sometimes, when there was shortage of food, the Qur’anic teacher would send the pupils out to solicit for food from residents around and the food would be brought back to the camp for all to eat. This practice of soliciting for food by the almajirai became known as “almajiranchi”—a practice meant to make them strong and to prepare them for life’s struggle. In fact, the almajiri system produced eminent jurists, Islamic scholars and religious reformers in the past, when their numbers remained within manageable limits. Since the 11th century, Qur’anic teaching has been a medium of Islamic education in the country. The population of Nigeria is about 50.4 percent Muslim, 48.2 percent Christian, and 1.3 percent adherents of other faiths. Currently, Nigeria has a 9-3-4 system of formal education: compulsory basic schooling takes nine years.

Senior secondary schooling takes three years, and most courses in the university except engineering, law, and medicine run for four years. In addition to this, a non formal system of education is operational among Muslims and includes the Quranic, Islamiyyah, and almajiri schools.²²

Research studies and reports have identified the following primary survival strategies employed by Almajiri children in Sokoto and Kano States:

Survival strategies employed by Almajiri children

The perception of Almajiri children regarding their living conditions often reflects the hardships they face, such as inadequate access to food, shelter, and education. These children, primarily in northern Nigeria, are sent to study Islamic knowledge but often experience neglect and poverty. Living Conditions include among others the following: first, Basic Needs: Many Almajiri children struggle with insufficient food and poor housing conditions, often living in overcrowded and unsanitary environments. Second, healthcare: Access to healthcare is limited, leading to vulnerabilities to illnesses. Third, education: While they receive religious education, access to formal education is often lacking, limiting broader opportunities.²³

The children use some coping mechanisms to deal with challenges. These include among others but not limited to: community support: They often rely on the goodwill of community members for food and clothing; peer networks: Building strong relationships with fellow Almajiri helps in sharing resources and emotional support; adaptation: Many develop resilience and adaptability to cope with their harsh living conditions; part-time work: Some children engage in small jobs or begging to supplement their needs. Efforts to address these challenges include government and NGO initiatives aimed at integrating formal education and improving living conditions. Understanding the perceptions and coping strategies of Almajiri children is crucial for developing effective interventions.²⁴

The survival strategies employed by Almajiri children have significant implications for their well-being, education, and future prospects: first, Well-being, physical health: Reliance on begging or unstable sources of food can lead to malnutrition and health issues. Second, Mental Health: The stress of living in poverty and neglect may contribute to mental health challenges, such as anxiety and depression. Third, social development: Limited family support and societal marginalization can hinder social skills and self-esteem. Fourth, education, Limited Learning Opportunities: While they receive religious education, lack of access to formal education restricts literacy and numeracy skills. Fifth, barriers to education: The need to focus on daily survival often takes precedence over attending school, leading to high dropout rates.²⁵

However, future prospects consist of employment opportunities: Without formal education and skills, job prospects remain minimal, perpetuating cycles of poverty. Social Mobility is another issue which emanates from limited access to education and resources which reduces their chances of upward social mobility. There is also vulnerability to exploitation: Lack of education and stable support systems can make them more susceptible to exploitation and abuse. Hence, there is a need for policies that integrate formal education with religious studies, provide basic needs, and protect children's rights. Initiatives that offer vocational training and support services can help improve future prospects.

²²I. Aghedo & S. J. Eke, "From Alms to Arms: The Almajiri Phenomenon and the Internal Security in Northern Nigeria", in *The Korean Journal of Policy Studies*, Vol. 28, No. 3 (2013), pp. 103.

²³FGD interviews with Some Almajiri children in the study areas

²⁴FGD interviews with Some Almajiri children in the study areas

²⁵GDinterviewswithSomeAlmajirichildreninthestudyareas

Addressing both immediate needs and long-term development is essential for breaking the cycle of poverty and improving well-being. Addressing these implications requires coordinated efforts from governments, NGOs, and communities to create sustainable and inclusive solutions.²⁶

Economic Survival Strategies

1. Begging and Alms Collection: Almajiri children beg for food, money, or other essentials.
2. Street Vending: Selling items like water, sweets, or other small goods.
3. Labour and Employment: Working as apprentices, farmhands, or in manual labour.
4. Scavenging and Waste Management: Collecting recyclable materials or scavenging for food.²⁷

Social Survival Strategies

1. Social Support Networks: Relying on fellow Almajiri, mentors, or community members for assistance.
2. Religious and Cultural Practices: Participating in Islamic education and cultural activities.
3. Coping Mechanisms: Developing resilience through prayer, storytelling, or other coping strategies.

Environmental Adaptation Strategies

1. Shelter and Accommodation: Sharing makeshift shelters or squatting in abandoned buildings.
2. Food Security: Relying on food donations, scavenging, or purchasing food from street vendors.
3. Health and Hygiene: Using public facilities or relying on traditional medicine.
4. Migration: Seasonal or permanent migration to other locations for better opportunities.
5. Entrepreneurship: Engaging in small-scale businesses, like selling firewood or charcoal.
6. Skill Acquisition: Learning skills like craftsmanship, agriculture, or animal husbandry.²⁸

Survival strategies employed by Almajiri children vary between urban and rural areas within Sokoto and Kano states due to differences in:

Urban Areas:

1. Greater access to economic opportunities (e.g., street vending, labor)
2. Higher likelihood of begging and alms collection
3. Increased exposure to modern amenities (e.g., healthcare, education)
4. More diverse social networks and community support
5. Greater availability of informal education and skills training

Rural Areas:

1. Limited economic opportunities, leading to reliance on agriculture or manual labor
2. Greater emphasis on traditional skills (e.g., farming, animal husbandry)
3. Limited access to modern amenities (e.g., healthcare, education)
4. Stronger community ties and social support networks
5. Greater reliance on subsistence farming and self-sufficiency

Comparison:

Urban Almajiri:

- More likely to engage in street vending, begging, and labor
- Greater exposure to modern education and skills training
- More diverse social networks and community support

Rural Almajiri:

- More likely to engage in agriculture, animal husbandry, and traditional skills
- Stronger community ties and social support networks
- Greater reliance on subsistence farming and self-sufficiency

Specific Strategies:

Urban:

- Selling water, sweets, or other small goods
- Begging at mosques, markets, or busy intersections

²⁶GDinterviewswithSomeAlmajirichildreninthestudyareas

²⁷"Survival Strategies of Almajiri Children in Kano State, Nigeria" (Journal of Social Sciences)

²⁸H. J. Nasarawa, "SurvivalStrategiesofAlmajiriChildreninKanoState,Nigeria"(JournalofSocialSciences, vol. 3, 2021, p.23

²⁹. H. Y. Gulma, "Urban-RuralDisparitiesinAlmajiriChildren'sSurvivalStrategies" in JournalofRuralDevelopment, Vol. 7, p. 204-206. Cf, AlmajiriChildreninUrbanandRuralNigeria"(UNICEFReport)

- Working as apprentices in urban workshops

Rural:

- Farming or herding livestock

- Collecting firewood or charcoal for sale

- Engaging in traditional crafts (e.g., weaving, pottery)²⁹

Therefore, the survival strategies include: Begging and alms collection were primary strategies, followed by street vending, labor, and scavenging.

Recommendations:

1. Government-supported education and skill acquisition programs.
2. Social protection initiatives, including healthcare and sanitation.
3. Economic empowerment programs, such as microfinance and entrepreneurship training.

Conclusion

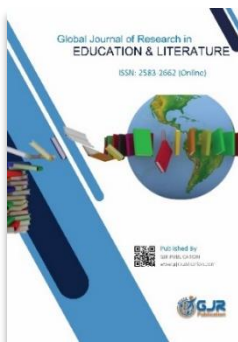
This study provides insights into the resilience and adaptability of Almajiri children. Policy interventions should prioritize education, healthcare, and economic empowerment to improve their well-being and future prospects. Certainly! Here is the bibliography with the publication date directly after the initials and without page numbers:

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