

**Mixed Media Painting Exploration of the “Almajiri”
Of Northern Nigeria**

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Abstract

Almajiri is derived from the Arabic word *Al-mahaajirun*, which literally means, a learned scholar who propagates the peaceful message of Islam. However, the *Almajiri* as a rejected social group has since outlived its purpose and has become a breeding ground for child begging and potential targets for recruitment into terrorism. However, the situation faced by the *Almajiri* has continued unaddressed due to the fear of parents/ elites exposing them to western education which may alter their Islamic identity. As a result, these children are neglected and exploited. This neglected social group is of thematic interest to a painter who may wish to explore its creative potentials for the production of mixed media paintings. This is why the late novelist, Chinua Achebe has observed that only committed artists/writers swim against the current. Thus, works of art are a form of visual address to the society. This paper is the report of a research whose source of inspiration was the *Almajiri*. The methodology adopted for the study as well as the conceptual framework were both experimental and exploratory in order to achieve a high degree of creativity and innovation. The findings showed that it was possible to explore the *Almajiri* theme, develop design concepts from it and translate such design concepts into mixed media composition, thus demonstrating that it was possible to use art as a tool of social commentary. The study recommended that other artists could key into the *Almajiri* theme as well as other social themes as a way of experimenting with the mixed media technique and for a greater range of creative-innovative possibilities.

Keywords: Arts, Painting, Mixed Media, *Almajiri*, Composition

Background

In recent times, insurgency, crimes, insecurity and poverty have almost become a social norm in Nigeria. These have come to depend on religious intolerance, bad government, destitution and neglect (*Almajiri*) as seen in different parts of the country most especially in the North, which is composed of nineteen States. For example, in Northern Nigeria, the population is made up of Muslims, including few Christian minorities. The core Northern States are Katsina, Kano, Sokoto, Gombe, Zamfara, Borno & Kebbi. These states have a population of ten million. The label, “Destitute”, in this context, refers to the helpless, the impoverished and poverty stricken while “Neglect”, on the other hand, refers to people who lack proper care in the inclusive sense.

During the researcher’s service year in Katsina State, she observed the tremendous number of homeless and tattered-looking children roaming the streets with dirty bowls begging for food. Lots of questions crossed through the researcher’s mind, questions one was eager to get answers to. Who are these children? Why are they roaming the streets in the North with dirty bowls? Why would a parent allow his/her child, who should be properly cared for by his family, roam the streets begging for little morsels of food? Initially the researcher had viewed these children as abandoned due to their poor living conditions. An interview with Mr. Oloyin, who grew up in the northern Nigeria revealed that these children were supposed to be knowledge seekers. They are *Islamically* called the “*Almajiri*”, a term said to emanate from the Arabic word, ‘*AL-MUHAJIRIN*’ and was first used by the prophet Muhammad to describe those of his companions (Muhajirun) who migrated with him in his propagation of Islam. However, the name, Muhajirun, later came to refer to the immigrant child in search of Qu’ranic education under the care and supervision of the Islamic teachers. (Okonkwo, 2017 and Linus, 2019).

In reality, the *Almajiri* are unkempt children with dirty begging bowls, and bare feet roaming the streets and motor-parks begging for a living and constituting social nuisance. They

look malnourished, dirty, haggard, ragged, destitute, deserted, hungry and sick- looking owing to a long distance of trekking (Linus, 2019). They are eager to eat anything their hands can find, from left over food to junks and garbage too. As a result, they are vulnerable to sickness, kidnapping, diseases, child abuse and other social vices (Abdulquadir, 2003, Gomment and Esomchi, 2017).

They are street urchins and constitute a time bomb ready to explode anytime. They abound in all the cities, towns and villages in the Northern parts of Nigeria. Their presence is also being felt in the other parts of the country. They sleep in roundabouts, in out-houses, on verandas or the dilapidated houses which also serve as their schools or classes in the day time. These children grow up untrained and unable to be trained. There are traces of hunger in their eyes. The poor living conditions of the *Almajiri* prompted Tanko (2001,) to assert that “their sad story keeps on repeating and with each passing day the response to this open challenge has always been the lukewarm attitude on the part of those who are supposed to do something about it”. The Northerners have left this situation to continue unaddressed due to their fear of exposing their children to Western education which may alter their Islamic identity. As a result, these children are neglected and exploited. The living conditions of these children are horrific since few of them do not know their homes or who their parents are. They usually leave home within an age range of 3 -18years. In order to survive, their only option is to follow other groups of children for whom begging is their source of livelihood. On some occasions, the boys are seen casing a bean cake (*kose*) seller who offers them food as “*sadakah*”.

The geometrical progression of the *Almajiri* is such that their population has become difficult for individuals to handle. This has transformed the Qu’ranic system of education for which they are supposed to receive religious training into a modern form of social and economic slavery and includes unimaginable social abuse. It is in the bid to protect the autocratic and feudal life style in northern Nigeria that has led to terrorism. Unfortunately, a terrorist once

created and perfected, will never know their creators or victims. They destroy whatever comes their way. The changing conditions of poverty, both of the neglected and the destitute, are of both creative and thematic interest to a painter.

This is why the late novelist, Chinua Achebe has observed that only committed artists/writers swim against the current. Contemporary African artists are deeply committed to the society. This was why the female sculptor, Ndidi Dike, took up the theme of slavery and produced a startling work as a metaphor of the middle passage. She titled her work ‘‘Waka into bondage (2008)’’. Demas Nwoko, a painter, did not shy away from the oppressive nature of colonial rule when he executed the painting with the title, ‘‘1959’’. This was a satirical comment of the collapse of colonial rule and its displacement by the advent of Nigeria’s political independence. So did Bernard Ibebe in (2004), execute a painting with the title ‘Almajiri’ (street kids) which showed the poor state of the *Almajiri* child in the North. Ugochuchu keyed into this by creating a painting titled, ‘‘Journey through Pain’’. These contemporary African artists keep on confronting social issues as a matter of creative ideology and social commitments.

Conceptual / Theoretical Framework

In art, modernism supports the search for new forms and creative experimentation. With this the conceptual framework is tied to the concept of mixed media as a technique to create forms of the *Almajiri*. However, three theories provided the conceptual framework for the present research. They consist of the theory of social dominance, feminism and postcolonial theory. The theory of social dominance is based on the notion that society is already structured in terms of social hierarchies and based sometimes on given structures of economic, political and social domination. The theory of social dominance reflects a society in which social narratives and constructions define individual status and social groupings. These gendered constructions by the dominant patriarchy have received intellectual resistance by feminists using feminism as a counter theory.

Also, postcolonial theories point to how a nation can assert its sovereignty over another through colonial constructions and narratives and how anti-colonialist struggles have posited an ideology of resistance which ultimately led to the emergence of postcolonial spaces and postcolonial narratives. Thus, these theories remind us that in any condition defined by hierarchies and social structures, there was always the tendency to contest the authority through counter theories such as deconstruction and other counter-social theories. These theories allow us critical glimpses into social formations and the structure of dominance in given societies such as those of selected states in northern Nigeria.

Thus, the theories make legible the nature of structures of dominance and their social narratives. The artist as the maker of images has to resort to counter theories of social dominance as a means of interrogating oppressive social formations and act by using works of art as his/her counter theory in order to deconstruct social hierarchies of dominance and suppression. By using such a conceptual framework, we are afforded useful glimpses into social hierarchies and structures of dominance. By privileging such theories, art provides a useful means as a counter theory because for every sign, there is a counter sign; for every narrative, a counter-narrative. As they say every conclusion, the structure of social dominance, marks the beginning of another argument.

When conceptualized in these terms, the project seeks to expose the oppressive nature of social dominance, with its social structures and hierarchies. With art, one can produce a counter theory, and demonstrate in imagistic terms, the oppressive nature of social hierarchies in the north of Nigeria of which art (the project) provides a counter theory as a process of mediation into a condition of social inequity. According to Foucault, power operates at micro levels of social condition. And it seems that with art as a tool, the artist can expose the fragile nature of power. According to Achebe, the writer/artist must swim against the current so that the orphan

child can led through the forest paths of life. Thus, theory makes the visible legible, and is very useful in conceptualizing ideas pertinent to creative production.

Issues Surrounding Almajiri

With the advents of colonial rule, the *Almajiri* School was abolished and a new western educational system known as (Boko) emerged and submerged the existing Almajiri schools. This led to the abrogation of the state funds for the almajiri educational system which was headed by the state Zaka. After the loss of financial support from the state and the emirs, their responsibility was taken over by the local scholars who deemed it a moral and religious duty to educate the pupils (Bawa, 2018). The abolishment of the Almajiri School led to the plight of the almajiri, since the mallams could no longer carter for themselves and their families let alone the children (almajiri). They were sent to beg rather than to steal.

Ugoeze (2019) opines that *Almajiri* is derived from Islamic education practiced in northern Nigeria which permits a person to leave his home in search of knowledge. Chidi (2019), on the other hand, asserts that “*Almajiri* are children not looked after and their plights are not documented”. They are subjected to abuse, ill treatment while some die as they are trafficked for ritual purposes. He added that the system is a very destructive path for any child to get caught-up in. Ankeli (2019, refers to the *Almajiri* as young people who migrate from the luxury of their homes to other places in the quest for Islamic knowledge. However, the *Almajiri* as a rejected social group has since outlived its purpose and has become a breeding ground for child begging and a potential material for recruitment into terrorism. This is why Asemota (2019), points out that the *Almajiri* boys have become a normal feature, a cultural norm whereby they roam the streets in certain parts of Nigeria (mainly in the north).

Umar (2018), states that they are recruited as slaves, brainwashed and used for anti-social activities, including destruction and violence. It is indeed very sad to see these hungry and malnourished children, as young as the age of four scavenging through trash can for left over

foods. The above explanation is a picture of the tragic plight of an *Almajiri* child in Nigeria. A scholar, Hassan (oral communication, 2019), has stated that Islamic teachings strongly forbid begging, except in special circumstances, which includes a man's loss of properties or wealth in a disaster. It includes when a man has loaned much of his money for the common good, so as to bring about peace between two warring parties. This tends to show that *Almajiri* system as it is being practiced today is totally un-Islamic. "Millennium Hopes program" (2000), a booklet by the office of the Kaduna state governor's wife, advocates that there is a need for the rehabilitation of the *Almajiri*.

It also explained further that the *Almajiri* has not been properly catered for against the backdrop of the initial practices of the system especially where the welfare of the *Almajiri* falls on the community to provide for their basic needs such as feeding and accommodation. The communal backing can make an *Almajiri* to go into the street to beg, become tout in motor parks, carry load at market places and campuses of institutions of higher learning. The booklet further stated that, the traditional Q'uranic school is not a religious practice, but a traditional practice that engages the presence of little boys and girls from the age of six to adulthood to learn the ethics and tenets of Islam for a number of years.

Dandare (2019), on the other hand, opines that the *Almajiri* education has shifted from being a breeding ground for clerics to a veritable avenue for the mass production of thugs, thieves, miscreants and criminals whose only importance is that they constitute a nuisance in the society. According to K. Inuwa (2019), banning begging without taking proactive measures to alleviate poverty is as useless as the last three letters in 'Queue'. He also added that many believe that banning *Almajiri* will solve the decade long problem of begging in northern Nigeria. Unknown to them, begging is not limited to *Almajiri* and child beggars alone, but has become an act being perpetuated by all categories of people, irrespective of age or gender. It is these people who continue to legitimize begging by misinterpreting Islamic teachings in order to justify their

imposed destitution on the almajiri. For this, the Almajiri and non-Almajiri, young and old, male and female, able and disabled take to begging on the streets on a permanent basis. It is normally imperative that the authorities concerned should address issues associated with this social menace. An interview with Hassan, (oral communication, 2019) reveals that Almajiri are poor and wretched children whose life is essentially colorless. They are children who grow up and lose the capacity for any organize training. They are unfit for any meaningful occupation in the age of the internet. They hold grudges against everyone, including their religious leaders/ teachers, supporters or sponsors.

Artist and Almajiri



Children are Starving by Kathe Kollwitz, Charcoal on Paper: Nationalgallery.org, 1924.

Kathe Kollwitz is a German artist born on 1867 in Konigsberg, Prussia (now Kaliningrad, Russia); she studied art at an art school of women in Berlin where she was inspired by the etchings of Max Klinger. She is best known for her drawings and prints, which offers a compassionate and unsettling account of human condition. She is a master of etching, lithography, and wood-cut. This is a two-dimensional work, executed by Kollwitz (1924) on paper. It shows four young children lifting their begging bowls towards heaven as though they are expecting manna. Their facial expression shows concentration and anxiety as their raised faces and open mouth show their eagerness to take advantage of whatever falls into their bowls. The artist has proved herself to be a good draughtsman as shown in the pictorial composition.



Middle Child by Samuel Ette, Poster on paper, Vat Studio 2019

Samuel Eteta is a Nigerian artist born in 1992 in Calabar, Cross River State. His creative imagery centres on realism/naturalism. He uses colors to suggest forms and shapes. One among his paintings is “The Middle Child” (2019), executed on cardboard with the poster color medium. The painting shows a hungry child who grips watermelon with much enthusiasm. He ravages it and pays no attention to his unclean hands or his environment. His pale yellowish eyes suggest malnourishment resulting from poor feeding, maltreatment, or ill-health. The artist used different shades of gray, blue, yellow, red, brown, black and white as neutral tones to evoke the mood of the painting which is one of pathos. The use of gray color suggests sadness which best represents the state of the child. Suddenly heavens smiled on him as he encounters what to eat, perhaps from a food vendor. As he eats, his iris is raised as a sign of gratitude to God for providing for the day since hunger has become his companion. However, the artist best captures the mood of the hungry child as a metaphor of the *Almajiri* social condition.



Almajiri (Street Kids) by Benson Ibebe, Oil on canvas, facebook 2017.

Ben Ibebe is an internationally known African artist based in Nigeria. His works reflect images of West Africa. He works with the impasto technique which gives his work a three-

dimensional surface. He sometimes works with geometric compositions as well. However, his works are vibrant, captivating and very tactile. In 2017, Benson Ibebe executed a painting titled 'Almajiri' (street kids), using the oil medium on canvas. The painting depicts three stylized Almajiri boys placed in a conical composition holding their hands as they sing in awe to God. Two of the boy's heads are placed in frontal view, while the head of little boy on the right, is in profile with an open mouth. Probably he is questioning the creator why they are in such a horrific state. The background accommodating the three figures painted in fragmented cool tones is rendered in tones of reddish orange. The top left of the work shows the image of sun whose rays fall on the faces of the boys standing against the sunlight as they think of a way out of their dilemma. The warm background reveals the intense heat of the scorching sun as the children hustle to survive. The way they hold their bowls in unity suggests a possibly silent conversation about God. The painting is composed of various tones of colour such as blue, yellow, green, orange, purple, black and white. The Jalabia worn by the boys is dominantly painted in blues, with few touches of yellow, green, red and purple. Tones of brown colors are revealed on their dissected head which could suggest their skin tone or dust incurred during the days hustle. However, some colours are darker than others, while still, others appear lighter than the rest. This is shown on the hand of the middle figure and around their neck. The use of a reddish orange background creates a warm atmosphere. The painting shows off the artist's mastery in his manipulation of multiple colours.

Methodology

The methodology adopted for the study is experimental and exploratory in order to achieve a high degree of creativity and innovation. The sources for data collection include the primary and secondary sources. The primary sources include journals, books in the research area, interviews and also photographic documentation. Secondary sources on the other hand include internet, articles, newspapers, and other student projects which are related to the study.

References were made to other artist's paintings, which was helpful in the handling of design concepts such as sketches and color washes to arrive to a good composition, and applicable techniques as part of the implementation strategies.

Discussion of Findings

The findings showed that it was possible to explore the *Almajiri* theme, develop design concepts from it and translate such design concepts into mixed media composition, thus demonstrating that it was possible to use art as a tool of social commentary.



E-red by Blessy Bassy, Acrylic on Canvas, 2020, Vat, Studio



The AI-Conference by Blessy Bassy, Acrylic on Canvas, 2020



Me and my fantasies by Blessy Bassy, Acrylic on Canvas, 2020

The work taken together provides a basis for theorizing them as a reflection on the oppressive human condition. The panels consist of works which has the following titles: “E-red”, “The Al. conference” and “Me and my Fantasies”. They are a synthesis of social denials in northern Nigeria which gave birth to an oppressed group known as Almajiri. We need to theorize these works as the artists mediation of a manifestly abhorrent social condition in which the elite has learnt to pocket the source of region through the structure of a social organization in which the very few are oppressing the very many in what, Wole Soyinka (1969) has described as our social anomie.

Here, the artist takes on the responsibility of a mediator as well as one that swims against the current. This is because theorizing the works is a way of theorizing the social conditions that brought them about. And what is theory? A theory may be seen as a cluster of idea or concepts by which one can explain an event, a social phenomenon so that the visible may be made legible. One theory that helps us to understand the importance of the study is the theory of social dominance. It helps us to explain and understand why social structures are deliberately created to serve the interests of the very few while putting the others under shadows. It is an ideology of conquest and ideation which has thrown into public space young people who are said to be receiving Islamic education but who end up as the rejected and dejected in the society. It is thus, the social moral responsibility of the artist to provide an artistic intervention in the condition of social anomie.

The works then may be seen as a tool of resistance on behalf of the oppressed. This is to say that works of art have in them the power and the means to resist oppression on behalf of the oppressed and in the search for justice and social equity. Herein lies the significance of the works as the artist’s creative response to the oppressive human condition in northern Nigeria as the study as attempted to demonstrate. To theorize the story of Almajiri as shown in the works is to confront the intolerable, social, economics, and political condition in the north. According to

Ballachandra, the Nigerian artist is no longer penned at the periphery casting wistful glances at the center. He has moved to the centre from which to address the human society. Leon Trotsky (2018) has stated that “Art is not a mirror to hold up society but a hammer with which to shape it”. Thus, works of art are a form of visual address the society because a man must know where the rain began to beat him. Contemporary African artists are deeply committed to the society. This was why the famed sculptor, Ben Ewonwu quickly embraced Negritude as a source of his inspiration and creative identity. With these works, the artist has responded to Wole Soyinka’s observation that if we do not speak out against oppression, the man dies in us.

Summary / Conclusion

Almajiri are supposed knowledge seekers entrusted into the care of an Islamic teacher known as Mallam to teach them the ethics of Quran. However, in reality they are seen roaming the streets, motor parks, looking tattered with dirty bowls searching for mean of survival. The neglected social group is of thematic interest to the painter who has explored its creative potentials for the production of mixed media painting. This is because the artist is sensitive to man social condition in the society and therefore tends to mobilize her creative tools as a means of creative mediation. This has also helped the artist to appropriate visual materials as a basis for conceptualizing new ideas in the execution of a number of mixed media paintings. The research is a visual interpretation of the plight of the *Almajiri*’s in Northern Nigeria with the artist serving as a keen observer, a mediator and a spokesman of their daily sufferings.

The paintings are critique of failed Islamic educational systems which aborted the potentials of these young boys and turned them to beggars and street urchins. They are like a ship without a rudder.

Conclusively, the study shows that it is possible to use mixed media as a means of interrogating the social condition of the *Almajiri* in Nigeria. The appropriation of mixed media technique in combination with the chosen media made it possible to execute mixed media

painting as a creative synthesis of theme, media and technique as well as a tool of creative interrogation and social address by establishing good relationship between the media and technique.

Recommendations

The study recommends that artists should focus on social issues in Nigeria as a means of conceptualizing pictorial compositions that creates awareness on the plight of *Almajiri* in northern Nigeria. The study poses a challenge to other artists to key into the present study as a means of addressing social issues in Nigeria, and in the process, explore other dimensions of their technical and aesthetic effect. In this way their contributions can add to existing literature.

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Interviewed Persons

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Wutarama Hassan: Lecturer Federal College of Education, Katsina State (2020)

Prof: Chike Aniakor: Lecturer, Cross River University of Technology (2020)

Charles Haruna: Lecturer, Kogi State Polytechnic (2020)