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Street- Begging in Cities: Cultural, Political and Socio-Economic Questions

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I. Introduction

Begging in the streets of urban centres is one of the age-long activities and perhaps occupations of the highly vulnerable, poverty-ridden individuals in the society, particularly in the developing countries. As revealed in the studies of different scholars, begging is not peculiar to developing countries; it is a universal phenomenon (Ado, 1997) and a global urban problem. While a considerable number of cities were identified in the US and Mexico as having a significant level of begging activity (Smith, 2005; Fabrega, 1971), cities in China, especially Shanghai, have been described as homes of different categories of beggars (including the poor, the disabled, the homeless and professional beggars), which are described as 'liumin' (floating people) or 'youmin' (wandering people) (Hanchao, Lu, 1999). In India, begging is seen as a pride as beggars are seen posing as someone famous. The situation is not so different in the city of Johannesburg, South Africa, where beggars are seen at junctions all over the city. In cities of Britain and similar industrialized countries in the recent years, begging has become highly visible (Jordan, 1999). Those of Mexico, as reported by Fabriga (1971), cited in Adedibu (1989) are not left out in this negative scenario. The situation in Nigerian cities as observed everyday is perhaps worse with different categories of beggars found at motor-parks, religious centres, markets, road junctions, venues of ceremonies, among other public places begging for alms (Ojo, 2005).

These categories of beggars include the disabled, the poor, and the destitute and to a considerable extent the able-bodied, healthy and physically strong individuals who take the advantage of the sympathy of the society for them to remain jobless and at times perpetrate evils (like crime) in the name of begging in the street. The issue is that those who engage in begging have one reason or the other to support their stand. While some may be claiming to be performing religious role by moving round and offering prayers to people who pay them in turn, others may claim to be taking their own share of the national cake, especially the jobless followers of certain political office holders (Jelili, 2009). To the easily recognized beggars, however, the problem of socio-economic maladies and physical disability are often the claim as articulated or implied in their approach to begging.

Be that as it may, one begins to wonder whether such religious, socio-political and socio-economic factors actually encourage begging. This paper actually exposes the connections of such acclaimed begging-induced factors to the phenomenon, and prepares the ground as well as gives directions for empirical studies, which may emanate from such exposition as attempts to explain, confirm, validate or otherwise, the constructs, and hypotheses that are products of this piece.

II. Begging and Related Concepts

Begging, as an indication of abject poverty, (Adedibu, 1989), has always been a major way out for the helpless poor. However, not all beggars are poor or motivated into begging by poverty, and not all the poor are beggars. This, therefore, necessitates the need to re-examine the concept of begging and related issues.

To beg, according to the Oxford Dictionary (sixth edition, 2001), simply means to ask for money, food, clothes, etc, as a gift or as charity. This implies that begging is not peculiar to individuals, but also organizations or countries. For the latter group, it is conceptualized here as "corporate begging"; and it is made to include seeking for charity by organizations or grants or debts cancellation by richer organizations or nations to poorer organizations or nations. The former category, which is the concern of this study, is synonymous with street and house-to-house begging; it borders around such issues or related concepts as "panhandling" "mendicancy" and "vagrancy" which characterize city beggars. This conceptualization would not only capture the image of the begging and beggars

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in question, but also reflect their implications for the city's physical and socio-economic environment.

It is important to state that while "street and house-to-house begging" and "panhandling" are synonymous, and may represent the general idea of asking people for money, food etc, mendicancy and vagrancy connotes more than street begging. Mendicancy, as an art of begging is usually associated with religious members. Vagrancy, on the other hand, refers to begging activity of the jobless, homeless, and wanderers or vagabonds. It involves people who have been driven by natural disasters to leave home in search of richer areas as well as refugees (Hanchao Lu 1999) who become beggars in the new places they migrate to. It is worthy of note that a significant proportion of street beggars are physically handicapped or disabled (Adedibu 1989:36). The levels of disability or nature of physical handicaps of most of them, however, do not warrant leaving paid job for begging. Most of them are what Hanchao lu (1999) describes as "Cunning Parasites" who take advantage of human compassion to make a fortune.

The implication of this conceptualization and differentiation shows that most of these beggars constitute social vices, environmental nuisance and are potential criminals (vagabonds). They however possess latent or physical potentials which, rather than being allowed to waste away under the guise of poverty, disability, or homelessness, could be made use of to make them a significant proportion of work force of the population. This is why this study shall conceptualize beggars, irrespective of the names by which they are called, as "the less privileged" who, out of the thought of hopelessness, take to panhandling as a method for eking out an existence in the city. Their hopelessness has therefore made them constitute a serious problem to the society.

It is important to note that being less privileged is not the same thing with hopelessness; the less privileged are described as persons who lack the necessary opportunities or facilities to actualize their potentials. This recognition of the potentials of the less privileged has been the position of those who carry out studies on the disabled by arguing that:

"When a person has a visible or perceivable disability, it is assumed by others that the person cannot survive and has to depend on the care of his/her parents or the welfare of the community. Sometimes, deprived of opportunity and steeped in ignorance, some disabled persons themselves seem to believe so" (ILO, 1993).

The situation of the disabled persons who are unemployed and take to begging, especially in developing countries, are thus condemned (Awori, 1992). In this context, the less privileged that beg for alms are not restricted to the disabled and destitute that constitute conventional beggars, but also include able-bodied young men and women who use different styles to beg either regularly as 'professional' beggars or occasionally as part time beggars. One of the non-economic factors associated with incidence of begging, particularly in Nigerian setting is the issue of religion (Adedibu, 1989). What impact does religion have on this?

III. Religious Perspectives on Begging

In virtually every religion of the world issues surrounding alms giving (and by implication begging) are entrenched though with different approaches. In this section the issue of alms giving and begging as obtained in the scriptures of both Islam and Christianity (which are the two most popular orthodox religions) is examined. In Islam, 'zakat' (alms giving) is so weighty that it is one of the five pillars of the religion. Thus says Allah: "And in their properties there was the right of the beggar, and the Mahruum" (the poor). It is believed that every "penny" spent for the poor is spent for the cause of Almighty Allah. It is evident in the Koran, and of course, Islam, not to repulse beggars "And repulse not the beggar" (Koran 93, verse10). The list of those entitled to alms in Islam is not, however, restricted to beggars, but including all the poor, the captives, those in debt, stranded travelers, among many others. (Koran 9 verse 60). In summary while giving alms is seriously encouraged, begging is not frowned at, if the need arises.

In Christianity, alms giving is also encouraged but begging is silent upon. Thus says the Bible: "Oh the joys of those who are kind to the poor (are that) the Lord rescues them in times of trouble" (Psalm 41:1). "Whoever gives to the poor will lack nothing. But a course will come upon those who close their eyes to poverty (Proverbs 28:27).

In a way, it could be inferred that, if religions encourage alms giving, they indirectly encourage begging. The difference between the reviewed religions is in degree and categorical statement, which are more pronounced in Islam than in Christianity. What the two religions stand for, however, as far as begging or beggars, and the poor generally, are concerned is love, to the extent that it is preached that the wealth of the rich is not considered theirs alone but to take care of the wretched too. Thus says the scriptures:

1) *"I want you to share your food with the hungry and to welcome poor wanderers into your homes…..If you do these things, your salvation will come like the dawn……Then when you call, the Lord will answer…. "*
   (Isiah 58:7-9")
2) *"And in their property there was the right of the beggar and the poor" (Koran 51:19)"*

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In another way, judging from the citations above, one may argue that no religion encourages begging. The two citations above suggest that if the well-to-do understand the scriptures and their supposed roles in the life of the poor and wretched persons, we would hardly have street beggars in cities, as there exist in each society individuals who are rich and can single-handedly relieve a considerable number of beggars and other wretched persons of their miserable life. This is perhaps why most Islamic scholars that have written on the issue (begging) affirm that it is a misconception to attribute begging to Islamic culture. They support the argument with a quote from the words of the Holy Prophet (SAW) to his followers that "it is better for any of you to take his rope and tie firewood with it to be carried in his back than to ask people for alms" (Adegbite, 1997). This, according to the same source, does not mean people should not beg for alms but only when there is dire need for it.

In the same vein, Jibril (also an Islamic scholar, 1997) observes that some people tend to justify begging with Islamic injunction that the poor and needy should be provided with, as contained in the Qur'an 93:10. What people fail to understand, he (JIbril) argues, is that the Qur'an is not referring to some one who takes begging to be his occupation. Rather, it refers to any one who falls into one problem or the other; and the moment the problem is solved that is all.

The status of a beggar, therefore and according to the scholar mentioned earlier (Adegbite, 1997), "should be a relief, and therefore transitional, rather than a permanent or professional one" Do all Nigerian beggars see it this way? The poser is part of the issue addressed in this study.

IV. Begging in the Context of Socio-Political and Socio-Cultural Environment

A lot of arguments and questions may ensue in the process of analyzing the reasons for street begging and how to curb it. The religious connection to begging has been unveiled earlier that, while religions may indirectly encourage begging by entrenching the principles of alms giving, no religion has actually made it a permanent solution to undesirable conditions or occupation to be engaged in. The question of socio-political circumstances is however a serious one while analyzing begging issue. In nearly every society organized into two broad categories of people – the political class and the electorates (most of whom are corrupt, poor and less informed) – the political class would continue enjoying the beggary life of the poor electorates, whom it uses as a means of parading its 'generousity' to permanently incapacitate and enslave them so that it could live fat on their voicelessness and one-sided pseudo-democracy. This is exactly the situation in most cities of the northern part of the country where 'almajiris-come-and-chop'-and-'mallam-Garba-muke-so' syndrome is very intense (a concept expressed in a Nigerian local language, referring to the money-politics in which the poor electorates are bought with token used as bait).

In the Yoruba-dominated western part of the country, however, street-begging is not so acceptable. Beggars are usually looked down upon as belonging to a class of the most wretched persons in the society. The cultural belief in the deity- nature of twins (or triplets), however, presents begging by the "twins' mother" as heeding the call of "Oosameji" (twin-deity). And the belief that "if you give alms to the twins or their mother, you will be blessed in turn in manifold" has made begging by twins' mother in Yoruba land (an ethno-geo-political zone in Nigeria) a comparatively acceptable form of street begging.

Begging in the eastern part of the country, especially among Igbo people (a popular ethnic group in Nigeria) is not popular; it is seen as a taboo. This is an established fact that is revealed in the research efforts of scholars (Jelili, 2009). The fact, however, is that in spite of the finding, just as in other parts of the country, though with a comparatively low incidence, street begging is also not an undisputable phenomenon and 'land use' activity in the cities of the eastern part of the country. This has been attributed to the question of socio-economic realities in most (if not all) Nigerian cities, or put in a better form, difficulties, which are the main object of the next session have been blamed by different people on different categories of people. To the pro-Islamic school formalization group of the north, including the northern elites and scholars, the power that be (government) takes the lion's share of the blame by abandoning the most cherished Islamic education in the north and disrupting the existing educational structure at the mercy of the western education (Sule-Kano, 1997).

To the people of the west, the blame has been on the infiltration of the Islamo-northern culture coupled with the existing 'iya-ibeji' (twins' mother) syndrome, increasing poverty level and stigmatization of the physically-challenged in the formal business world. With slight departure, in terms of degree or severity of the problem and that of twins' mother syndrome, begging in the east is not unconnected to urbanization and poverty related matters.

V. Socio-Economic Realities of Begging

Regardless of one's religious, cultural and other background and orientation, what to eat or wear and where to live, among other necessities must be sought so long as one is alive. It follows therefore that as long as poverty exists in our society, without adequate policy

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measures to address it, begging would continue to thrive as an urban activity. This is because without prejudice to the influencing roles of the composite variables of culture, urbanization and socio-polity, most (if not all) beggars (including part-time and full time as well as conspicuous and 'veiled' ones) are lured into begging first by the factor of poverty. This is an undisputed fact to most scholars in the emerging school of thought (study of begging) including Adedibu (1989), Hanchao Lu (1999), Jordan (1999), Osagbemi (2001), Kennedy and Fitzpatrick (2001) and Jelili (2006, 2009), among several others. For example, while Jelili, (2006, 2009) has described begging as an activity of the wretched poverty-ridden individuals, Kennedy and Fitzpatrick (2001) have associated begging with such poverty indicators as homelessness (which they describe as 'rough sleeping') and dirty street job (which they describe as 'big issue'). To nearly all scholars the highly visible poverty indicator of physical disability is one of the characteristic features of beggars. What is certain is that, though when many beggars taste begging especially as evidenced in Nigerian cities, they do not want to stop irrespective of whether or not they have overcome the poverty hardship, none of the certified full time or part time beggars actually take to begging without first tasting poverty.

The socio-cultural and socio-political background and other orientations notwithstanding, the socio-economic realities and circumstances that may promote begging in the society should be well focused and attended to in the state economic and urban development policies. It is only when this is taken care of that we can appreciably discern and address the socio-cultural and socio-political connections to begging.

VI. The Interface between Socio-Economic and Socio-Cultural Dimensions of Begging

If we define culture simply as a way of life, then we can say that the culture of a society is a function of its socio-economic and socio-political circumstances. Also, if it is agreed that poverty is a culture, then it can be said that all the norms, values, orientations etc (which are elements of culture) existing in a society are a reflection of the poverty level of that society and by implication or by direct association, the incidence of and/ or propensity to begin that society.

This informs the choice of 'vicious cycle of poverty' to provide a clear explanation on the link or interface between socio-economic, cultural, and socio-political dimensions of begging in cities. This provides a better understanding of some major correlates of begging and generates some constructs, concepts and hypotheses, which may provide suitable platforms for empirical studies on begging and related matters.

The concept of vicious circle, which was originally visualized by the founding fathers of Development Economics, particularly Nurkse (1959) and Myrdal (1964) in particular, as a metaphor for the stickiness of poverty and underdevelopment, was later reinvented by the World Bank in its 2000 World Development Report on poverty thus:

"Extreme poverty deprives people of almost all means of managing risks by themselves. With few or no assets, self-insurance is impossible. With poor health or bad nutrition, working more or sending more household members to work is difficult. And with high default risks, group insurance mechanisms are often closed off. When a shock occurs, they must obtain immediate increases in income or cut spending, but in so doing they incur a high long-term cost by jeopardizing their economic and human development" (World Bank, 2000).

These are the situations which lead to child labour and malnourishment, with lasting damage to children and the breakdown of families (World Bank, 2000), and the resultant begging option, the 'proceeds' of which may not be appreciable enough to make the affected persons transit from such undesirable situations.

The 'vicious circle of poverty' posits that the poor are poor, and remain poor because they are poor; and they would continue to remain poor unless the attributes of poverty are prevented from setting poverty-induced processes in motion. Mosley and Verschor (2005), while trying to apply the theory of vicious circle of poverty to explain why small-scale farmers in rural Ethopia, Uganda and Andhra Pradesh (India) remain in poverty, observe that the poor are poor because they avoid taking risks in form of investments particularly in new technologies. The farmers' risk-aversion, which according to the scholars is not unconnected with poverty and the fear of uncertainties involved in investments' risks. This risk-aversion and the resultant low investment, according to them, would lead to low return on existing assets (human and material). Again, the low investment and low return on assets would equally lead to inability to manage several challenges whose implication is also chronic poverty. They specifically argue that: (1) the asset-poor small-scale farmers in poor countries operate in precarious conditions which make them to be less ready for risks and thereby be risk-averse, (2) inadequate and ineffective risk management strategies are bound to increase the likelihood of income poverty, and thereby increase the likelihood of chronic poverty; and (3) a state of mind brought about by chronic poverty reduces one's willingness to undertake the risky investment that may offer an escape from poverty.

What has been noticed from the argument above is that there is interrelationship between poverty

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(of various dimensions) and human behaviour and unless certain external forces are injected to disrupt the relationship and the cyclical processes the poor will continue to languish in poverty and of course in chronic poverty. This fact is also acknowledged by Binswanger (1980, 1981) in his study of poverty and attitude of the poor to certain poverty-induced conditions.

Applying the theory to begging issue one observes that while most beggars beg as a result of poverty, nearly all beggars (including the so-called rich beggars) are in poverty (whether or not they appreciate the fact) because they remain in 'begging profession' as a means of livelihood rather than taking risks in form of investment in one form of business or the other. What this implies is that reliance on begging may not only perpetuate the 'practitioners' in poverty but also prevent them from recognizing: (1) their potentials, (2) their self-esteem, and (3) the likely investments or other opportunities, which may be available at any given time and serve as escape from poverty, given such recognition.

However, begging or reliance on begging may not be drastically reduced unless measures are taken to distort the cycle. Just as Mosley and Verschor (2005) recommend 'micro-insurance' for the poverty-ridden small-scale farmers, measures to tackle chronic poverty of begging, or distort the associated vicious circle of poverty, are socio-cultural, socio-economic and legal in nature. It is important to mention, however, that somebody who does not recognize his self-esteem may not be prepared to leave begging for any socio-economic activity, and as such not likely to be anti-begging-regulation-abiding. Hence effectiveness of any socio-economic and legal means tends to depend on the socio-cultural measure as the latter influences recognition of self-esteem. Therefore measures to tackle chronic poverty of begging, or distort the associated vicious cycle of poverty, are such that can effect a change of orientation and people's perception of life. It is therefore hypothesized that begging is a product of poverty (of income, attitude, orientation and culture), while chronic poverty is a product of begging.

VII. Conclusion

It has been unveiled in this paper that street begging in cities is a phenomenon with socio-economic, cultural and socio-political dimensions, all indicating the centrality and importance of the concept of poverty, as a significant measure of understanding and addressing the problem of begging in cities. The paper has further still, generated a number of constructs, and hypotheses, which may be useful as platforms upon which future research endeavours may emanate. It is hoped that different categories of stakeholders in the study as well as in the implementation of policies aimed at addressing street begging and related matters would find the paper useful in their quest to understand and address the phenomenon.

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