

# 1 Street-Begging in Cities: Cultural, Political and Socio-Economic 2 Questions

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## 7 **Abstract**

8 This paper attempts to unveil the cultural, socio- political and socio-economic correlates of  
9 begging in cities, particularly of developing countries. With illustrations from Islamic and  
10 Christian scriptures, and examples from cities across the world, with a particular emphasis on,  
11 Nigeria, the paper establishes the impacts of the different composite factors of religion,  
12 culture, polity, and socio-economy on begging. The paper sees poverty and other  
13 socioeconomic factors as central issues in addressing the problem of begging in cities. It  
14 identifies or rather, generates certain constructs and hypotheses, which may provide a suitable  
15 platform for empirical studies on the phenomenon.

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17 **Index terms**— begging, culture, religion, socio-economy.

## 18 **1 Introduction**

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

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

41 Be that as it may, one begins to wonder whether such religious, socio-political and socioeconomic factors  
42 actually encourage begging. This paper actually exposes the connections of such acclaimed begging-induced  
43 factors to the phenomenon, and prepares the ground as well as gives directions for empirical studies, which

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44 may emanate from such exposition as attempts to explain, confirm, validate or otherwise, the constructs, and  
45 hypotheses that are products of this piece.

### 46 2 II.

### 47 3 Begging and Related Concepts

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

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

59 It is important to state that while "street and house-to-house begging" and "panhandling" are synonymous,  
60 and may represent the general idea of asking people for money, food etc, mendicancy and vagrancy connotes more  
61 than street begging. Mendicancy, as an art of begging is usually associated with religious members. Vagrancy, on  
62 the other hand, refers to begging activity of the jobless, homeless, and wanderers or vagabonds. It involves people  
63 who have been driven by natural disasters to leave home in search of richer areas as well as refugees (Hanchao Lu  
64 1999) who become beggars in the new places they migrate to. It is worthy of note that a significant proportion  
65 of street beggars are physically handicapped or disabled ??Adedibu 1989:36). The levels of disability or nature  
66 of physical handicaps of most of them, however, do not warrant leaving paid job for begging. Most of them are  
67 what Hanchao lu (1999) describes as "Cunning Parasites" who take advantage of human compassion to make a  
68 fortune.

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

76 It is important to note that being less privileged is not the same thing with hopelessness; the less privileged  
77 are described as persons who lack the necessary opportunities or facilities to actualize their potentials. This  
78 recognition of the potentials of the less privileged has been the position of those who carry out studies on the  
79 disabled by arguing that: "When a person has a visible or perceivable disability, it is assumed by others that  
80 the person cannot survive and has to depend on the care of his/her parents or the welfare of the community.  
81 Sometimes, deprived of opportunity and steeped in ignorance, some disabled persons themselves seem to believe  
82 so" (ILO, 1993).

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

### 89 4 Religious Perspectives on Begging

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

100 In Christianity, alms giving is also encouraged but begging is silent upon. Thus says the Bible: "Oh the joys  
101 of those who are kind to the poor (are that) the Lord rescues them in times of trouble" (Psalm 41:1). "Whoever  
102 gives to the poor will lack nothing. But a course will come upon those who close their eyes to poverty (Proverbs  
103 28:27).

104 In a way, it could be inferred that, if religions encourage alms giving, they indirectly encourage begging. The  
105 difference between the reviewed religions is in degree and categorical statement, which are more pronounced in  
106 Islam than in Christianity. What the two religions stand for, however, as far as begging or beggars, and the poor  
107 generally, are concerned is love, to the extent that it is preached that the wealth of the rich is not considered  
108 theirs alone but to take care of the wretched too. Thus says the scriptures: 1) "I want you to share your food  
109 with the hungry and to welcome poor wanderers into your homes?..If you do these things, your salvation will  
110 come like the dawn??Then when you call, the Lord will answer?.. " (Isiah 58:7-9") 2) "And in their property  
111 there was the right of the beggar and the poor" (Koran 51:19)"

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

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

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

## 129 5 IV.

## 130 6 Begging in the Context of Socio-Political and Socio-Cultural 131 Environment

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

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

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

160 To the people of the west, the blame has been on the infiltration of the Islamo-northern culture coupled with  
161 the existing "iya-ibei" (twins" mother) syndrome, increasing poverty level and stigmatization of the physically-  
162 challenged in the formal business world. With slight departure, in terms of degree or severity of the problem

## 9 THE INTERFACE BETWEEN SOCIO-ECONOMIC AND SOCIO-CULTURAL DIMENSIONS OF BEGGING

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163 and that of twins" mother syndrome, begging in the east is not unconnected to urbanization and poverty related  
164 matters.

165 V.

### 166 7 Socio-Economic Realities of Begging

167 Regardless of one's religious, cultural and other background and orientation, what to eat or wear and where  
168 to live, among other necessities must be sought so long as one is alive. It follows therefore that as long as  
169 poverty exists in our society, without adequate policy measures to address it, begging would continue to as an  
170 urban activity. This is because without prejudice to the influencing roles of the composite variables of culture,  
171 urbanization and socio-polity, most (if not all) beggars (including part-time and full time as well as conspicuous  
172 and "veiled" ones) are lured into begging first by the factor of poverty. This is an undisputed fact to most  
173 scholars in the emerging school of thought (study of begging) including Adedibu (1989), Hanchao Lu (1999),  
174 Jordan (1999), Osagbemi (2001), Kennedy and Fitzpatrick (2001) and Jelili (2006Jelili ( , 2009)), among several  
175 others. For example, while Jelili, (2006Jelili, ( , 2009) ) has described begging as an activity of the wretched  
176 poverty-ridden individuals, Kennedy and Fitzpatrick (2001) have associated begging with such poverty indicators  
177 as homelessness (which they describe as "rough sleeping") and dirty street job (which they describe as "big issue").  
178 To nearly all scholars the highly visible poverty indicator of physical disability is one of the characteristic features  
179 of beggars. What is certain is that, though when many beggars taste begging especially as evidenced in Nigerian  
180 cities, they do not want to stop irrespective of whether or not they have overcome the poverty hardship, none of  
181 the certified full time or part time beggars actually take to begging without first tasting poverty.

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

### 186 8 VI.

### 187 9 The Interface between Socio-Economic and Socio-Cultural 188 Dimensions of Begging

189 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  
190 socio-economic and socio-political circumstances. Also, if it is agreed that poverty is a culture, then it can be said  
191 that all the norms, values, orientations etc (which are elements of culture) existing in a society are a reflection of  
192 the poverty level of that society and by implication or by direct association, the incidence of and/ or propensity  
193 to begin that society. This informs the choice of "vicious cycle of poverty" to provide a clear explanation on  
194 the link or interface between socio-economic, cultural, and sociopolitical dimensions of begging in cities. This  
195 provides a better understanding of some major correlates of begging and generates some constructs, concepts  
196 and hypotheses, which may provide suitable platforms for empirical studies on begging and related matters.

197 The concept of vicious circle, which was originally visualized by the founding fathers of Development  
198 Economics, particularly Nurkse (1959) and ??yrdal (1964) in particular, as a metaphor for the stickiness of  
199 poverty and underdevelopment, was later reinvented by the World Bank in its 2000 World Development Report  
200 on poverty thus: "Extreme poverty deprives people of almost all means of managing risks by themselves. With  
201 few or no assets, self-insurance is impossible. With poor health or bad nutrition, working more or sending more  
202 household members to work is difficult. And with high default risks, group insurance mechanisms are often closed  
203 off. When a shock occurs, they must obtain immediate increases in income or cut spending, but in so doing they  
204 incur a high long-term cost by jeopardizing their economic and human development" ??World Bank, 2000).

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

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

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222 What has been noticed from the argument above is that there is interrelationship between poverty 20 2 56  
223 ( ) C (of various dimensions) and human behaviour and unless certain external forces are injected disrupt the  
224 relationship and the cyclical processes the poor will continue to languish in poverty and of course in chronic  
225 poverty. This fact is also acknowledged by Binswanger (1980Binswanger ( , 1981 ) in his study of poverty and  
226 attitude of the poor to certain poverty-induced conditions.

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

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

## 244 10 VII.

## 245 11 Conclusion

246 It has been unveiled in this paper that street begging in cities is a phenomenon with socio-economic, cultural and  
247 socio-political dimensions, all indicating the centrality and importance of the concept of poverty, as a significant  
248 measure of understanding and addressing the problem of begging in cities. The paper has further still, generated  
249 a number of constructs, and hypotheses, which may be useful as platforms upon which future research endeavours  
250 may emanate. It is hoped that different categories of stakeholders in the study as well as in the implementation  
251 of policies aimed at addressing street begging and related matters would find the paper useful in their quest to  
252 understand and address the phenomenon.<sup>1 2 3</sup>

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## 11 CONCLUSION

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