

## MIGRATION ETHICS (GENESIS 47:1-12) AND ALMAJIRI (TSANGAYA) CHILDREN DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC

**Favour C. Uroko & Enobong Solomon**

Department of Religion and Cultural Studies,  
Faculty of the Social Sciences,  
University of Nigeria, Nsukka  
[urokofavour@gmail.com](mailto:urokofavour@gmail.com); [enoesol1@gmail.com](mailto:enoesol1@gmail.com)  
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### **Abstract:**

*This article examines the impacts of COVID-19 on Almajiri children in Nigeria in the light of Genesis 47:1-12. Almajiri children were discovered to be part of major careers of coronavirus in northern Nigeria. Almajiri children engaged in irregular migration from one state to the other without the approval or consent of the government of these receiving states. This led to an increase in the number of coronavirus cases, miscreants taking advantage of the situation, religious tension and high-level suspicion among Nigerians. Observing this irregular migration of Almajiri children, the researchers see Genesis 47:1-12 as limelight. The pericope concerns Jacob, who engaged in regular migration to Egypt during a period of crisis in Canaan. He followed the migration policies and border policies of Egypt. It is strongly believed that the pericope will speak anew to the irregular migration of Almajiri children amidst the escalating coronavirus infections in Nigeria.*

**Keywords:** COVID-19, Genesis 47, Almajiri, regular migration, security

### **Introduction**

This Almajiri system could be traced to Usman Dan Fodio. Usman Dan Fodio who retired to private life, and in 1807 led a studious, religious life in Sokoto, writing so many Koranic books, and codified laws.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, Usman Dan Fodio strengthened the Almajiri heritage, and transformed it into a free, well-funded and staffed universal Muslim primary education in the Sokoto Empire of which present-day northern Nigeria.<sup>2</sup> The Sokoto state was the commercial centre of northern Nigeria at that time.

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<sup>1</sup> Niyi Awofeso , Jan Ritchie & Pieter Degeling, “The Almajiri Heritage and the Threat of Non-State Terrorism in Northern Nigeria--Lessons from Central Asia and Pakistan”, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 26, no.4 (2003):314.

<sup>2</sup>Niyi Awofeso , Jan Ritchie & Pieter Degeling, Loc. cit.

These Almajiri children were giving birth by their parents and chased away from the house to go and hustle for their needs. Most times when they reached 5 years, they are allowed to cater for their own needs. According to the structural framework of the Almajiri system, Abdurrahman and Canham explain thus:

First, it involves children relocating from their family and friends in villages to the guardianship of Mallams in towns. Second, it is restricted almost exclusively to boys – the girls who attend these schools are not classified as Almajirai, as they normally attend Koranic schools nearby their homes in the villages for relatively short periods. Third, the curriculum of the schools is concerned primarily with learning the 60 chapters of the Koran. Finally, each school, consisting of between 25 and 500 pupils, is largely autonomous. These pupils are typically aged between 6 and 15 years.<sup>3</sup>

During the COVID-19 pandemic, governors of some states were Almajiri children were more in numbers asked the children to depart to other states. On the 17 and 18 April over 150 people died from coronavirus in Kano state alone.<sup>4</sup> Based on this insistence, Nigerians became anxious about these moves. According to the governments of these northern states these Almajiri children were from different states in Nigeria. They further hinted that the Almajiri constituted a nuisance and may serve as a major tool for the spread of the coronavirus. On 31 March 2020, there was the declaration of total lockdown in Nigeria. There was a ban on interstate movement of people and vehicles. This was to prevent the spread of the disease from one state to the other. In April 2020, the Almajiri children engaged in forceful migration to different states of the federation. These Almajiri children were loaded in trucks with cattle to prevent them from being apprehended by security agents at destination state borders. Even when they are detected, some security agencies, like in many highways in Nigeria, take bribes to allow these buses and trailers, conveying these irregular migrants to pass, contrary to

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<sup>3</sup>M. Abdurrahman, & P. Canham, *The Ink of the Scholar—The Islamic Tradition of Education in Nigeria* (Lagos: Macmillan Press, 1978).

<sup>4</sup>Ibrahim Musa Giginyu, Richard P. Ngbokai, Tijjani Ibrahim, Lubabatu I. Garba & Ojoma Akor, “Nigeria: 150 People Die in Kano in 3 Days”, *DailyTrust*, 21 April 2020.

Nigeria's Federal Government directive.<sup>5</sup> Nigerians began to be sceptical of these moves. It is suspected that it is either they are fleeing the North because of the increasing cases of COVID-19 or they are being deliberately sent to the South to infect the people of the region.<sup>6</sup> It is important to reveal that before the forceful migration many of these Almajiri children tested positive to the coronavirus. One begins to wonder what is the political economy of this forced migration of Almajiri to their destination states? This article explores the social ethics in Gen 47 as it concerns the Almajiri children during the COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria.

Gen 47:1-12 concerns Jacob's families' regular migration to Egypt during a serious famine. It was famine not caused by war or pandemic, but was natural. Jacob and his family members had to engage in a regular migration to Egypt which was based on the call of Joseph. Joseph was the ideal of Hebrew manhood and the model of perfect conduct in every situation<sup>7</sup>. Joseph first informed the Egyptian government of the arrival of the Jewish migrants. This was a period when Egypt was also in a crisis of famine. The migration ethics of the Jewish migrants during the period of this crisis have implications in the Nigerian context. It is believed that this pericope will speak anew to the problem that Almajiri children are posing to Nigerians in the current problem of COVID-19. This article will be examining the political economy of Almajiri children during the COVID-19 pandemic in the light of Gen 47:1-12.

First, this article carries out an exegesis of Gen 47:1-12. Second, it looks at the themes embedded in the pericope. Third, this article explores the history of Almajiri system in Nigeria. Fourth, a critical analysis is made about the political economy of Almajiri system during COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria. Finally, the themes discovered in the pericope were applied to the Nigerian context and thereafter recommendations were made to that regards.

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<sup>5</sup> Lawrence Njoku, Segun Olaniyi, Msugh Ityokura, Kanayo Umeh, Saxone Akhaine & Joseph Wantu, "South East, South South clamp down on almajirai relocating from North", *The Guardian*, 8 May 2020.

<sup>6</sup> Njoku, Olaniyi, Ityokura, Umeh, Akhaine & Wantu, Loc. cit.

<sup>7</sup> Charles T. Fritsgh, "God was with Him" A Theological Study of the Joseph Narrative", *Union Seminary Magazine* 9, no. 1 (1955): 21.

Academic literature abounds on Almajiri in Nigeria. Awofeso, Ritchie & Degeling<sup>8</sup> in their study “The Almajiri Heritage and the Threat of Non-State Terrorism in Northern Nigeria – Lessons from Central Asia and Pakistan” reveal Almajiri as the reason for non-state terrorism in Nigeria. Olaniran explores the provision of education opportunities to a disadvantaged group in Nigeria known as Almajiris.<sup>9</sup> Omeni in his article “The Almajiri in Northern Nigeria: militancy, Perceptions, Challenges, and State Policies” identifies what Almajiri is, how these young men are distinct from other youth categories in northern Nigeria, and why the system has undergone gradual collapse.<sup>10</sup> However, seeing literature on the Almajiri children from the Old Testament perspective during the coronavirus pandemic in Nigeria is hard to find. Thus, a theological response to Almajiri children as victims of coronavirus is the gap the researcher intends to fill.

### **Context of Genesis 47:1-12**

From the historical context, Genesis is believed to be written by Moses, and it is accorded the first book of the Old Testament. The book of Genesis gives an account of the origin of the earth and the human race (chapters 1-11) and also the beginning of the nation of Israel, God’s chosen people (Chapters 12-50).<sup>11</sup> Genesis reveals a single all-powerful, all-knowing creator God, who speaks and acts in history and in everyday life and who controls everything on earth and in the universe.<sup>12</sup> Genesis can also be described as a book of relationships, such as those between Jacob, Joseph and his brothers<sup>13</sup>. This is why Hale describes the relationship between God, Jacob, Joseph and his brothers as God’s dealing with those he has chosen to be his special people.<sup>14</sup> Jacob and other Jewish migrants were part of God’s chosen people.

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<sup>8</sup> Niyi Awofeso, Jan Ritchie & Pieter Degeling, Loc. cit.

<sup>9</sup> Sunday Olawale Olaniran, “Almajiri education: Policy and practice to meet the learning needs of the nomadic population in Nigeria”, *International Review of Education* 64, no. 1 (2018): 111-126.

<sup>10</sup> Akali Omeni, “The Almajiri in Northern Nigeria: Militancy, Perceptions, Challenges, and State Policies”, *African Conflict and Peacebuilding Review*, 5, no. 2 (2015):128

<sup>11</sup> Thomas Hale, *The Applied Old Testament Commentary*, (Colorado Springs: Kingsway communications, 2007):126.

<sup>12</sup> Hale, Op. cit.,127.

<sup>13</sup> Barnabe Assohoto & Samuel Ngewa, “Genesis” in Tokunboh Adeyemo ed. *Africa Bible Commentary*, (Nairobi: Zonderan Corporation, 2006):9.

<sup>14</sup> Assohoto & Ngewa, Loc. cit.

With regards to Joseph and his brothers, it was a narrative about how they migrated from the Canaanite state to the Egyptian state. Joseph had been sold for twenty shekels of silver to the Ishmaelite caravan. This was necessitated by the hatred that his brothers had towards him. Joseph went to Egypt and was isolated in the House of Potiphar, the chief security guard to the Pharaoh. Potiphar was a eunuch that is an official of the court.<sup>15</sup> Potiphar trusted Joseph so dearly and thus, made him the caretaker of his household. Potiphar's wife landed Joseph in prison through her false testimonies and allegations.

In prison, Joseph was called upon by the Pharaoh to interpret his dreams. In the interpretation, Joseph was able to interpret accurately and also provided solutions to the problem. The Pharaoh was highly impressed with this development and he employed Joseph to be his second in command in the whole of Egypt. Joseph being second-in-command means that he was the grand vizier of all Egypt, with every mark of honour.<sup>16</sup> Immediately, Joseph set to work by doing everything he told the Pharaoh in the interpretation of his dreams. Corroborating this thesis, Clifford and Murphy recount that "Joseph never ceases to work out his designs"<sup>17</sup>. This shows that he put efforts into seeing his aims materialize into effect. After his appointment, there was a famine in the land as prophesied by Joseph, it also affected surrounding nations.

From the literary context, there was a famine in Canaan, a surrounding state to Egypt. At this point, Jacob and his family members were in Canaan. Jacob has to send his family members to come to Egypt to find food. When they arrived in Egypt, Joseph saw them and recognised them, however, they couldn't recognise him. After much interaction and thought, Joseph decided to introduce himself to his brothers as Joseph. This made his brothers to be afraid. Joseph advised them not to be afraid, instead, they should see his sale to Egypt as part of God's plan.

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<sup>15</sup>S.H Hooke, "Genesis", *Peake's Commentary on the Bible*, ed. Matthew Black and H.H. Rowley, (Melbourne: Thomas Nelson Ltd, 1962): 202.

<sup>16</sup> S.H Hooke, Loc.cit.

<sup>17</sup> Richard J. Clifford & Roland E. Murphy, "Genesis", *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary* (London: Indira Printers, 1968 ):41.

He furthermore encouraged them to come to Egypt. This shows that Joseph knew that God had been at work to preserve His people. Instead of perishing in the famine, Jacob and his family were welcomed into Egypt.<sup>18</sup> Joseph told his brothers to go and bring their father and everything they had in Canaan to Egypt. Notwithstanding that Joseph had all the powers to give them a sanctuary in Egypt, he allowed the migration policies and laws to take hold on Jacob and his family.

### **Grammatical-theological analysis of Gen 47:1-12**

The close reading of Gen 47:1-12 reveals that it has four parts. The first is v.1, vv. 2-4, vv.5-10, and vv.11-12. The first part concerns the time of the migration of Jacob and his family members. The second part deals with the migration procedures of Egypt that Jacob and his family members passed through. The third part involves the sincerity of the migrants in their quest for sanctuary and the last division relates how the Jewish migrants were granted sanctuary in Egypt.

#### ***Time of Migration***

In v.1, there was a famine in Egypt and also in the surrounding countries such as Canaan. This forced Jacob and his family members to migrate to Egypt due to the difficulty of surviving in Canaan. In v.1, *בָּאוּ מֵאֶרֶץ* (have come from the land) indicated that Jacob actually migrated from Canaan to Egypt. Hebrew *מֵאֶרֶץ* contains *אֶרֶץ* (land) prefix by the preposition *מִן* (from) indicating that land was an important factor in migration. They moved from one land due to famine, seeking for another land for survival. Apart from Joseph's call on Jacob and his family to migrate to Egypt, God also spoke to Jacob in a vision and confirmed that he should go down to Egypt.<sup>19</sup> In this migration, Jacob, his children, his relatives, their flocks, and all that they have were moved to Egypt. However, it was not the irregular type of migration. It was a regular migration.

#### ***Procedures of Migration and systematic profiling***

In vv. 2-4, Jacob did not try to circumvent the migration procedures and border policy of Egypt. He first subjected himself to the laws of Egypt. Joseph, who was

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<sup>18</sup>Mindy Smith, "Joseph Saves His Family", *Mission Bible Class*, viewed 3 February 2019, from <https://missionbibleclass.org/old-testament/part1/tower-of-babel-through-joseph/joseph-saves-his-family/>

<sup>19</sup> Thomas Hale, *The Applied Old Testament Commentary*, (Colorado Springs: Kingsway communications, 2007):196

one of them did not also try to circumvent the laws of Egypt, instead, he insisted that his family members follow the migration policies of Egypt. It shows Joseph's prudent care concerning his brethren's settlement, though it was justice to the Pharaoh to let him know that such as colony had come to settle in his dominions.<sup>20</sup> They did not enter irregularly and clandestinely. In v.2, Hebrew לִפְנֵי ('before', 'face', 'presence') indicates that Joseph sets these migrants in the presence of the chief security officer of Egypt, the Pharaoh. When they got to the chief migration officer of Egypt who was the Pharaoh, he inquired of them of whom they were and their occupation. In v.3, מַעֲשֵׂיכֶם (what is your occupation) was used to show that the migrants must have a reason for migrating to Egypt and also, they should also be able to be valuable assets to Egypt. Hebrew מַעֲשֵׂה is derived from מְעַשֶׂה (a work, activity) indicates that the Jewish migrants have a craft and even a technique that they are accustomed to. They told the Pharaoh that they were shepherds who had come to Egypt to look for pasture for their animals due to the current famine that had invaded the land. In v. 4, they told the Pharaoh specifically that they had migrated into Egypt to לָגוּר (to dwell, sojourn, to migrate) in the land. A sojourner is someone who lives in an environment as a stranger for a period. There is nothing wrong in being specific about what we want, being direct and clear is not an offence, even if the request is not granted.<sup>21</sup> Also, in v. 4, the Jewish migrants said that it was because of הָרָעָב that they have come to Egypt as migrants. Hebrew הָרָעָב means famine, starvation, hunger, difficulty. They were definite in stating their reasons for migrating. In a further revelation, they pleaded with the Pharaoh that they are sojourners want to sojourn in Egypt Indirectly, they were asking for land to stay.

### *Sincerity in the Migration*

In vv. 5-10, the Pharaoh understood that the migrants were seeking to be granted migrant status in Egypt. However, he was comforted and relaxed due to the sincerity of the Jewish migrants' comportment. He said to Joseph אָבִיךָ וְאֶחָיִךָ בָּאוּ אֵלֶיךָ (you father and your brothers have come to you) signifying that he knows these migrants (v.5). He was satisfied with profiling. The suffix ך is a second person

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<sup>20</sup>Matthew Henry, "Genesis", *Matthew Henry's Commentary*, (Grand Rapid, Michigan: Hendrickson Publishers 2006):88.

<sup>21</sup>Barnabe Assohoto & Samuel Ngewa, "Genesis", *African Bible Commentary*, Tokunboh Adeyemo, (Grand Rapids: Michigan: Zondervan, 2006): 78.

personal pronoun meaning 'your'. The Pharaoh could see that they were not invaders or spies. The Pharaoh granted them a land to settle in. This was the best part of Goshen. The Pharaoh was quite happy to allow them to settle in Goshen (v.5-6a).<sup>22</sup> In v.6, the Pharaoh said יִשְׁבוּ בְּאֶרֶץ (let them dwell in the land) which shows approval of their migrant status. Hebrew יָשַׁב from יִשְׁבוּ means 'inhibit', 'dwell', 'to camp' and also to reside. These meanings tell of the kind of freedom that the Pharaoh had granted them. Pharaoh's was also persuaded to grant the Jewish immigrants' sanctuary due to the age of the most elderly, Jacob. In v.8, the Pharaoh asked Jacob how old he is, and Jacob said that he is one hundred and thirty years which have been few and evil compared to the ages and experiences of his Abraham and Isaac (v.9). He said they were few and difficult (v.9) because if we recollect the years Jacob spent for Laban, and his years of mourning for Joseph, with the long years of his grandfather Abraham (175 years), and Isaac (180 years) these necessitated his lamentation.<sup>23</sup> The interview with Joseph's brothers had been a businesslike one, but the aged Jacob's appearance before the Pharaoh was more like a courtesy call.<sup>24</sup> This elderly Jacob furthermore blessed the Pharaoh as a mark of appreciation for the kind gestures (v.10).

### *Social Ethics for the Migrants*

In vv. 11-12, the Pharaoh handed over the migrants to Joseph to cater for. The Pharaoh had instructed Joseph to grant them a sanctuary (v.6). This speaks, not only Joseph as a good man, who took this tender care of his poor relations, but God as a good God.<sup>25</sup> In v.11a, Joseph וַיִּשְׁבֶּה (placed, cause to dwell) Jacob and the other Jewish migrants in Goshen. The Jewish migrants were provided with food, water, and a piece of land. Also, the Pharaoh offered job opportunities to those of them skilful in shepherding.

Gen 47:1-12 shows clearly that regular migration was encouraged as against irregular migration. Jacob and other Jewish migrations were accepted due to the fact that they proved beyond all reasonable doubt that they were responsible and

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<sup>22</sup> Barnabe Assohoto & Samuel Ngewa, "Genesis" in Tokunboh Adeyemo ed. *Africa Bible Commentary*, (Nairobi: Zonderan Corporation, 2006):78.

<sup>23</sup> Barnabe Assohoto & Ngewa, Loc. cit.

<sup>24</sup> Barnabe Assohoto & Ngewa, Loc. cit.

<sup>25</sup> Matthew Henry, "Genesis", *Matthew Henry's Commentary*, (Grand Rapid, Michigan: Hendrickson Publishers 2006):89.



also of economic value to the Egyptians. Also, they proved that their migration will not affect the health of the Egyptians.

### **The political economy of *Almajiri* system in Nigeria**

The Hausa word *Almajiri* means someone who is a pupil of Islamic knowledge. It is traceable to the Arabic origin 'Almuhajir' an emigrant, a traveller who seeks of Arabic knowledge and "Al muhajirun", meaning an emigrant from home. The plural of *Almajiri* is *almajirai*. The *Almajiri* system is the brainchild of the *Tsangaya* system in northern Nigeria. The *Tsangaya* system "was established as an organised and comprehensive system of education for learning Islamic principles, values, jurisprudence and theology"<sup>26</sup>. It was a system for the sustenance of Koranic schools. In northern Nigeria, the term "Koranic schools" is usually reserved for elementary religious schools. The traditions, structure, and functions of these schools collectively constitute what is generally regarded in northern Nigeria as the *Almajiri* heritage.<sup>27</sup> Before Nigeria's colonization by the British, the *Tsangaya* system was strengthened and sponsored with state funds and the students of this school reciprocate their beneficiaries (state) with physical and mental labour. According to Al-Amin, the *Almajiri* children offered services such as laundry, cobbling, gardening, weaving, etc, as charity to the community that contributed to their well-being.<sup>28</sup>

At the beginning of the practice of *Almajiri* system, the *Almajiri* children stayed with their parents at home and acquired this Koranic education. Furthermore, these *Almajiri* schools were located close to the children's residential homes. The system though grants *Almajiri* children the time to acquire other human skills beside Quranic education. This system produced businessmen, judges (especially in sharia courts), clerks and the contemporary Alhaji Dangote, the wealthiest man in Africa. The *Almajiri* system is the only one today known in the Muslim world that has retained the reproduction of the Qur'an, written directly from memory

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<sup>26</sup> Cheta Nwanze, "History of the *Almajiri* system in Nigeria", *TheGuardian*, 29 May 2019.

<sup>27</sup> Niyi Awofeso, Jan Ritchie & Pieter Degeling, "The *Almajiri* Heritage and the Threat of Non-State Terrorism in Northern Nigeria--Lessons from Central Asia and Pakistan", *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 26, no.4 (2003):313.

<sup>28</sup> Bukar Al-Amin, "The *Almajiri* phenomenon in Northern Nigeria and the burden on society", *DailyTrust*, 18 August 2019

without looking at any copy.<sup>29</sup> This is in continuation of what happened in the medieval period, in which instruction at Koranic schools in northern Nigeria presently is almost entirely by recitation (rote learning).<sup>30</sup>

During the colonial period, the Almajiri were part of the colonial staff. The British came into Nigeria, found this system of education unwelcoming, and thus destroyed it. This destruction was not a cold war. It was a physical war led by Lord Lugard between 1900 and 1903 majorly against the Sokoto caliphate. The Almajiri were replaced, phased out and indeed abandoned<sup>31</sup> to the advantage of western education (Boko) beginning in 1903 precisely in March. This was possible due to the killing of Muhammadu Attahiru of Sokoto and the capture of Emir Aliyu of Kano, the two great administrators of Tsangaya (Almajiri) education in northern Nigeria. Those emirs who were left to continue their rule were made to be subjected to the British, under the indirect rule system. Indirect rule is an Indirect administration that is designed to adapt for the purposes of local government the tribal institutions which the Native peoples of northern Nigeria have evolved for themselves, so that the latter may develop in a constitutional manner from their own past, guided and restrained by traditions and sanctions which they have inherited, moulded and modified as they may be on the advice of British officers and by the general control of those officers.<sup>32</sup> The British abolished state funding of Tsangaya, arguing that they were religious schools “Karatum Boko”, western education was introduced and funded instead. With this loss of support, the system collapsed.<sup>33</sup> This was catastrophic to the survival of this type of education. Lugard’s educational policies, which compromised quality education for the political and economic gains of Indirect Rule, laid the foundation for the dysfunctional nature of the Almajiri heritage in present-day northern Nigeria.<sup>34</sup> However, Lord Lugard was very careful not to interfere with the agreement with

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<sup>29</sup> Bukar Al-Amin, Loc. cit

<sup>30</sup> Awofeso, Ritchie & Degeling, “The Almajiri Heritage and the Threat of Non-State Terrorism in Northern Nigeria--Lessons from Central Asia and Pakistan”, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 26, no.4 (2003):

<sup>31</sup> Bukar Al-Amin, Loc. cit.

<sup>32</sup> W. Ormsby-Gore, “The meaning of “indirect rule”, The principles of native administration and their application by Sir Donald Cameron”, *African Affairs*, XXXIV, no. CXXXVI,(1935): 283–284.

<sup>33</sup> Cheta Nwanze, “History of the Almajiri system in Nigeria”, *TheGuardian*, 29 May 2019.

<sup>34</sup> Awofeso , Ritchie & Degeling, Op. cit., 315-316.

the north (not to temper with the cultural and religious practices of the north). Notwithstanding that some of his officials at that point in time advised him to educate the Almajiri children. Instead, Lord Lugard developed as approach. He started educating the children of the rich (aristocrats) in science and Roman scripts.

The tactic by Lord Lugard succeeded in separating the rich children from the poor. Thus, despite the officially secular nature of Nigeria's educational system following independence from colonial rule in 1960, the Almajiri educational system remains quite popular among the peasant class in northern Nigeria<sup>35</sup>. The pupils (Almajiris) and their teachers (Malams) having no more money to continue to sponsor the education resorted to begging for survival. It became the system for peasants. This was even after Nigeria gained her independence in 1960. These imams were the core of Islamic scholars. Unfortunately, these Islamic scholars who were reserved professionally for controlling the moral fibre of the northern society gradually became neglected and relegated only to delivering sermon once a week at the local Friday Masjid (Mosque).<sup>36</sup> All these were based on the relegation imposed on them by Lord Lugard and his men. The long-run effect of this development is that during religious crisis, most of the aggressors were the Almajiri due to their struggle for survival and their lives being in control by the malams. This total destruction of the Almajiri system may have been the cause for the belief by the malams that western education was of Christian origin and must be fought against due to its threat to Islamic education, tenets and jurisprudence.

Contemporarily, Almajiri children are seen in most streets, especially in northern Nigeria, and other parts of Nigeria. These children are roaming about in the streets in tattered clothes, bare-footed, extremely dirty, looking malnourished with dry lips and dry faces, rashes all over their body, moving from house to house, street to street begging.<sup>37</sup> They are begging in order to survive and also provide for the malams, their teachers.

### **Almajiri children migrations during the COVID-19 pandemic**

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<sup>35</sup> Awofeso , Ritchie & Degeling, Loc. cit.

<sup>36</sup> Bukar Al-Amin, "The Almajiri phenomenon in Northern Nigeria and the burden on society", *DailyTrust*, 18 August 2019.

<sup>37</sup> Bukar Al-Amin, Loc. cit

Nigeria is a country in sub-Saharan Africa precisely in West Africa. Nigerian has six geopolitical zones – north-east, north-west, north-central, south-south, south-east, and south-west. The first three geopolitical zones are mainly Muslim territories, while the last three are predominantly Christian territories. The Almajiri system prevails and was sustained in these northern parts of Nigeria, even after British intervention during the colonial periods in Nigeria.

According to the United Nations children emergency fund report, the number of Almajiri in Nigeria is 9.5 million, or 72 per cent of the country's 13.2 million out-of-school children.<sup>38</sup> Almajiri before the COVID-19 pandemic has been a major asset to northern Nigeria before, during and after elections. They were used for menial jobs and other sundry activities. They were revered by the northerners and their elites before the coronavirus pandemic in Nigeria. However, things fell apart during the coronavirus period in Nigeria and the centre could not long hold.

On May 23, 2020, Ngbokai lamented that grave diggers and cemetery attendants in Kano were in great danger as community transmission of COVID-19 increased in the state.<sup>39</sup> On the 22 May 2020, more than 36 people were killed by coronavirus and they were buried secretly with the burial ground unknown to the general public<sup>40</sup>. It all happened that people started dying in Kano and it was traced to persons having coronavirus infections. What happened was that the test was conducted in the area where some of these deaths were recorded and the result showed that the Almajiri children were also infected and major carriers. What was expected from the governor was the formulation of mitigation strategies such as more case identification, isolation of these children and also quarantining them, and carrying out contact tracing with other sensitization programmes. Instead, the governor of Kano state insisted that all the Almajiri children, both tested and untested must be repatriated to their respective states. Other states where Almajiri children were found followed suite.

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<sup>38</sup>Cheta Nwanze, "History of the Almajiri system in Nigeria", *TheGuardian*, 29 May 2019.

<sup>39</sup>Richard P. Ngbokai, "Kano gravediggers might be digging own graves as COVID-19 community transmission spikes", *DailyTrust*, 23 May 2020.1

<sup>40</sup>Richard P. Ngbokai, Loc. cit.

What happened next was thought provoking. These children without proper profiling were sent to different states of the federation. Notwithstanding that they have been confirmed positive to the coronavirus. Despite the call by some members of the National Assembly that Almajirai should not be repatriated to their respective states due to the increasing cases of coronavirus disease, Governors from the northern states (Northern Governors’ Forum) resolved to continue with the exercise.<sup>41</sup> These children were loaded into trucks and other vehicles and transported to other states of in Nigeria, which the Governors claimed, was the state origin of the Almajiri children. This was done without due process, without the health implications and also the security implications to receiving states.

#### **Cases of interstate travel of Almajiri during the COVID-19**

Notwithstanding the ban on the movement of people by the government of Nigeria, there was a secret movement of Almajiri children from one state to another beyond their state of origin. Unfortunately, due to lack of effective profiling, Almajiri children are being distributed to various states, with no provision for housing, toiletries, feeding and the security threat they may pose.

**Table 1: Cases of Almajiri movement from northern parts of Nigeria to other parts of Nigeria**

S/N	Cases	Date	Source
1.	The Cross River State government and security operatives intercepted and sent back set of trucks carrying no fewer than 30 “Almajiri” at the Gakem-Benue border in the state.	9 May 2020	<a href="https://www.premiumtimesng.com/coronavirus/392085-covid-19-cross-river-taskforce-intercepts-sends-back-trucks-carrying-Almajiri-children.html">https://www.premiumtimesng.com/coronavirus/392085-covid-19-cross-river-taskforce-intercepts-sends-back-trucks-carrying-Almajiri-children.html</a>

<sup>41</sup> Therese Nanlong, “We will continue to repatriate almajirai –Northern Govs”, *Vanguard*, 20 May 2020.

2.	The Enugu State government intercepted and turned back nine busloads of almajirai	7 May 2020	<a href="https://guardian.ng/news/south-east-south-south-clamp-down-on-almajirai-relocating-from-north/">https://guardian.ng/news/south-east-south-south-clamp-down-on-almajirai-relocating-from-north/</a>
3.	The Dan Okoli-led team intercepted the Almajiris hidden in cattle trucks enroute Abia state	5 May 2020	<a href="https://businessday.ng/news/article/security-operatives-intercept-truckload-of-Almajiris-to-abia/">https://businessday.ng/news/article/security-operatives-intercept-truckload-of-Almajiris-to-abia/</a>
4.	A truck full of Almajiri was stopped before arriving in Lagos at the Ojodu-Berger in Lagos	4 May 2020	<a href="https://guardian.ng/news/south-east-south-south-clamp-down-on-almajirai-relocating-from-north/">https://guardian.ng/news/south-east-south-south-clamp-down-on-almajirai-relocating-from-north/</a>
5.	The Osun State government raised the alarm over the large influx of almajiri.	1 May 2020	<a href="https://guardian.ng/politics/covid-19-deportation-of-almajiris-re-opens-citizenship-rights-debate/">https://guardian.ng/politics/covid-19-deportation-of-almajiris-re-opens-citizenship-rights-debate/</a>

Source: Authors compilation

### Impacts of Almajiri irregular migration during COVID-19 pandemic

The effects of the mass exodus of Almajiri children from home states to destination states cannot be underestimated. They include the following:

**1. Increased in the number of infected persons:** The movement of Almajiri children has led to the increasing number of coronavirus infections in the north and other parts of Nigeria. Njoku, Olaniyi, Ityokura, Umeh, Akhaine, & Wantu lament that instead of locking down to cushion the spread as was done by all states in the East, Northern leaders opened their borders and allowed the free movement of their people, many of who have become infected with the virus; they intend to infect the rest of us under the guise of relocating almajirai<sup>42</sup>. This is because the

<sup>42</sup> Lawrence Njoku, Segun Olaniyi, Msugh Ityokura, Kanayo Umeh, Saxone Akhaine & Joseph Wantu, "South East, South South clamp down on almajirai relocating from North", *The Guardian*, 8 May 2020.

Almajiri children were distributed without proper sanitation measures taken to prevent the virus spread.

**2. High level suspicion by receiving states:** The receiving states are not taking this kind of migration of Almajiri children for granted. They see this as a way of making sure that other states suffer from the causalities of the coronavirus. Emeka Diwe lamented that “We have a situation in the country and everyone is advised to remain where they are to avoid being infected with the coronavirus. How are we sure if these imported Hausas and Fulanis, even from the Niger Republic are not COVID-19 positive.”<sup>43</sup>

**3. Miscreants hiding in the midst of these Almajiri:** The smuggling of Almajiri to other states of Nigeria, especially to southern states, has afforded criminals and religious extremists to be smuggled with them this period. These Almajiri may begin to carry out non-state terrorism. Techman definition of non-state terrorism captures the situation, thus:

Non-state terrorism could be defined as actions carried out for political or other social purposes, including certain kinds of large-scale mercenary purposes, by individuals or groups. Its political or other aims might be either good or bad. It is normally a criminal action according to national and/or international law but is not invariably unlawful according to natural law. It includes successful or unsuccessful attempts on the lives of innocent or guilty, targeted or untargeted, victims; or the taking of combatant or non-combatant hostages; it includes the torture of innocent or guilty people; and it is usually but not necessarily has either the effect or intention or both of causing terror and panic.<sup>44</sup>

According to reports, Nigeriens from the Republic of Niger (neighbouring country to Nigeria) have been fished out, hiding amongst Almajiri children to gain entry into other states. These miscreants engage in religious killings, kidnapping and also rapping of their female victims. This is the reason for the high level of killings going on presently in Nigeria.

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<sup>43</sup> Adindu Obialor, “Smuggling of Almajiris into southeast is unacceptable – Activist”, *DailyPost*, 19 May 2020.

<sup>44</sup> Teichman, J. 2001. *Ethics and Reality: Collected Essays*. Aldershot: Ashgate Press.

**4. Religious tension:** There is high-level suspicion that the mass migration especially at the odd hours of the day of Almajiri children from northern states to specifically the southern states may be to invade the land and conquer it for Islam growth and development. Citizens of southern states are seeing this as a ploy to Islamize the southern regions of Nigeria. For instance, Awofeso, Ritchie & Degeling recalls a case study of the 1980 Maitatsine riots in Kano, in which there was the mass deployment of Almajirai in non-state terrorism that led to the loss of approximately 6,000 lives.<sup>45</sup> These tensions are brewing based on past experiences of the use of Almajiri as combat forces in religious violence in Nigeria. Furthermore, these Almajiri children being separated from their family and under the guardianship of Islamic teachers, also being denied of parental care, form the bulk of Boko Haram and Fulani herdsmen in which recruitment of these children is most times forcefully done.<sup>46</sup>

#### **Relevance of Genesis 47:1-12 to Almajiri migration during the COVID-19 Pandemic**

In the text studied, the time that Jacob and his descendants moved to Egypt was a time of famine. It was a period of crisis for the Jewish migrants. Almajiri children faced crises of being forced to move from their original home states. In v.1-2, the Jewish migrants ensured that they were not threats to the health or security of the Egyptian population. Unfortunately, the migration of almajiri to other states in Nigeria during the coronavirus period constitutes threats to the health of Nigerians in destination states. This is the reason for the increasing number of coronavirus infected persons in northern Nigeria in particular, and Nigeria in general.

Joseph informed the Pharaoh about the arrival of these new Egyptian migrants. The Pharaoh was the chief migration officer of Egypt and Joseph, as a mark of

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<sup>45</sup> Niyi Awofeso, Jan Ritchie & Pieter Degeling, "The Almajiri Heritage and the Threat of Non-State Terrorism in Northern Nigeria--Lessons from Central Asia and Pakistan", *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 26, no.4 (2003):314.

<sup>46</sup> Francis Chigozie Chilaka and Ikechukwu Idika "Boko Haram: Evolution, Philosophy and Structural Organization", Oshita O. Oshita, Ikenna Mike Alumona, Freedom Chukwudi Onuoha, eds. *Internal Security Management in Nigeria Perspectives, Challenges and Lessons*(Singapore :Springer Nature, Pte Ltd.):93.



sincerity brought Jacob and his family to pass through the migration laws. The Pharaoh systematically profiled them such as: (1) What is your occupation (2) what is your age (v.3, v.8). These two questions were important questions. First, the first question revealed their mission to Egypt and also the benefits that Egypt got from them. Second, the second question reveals the safety of Egyptians in the hands of the Jewish migrants. In Nigeria, there is no systematic profiling of the Almajiri children before smuggling them to other states of Nigeria. First, the governors of the receiving states were not called to notify them of the migration of these Almajiri children. Moreover, this period is a time of total lockdown in Nigeria, and one begins to suspect the actions of the northern governors at a time like this. Secondly, these Almajiri children were loaded into trucks meant for bags of rice and cement. They were hidden in these trucks and transported as essential food items into other states. One of the so many cases was on 6 May 2020, when the Cross River border taskforce intercepted and sent back five trucks with goods and Almajiri children at Gakem-Benue border.<sup>47</sup> This shows that government of the northern states where Almajiri children were forcefully and wrongfully repatriated were not profiled.

The Pharaoh was convinced that these Jewish immigrants were not irregular migrants. Furthermore, with the profiling of the immigrants, he was convinced that they will be great assets to Egypt. First, they were shepherds accompanied with a specific purpose (v.3). Also, he was convinced that they would not constitute a health risk to the Egyptian people (v.6). However, the Pharaoh did something spectacular. He kept this new immigrant community in a secluded area called Goshen. It is of the view of the researcher that this was done to observe this new community and see if to revoke the terms of the agreement. Jacob and other Jewish immigrants were honest in their response to the questions asked by Pharaoh. Jacob also succeeded in convincing the Pharaoh that he has suffered so much and lived a short life (v.9). Bring this scenario to the Nigeria context, the truth seems to be crystal clear. The governors and citizens of receiving states are not comfortable with this emergency migration of Almajiri children. Sometimes these children are being transported to other states as early as 2-3am. One begins

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<sup>47</sup>Agency Report, “COVID-19: Cross River taskforce intercepts, sends back trucks carrying Almajiri children”, viewed 9 May 2020, from <https://www.premiumtimesng.com/coronavirus/392085-covid-19-cross-river-taskforce-intercepts-sends-back-trucks-carrying-Almajiri-children.html>

to wonder why the secrecy. It is sad to note that at a time like this, the lives of Nigerians are being taken for granted through religious politicking. Lamenting further, Niyi reveals that these children may have security implications for the receiving states. In his words: “The terrorist potential of having about one million hungry and gullible children roaming aimlessly in Nigeria’s northern cities, from whom any fanatic, religious or otherwise, could readily recruit disciples for antisocial purposes is immense”<sup>48</sup> It may be that they want these Almajiri children to spread the disease to other states in Nigeria that were coronavirus free. This may be reckoned as an obscene abuse of the fundamental human rights of Nigerians.

Jacob and his brethren were granted Goshen to dwell in. This was part of the social ethics of Egyptian Pharaoh and his subjects to the new migrants – Jacob and his children. This social ethics void the sending back of the Jewish migrants to where they were coming from. However, it must be emphasised that the granting of Goshen to these Jewish immigrants were based on the sincerity of the migration and the immigrants and their cooperation throughout the period of profiling. Taking the Nigerian context into this scenario, first, it is dangerous to keep the Almajiri children that you cannot attest where they are coming from and also validate their health status in the time like this in Nigeria. Secondly, allowing the Almajiri children to mix with the host population will be inimical to the security health of the receiving community.

## **Recommendations**

They include:

1. Just as the Jewish migrants engaged in regular migration, the governors of states with these Almajiri children should know that the irregular migration of Almajiri children to other states of Nigeria is not in the interest of both giving and receiving states. Governments of receiving states should be made to be aware of the arrival of these migrants by the government of the giving state.

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<sup>48</sup>Niyi Awofeso , Jan Ritchie & Pieter Degeling, “The Almajiri Heritage and the Threat of Non-State Terrorism in Northern Nigeria--Lessons from Central Asia and Pakistan”, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 26, no.4 (2003):320

2. Just as the Pharaoh profiled the Jewish migrants, the government of destination states should systematically profile the Almajiri children by asking them of their parents' name, their local government, their state and their village. This will enable the government of receiving state to know better about their visitors.
3. Pharaoh felt satisfied with the presence of the Jewish migrants and he gave them where to stay. Any state governor that feels satisfied with the explanation given by these migrating Almajiri children should allow them in, however, in a secluded place for close monitoring.
4. The Jewish migrants were provided with food and other essential needs. Government and other stakeholders should provide the essential needs of these Almajiri children so that they do not die of starvation or engage in any nefarious activities for survival.

## **Conclusion**

From the pericope, Jacob and his family members notwithstanding that the motive for their migration was economic, they ensure that they achieved their aim legally and as regular migrants. It is due to lack of proper profiling that made Almajiri children scapegoats to coronavirus in Nigeria. The Almajiri children before this period have not being given due consideration and attention. The spate of the smuggling of Almajiri children in trucks meant for animals tells of how these children are considered as humans. It also tells of the security risk that that forced migration of these children posed to their receiving states. There is the need to properly profile these children and reunite them with their parents or the government at the moment should give them proper attention until the pandemic is reduced to the minimum.