

**IMPACT OF FOOD/CASH CROP PRODUCTION ON ALMAJIRI
SYSTEM OF EDUCATION IN LAFIA, NASARAWA STATE: A
HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE**

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ABSTRACT

Being an agricultural landscape in central Nigeria, the Lafia area is naturally endowed with abundant natural resources, suitable environmental and arable land that support different kinds of agricultural activity and crop production. The area is also well-watered and falls within the Guinea Savannah vegetation zone of Nigeria. It is largely because of this natural endowment and the people who are mainly farmers that the area came to be regarded as the agricultural hub of the present Nasarawa State. Lafia is a place to fall back on even during drought and famine, because of the ceaseless supply of agricultural products in the area. This, in fact, led to the emergence and influx of other people into Lafia with the intention of trading activities and the acquisition of Islamic knowledge referred to as “makarantan Allo” under the Almajiri system. This study observes that, based on empirical facts, the cash-crop production of the area has seriously impacted the Almajiri schools in the area. The findings reveal that the Almajiri pupils benefited greatly through the instrumentality of cash production, which contributed immeasurably to their studies and improved their living conditions.

KEYWORDS: Food/cash Crop Production, Almajiri, Nasarawa, Education, and Impact.

INTRODUCTION

Lafia is abundantly endowed with fertile soil, lush vegetation, and favourable climatic conditions in the area of the so-called food and cash crops production right from the earliest times. The area is also blessed with highly experienced and skilled farmers. The soil supports different types of crops, and the yield is always high compared to other neighbouring areas.¹

The railway line was constructed in 1925. The area has catalysed the influx of people into the area.² The sudano-sahelian drought, which occurred in 1913/1915, 1942/1944, and 1972/1973 in the northern parts of Nigeria, coupled with other natural factors, triggered seasonal migration of people from the north to Lafia.³ This development actually contributed to the increase in the population of the area. The immigrants later found the area as a safe haven. The surge in population added to the number of farmers in the area.⁴ The influx of people into the area had tremendously helped in boosting agricultural activities in the area. The indigenous people like Alago, Ake, Kanuri, Eggon, Migili, and Gwandara played a significant role in making Lafia a “food basket” of some sort in Nigeria. Indeed, during drought and famine, Lafia has proven to be a place to fall back on.⁵

The food production profile of Lafia supported people who were engaged in teaching, learning, and spreading Islam under the Almajiri Islamic education system. It provided a means whereby the Almajirai (pupils) mostly assisted their mallams (teachers) as well as themselves by going about begging for both food and money (known as bara) to earn a living. This is a tradition that became common, or rather an acceptable norm, in most Almajiri education systems in northern Nigeria. The presence of Almajirai on most streets in northern Nigeria is a testimony to the above fact.

CONCEPTUAL ISSUES

Cash crop and Almajiri are consistently the key concepts used in this study. The concept of cash crop is not fundamentally new to social scientists and economic historians. It is deliberately coined by the colonialists in order to differentiate it from the so-called food crop. Therefore, the concept is purely a colonial creation. It's the understanding of the colonialists that cash crops fetched “cash” to the farmer or producer in contradistinction to the food crops, which were meant for the provision of food and other staples. This categorization is being challenged by some notable

historians and social scientists to the effect that the categorization is not necessary and that it was coined purely for the exploitation of Africans.⁶ Therefore, this study seeks to retain and use the colonial concept of cash crops for a nuanced discussion of the Almajiri question in Nigerian social and economic spaces.

Almajiri, as a concept, is derived from the Arabic word “Almuhajirun” meaning an emigrant. The Arabic word was later corrupted by the Hausa people to Almajiri. It usually refers to a person who migrates from the luxury of his home to other places or to a popular teacher (mallam) in the quest for Islamic or Qur’anic knowledge.⁷ This group of immigrants in present-day northern Nigeria is mostly a horrible sight. These children usually carry bowls and are hungry-looking; they are a visible sight on our streets.⁸ They sometimes constitute a menace to society. Some even fall victims of ritualists and human traffickers. The children hardly have time to learn except very early in the morning. The Mallams sometimes rely on the pupils/students for feeding and the provision of other social necessities.⁹

LAFIA AGRICULTURAL FOOD ECONOMY IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Food/cash crop production happens to be the main pre-occupation of Lafia people right from time immemorial. These activities-food production, endure up to the present time, which earns the area of Lafia. The reputation of the “food basket” of Nasarawa State and, arguably, the country. Lafia is known for the cultivation of root and tuber crops, cereals, and other crops such as groundnut, cashew nut, legumes, as well as vegetables¹⁰

It is interesting to note that every village in Lafia specializes in the cultivation of a particular food crop. For example, while Ugah and Assakio specialize in rice production, places like Adogi, Ashangwa, Akurba, and Agyaragu specialize in vegetable production. In like manner, Madagwa, Igibi, Ambana, and parts of Barkin Abdullahi specialize in vegetable production. Areas like Aridi, Barkin Abdullahi, Bakin Rijiya, Adogi, Kurikyo, Ambana, and Igibi, as well as Ashakpa and Angbaku, specialize in cassava production.¹¹ The above places, as well as several others like Tudun Wada and Andre, have skillful farmers of different commodities. These areas had produced tons of cereals and tubers of yams and cassava for quite a long time. During the period of the great depression of the early 1930s, Lafia's food economy was affected so much so that the native authority had to set the general parameters that would inform the strategy for the revitalization of

African agriculture. Thus, through the department of agriculture, the colonial state came to occupy a more central role in directing agriculture than hitherto did.¹²

Predictably, local farming households of the Lafia area spontaneously responded to these initiatives by increasing the level of their productivity, especially of the so-called cash crops. Consequently, food crop production received a boost during the period of the Great depression, which affected the area negatively as it resulted in food shortages in most of the northern states, and it also affected Lafia to a certain extent. But food production momentarily got a boost. This was because people came from different parts of the country down to Lafia markets for the purchase of their foodstuffs during the periods under review.¹³

BRIEF HISTORY OF ALMAJIRI SYSTEM OF EDUCATION IN NORTHERN NIGERIA

The almajiri system of Islamic education is an old practice among Muslims. Imam Shafi'i was the greatest proponent of migration for seeking knowledge, which he also extended even to business and a number of other things. He likened it to a precious stone, which is said to be nothing unless it is mined and transported away from its soil. He summarized everything in two verses: "Emigrate from your home is a quest of excellence, and travel, for in travel there are five benefits: relief from sorrow and earning a livelihood, then knowledge, good manners, and friendship."¹⁴

Shafi'i himself was born in Gaza. He travelled almost the entire Middle East seeking knowledge until he finally settled in Egypt. Danfodio¹⁵ travelled to Niger to learn from Sheikh Jibril. The mallams in Zaria city still receive students from distant places like Mali, Cameroun, Chad, and Central Africa, etc.¹⁶

During the pre-colonial era, the Almajiri education system, originally called Tsangaya was established under the Kanem-Borno Empire, one of the oldest empires in Africa. It was established as a comprehensive system of education largely for learning Islamic principles, values, jurisprudence, and theology. It was a replica of Islamic learning centres in many Muslim countries, such as the Mudrasah in Pakistan, Malaysia, Egypt, and Indonesia, etc.¹⁶

This system of Islamic Education started in Borno in the 11th century as a result of the involvement of Borno rulers in Qur'anic literacy. Over seven hundred years later, the Sokoto caliphate was founded principally through an Islamic revolution. These two empires ran similar Qur'anic learning systems, which, over time, came to be known as the Almajiri system¹⁷. Under the Almajiri system,

especially during the pre-colonial period, the pupils lived with their parents for moral upbringing. All the schools were located within the immediate environment from where the pupils came. The Jihad of Usman Danfodio brought with it some modifications, particularly the establishment of an inspectorate unit for Qur'anic literacy¹⁸. The inspectors reported directly to the Emir of the Emirate or sub-emirate concerning all matters relating to the schools. This is with a view to ensuring quality control through effective supervision of such schools. The period, unarguably, marked a significant turning point as far as Qur'anic and Islamic education was concerned in northern Nigeria¹⁹.

The schools were maintained by the state, communities, the parents, zakat waqf, and supplemented by the teachers and students through farming²⁰. Bara (begging) as it is known today was completely unheard of. Teachers and their pupils, in return, provide the community with Islamic education, reading and writing the Qur'an, in addition to the development of Ajami, i.e., writing and reading of Hausa language using the Arabic alphabet. Based on this system, the then northern Nigeria was largely educated with an Islamic way of life, governance, customs, traditional craft, trade, and even mode of dressing²¹. The funds were under the control of the emir of the area since Islam encourages charity to a wayfarer and to a student of learning. The community also supported these Almajirai, most of whom came from faraway places to tsangaya (Qur'anic learning centre) schools²². In return, the almajirai offered services such as laundry, cobbling, gardening, weaving, sewing, manicure, and pedicure as well as charity to the community that contributed to their well-being, hence giving them.

The Almajiri schools, though funded, were not overly dependent on the state. The pupils were at liberty to acquire vocational and occupational skills in between their Islamic lessons and so were involved in farming, fishing, well construction, masonry, production, trade, tailoring, small business, etc. Many of them were the farmers of the northern Nigerian cotton and groundnut pyramids²³. They formed a part of the traders in the commercial city of Kano. They were the leather tanners and leather and shoes, and bag makers in the old Sokoto Empire. The cap weavers and tailors in Zaria city were said to be almajirai. Thus, they formed the largest percentage of the community workforce and made significant contributions to the economy of the society before the introduction of white collar jobs²⁴. It is interesting to note that this system of Qur'anic education has survived up to our time but with little modifications, like the establishment of Islamiyya schools across most of the northern region, which significantly altered the nature and mode of instruction,

largely due to the introduction of a new curriculum that seeks to combine both Qur'anic and Islamic education at the same time²⁵.

ORIGIN AND DEVELOPMENT OF ALMAJIRI SCHOOLS IN LAFIA

As in Borno and Hausa states, where there are documents regarding the establishment of almajiri and tsangaya schools in the pre-colonial period, the case of Lafia is very different. Lafia metropolis was initially a koro settlement otherwise known as Migili, and later Alago and Gwandara joined them²⁶. The Kanuri subsequently joined them and came along with the Qur'an as their source and symbol of authority of Shariah law. Going by interviews conducted in the area, some informants of Lafia town stated that tsangaya and almajiri schools began to surface right from the 1960s to date.²⁷

Malam Musa Ahmed, a great historian, opines that some Almajirai (students) who came from Igala land in present Kogi State settled at unguwar Liman under the control of Malam Adam and his son Malam Ali. The students were provided with accommodation and food. They also engaged in begging (Bara) in order to supplement the feeding and concentrate on their studies²⁸.

In addition, a typical Tsangaya school was founded at unguwar wajen Rabo under the leadership of Malam Liman, whose teachings generated and produced quality graduates in Islamic education. In line with this development, more Tsangaya and almajiri schools came to be established in the area. Generally, these schools increased spontaneously. These include makarantan Malam Sabo Baba, that of Malam Fulani adjacent to unguwar Jaba, close to the railway line at Makurdi road.²⁹

The economic potentials of Lafia area subsequently attracted and led to the establishment of tsangaya and almajiri schools in the area. The city increased in population in such a manner that rapid socio-economic, political, and educational development qualified Lafia to become the state capital of Nasarawa State in 1996³⁰. At present, there are more than 40 to 50 tsangaya and almajiri schools firmly established in the town.

CASH CROP PRODUCTION IN LAFIA AREA

The cash crop production in Lafia started because of the colonial policy of taxation in the area around 1903. There is a link between colonial taxation and cash crop production and trade. People of Lafia had to engage in wage labour, particularly on cash crops, to source money to settle their tax obligations.³¹ In such a situation,

the people had no alternative but to cultivate and sell their farm produce (cash crops) for a fixed amount authorized by the colonial administrators. As a corollary, the people of Lafia concentrated their efforts on the cultivation of the cash crops in the area for obvious reasons. The cultivation was partly done with the labour sourced from some of the almajirai already settled in the town³². It should, however, be noted that during the period, farming was the dominant occupation of the Lafia people. The Muslims and non-Muslims alike were deeply involved in the cultivation of this produce (cash crop). This was so much so that some areas and villages came to be identified with the cultivation of certain types of cash crops: Aridi villages were noted for the cultivation of beniseeds, ugah, and Assakio were noted for rice production, and most of the Eggon settlements of Lafia were highly noted for groundnut production, as well as the Kanuri people of Lafia. Most of these Almajirai were active participants in the cultivation of cash crops in the area³³.

THE CONTRIBUTION OF FOOD/CASH CROP PRODUCTION IN THE GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT OF ALMAJIRI EDUCATION IN LAFIA

Food/Cash crop production played a significant role in the development and sustenance of Almajiri education in the Lafia area. Lafia was known for the production of cash crops, particularly groundnuts. It is, therefore, not out of place to say that the Lafia area contributed greatly to the popular groundnut pyramid of Kano during the colonial and post-colonial periods³⁴.

Lafia farmers are always a visible sight during the groundnut harvesting period from June to September. They were as well, visibly seen at the Dawanau market of Kano State where they sold their cash crops; thereby contributing greatly to the agricultural economy of the country. Much is still the same with the agricultural produce traders and middlemen from the north, particularly Kano, trooping into Lafia, to buy from the local farmers for onward transportation of the commodities to their states.

It is interesting to note that the cultivation of groundnuts was being carried out, particularly in the early sixties and beyond, by the cheap labour provided by almajirai³⁵. The farmers usually sought the support of Mallams (teachers) during cultivation and harvest periods to supply them with the labour of the almajirai to carry out their farming activities. The mallams sometimes used the almajirai on the lands of farmers to earn a living and to supplement what their teachers had for them.

It is noteworthy that some non-Muslims do engage the labour of the mallams (teachers) instead of the almajirai³⁶.

The almajirai are always helpful during the harvest period. They would be eager to go to the farms and pick the groundnuts from the plants popularly called “Roron Gyada” in Hausa by the almajirai. Lafia area is popularly known as the groundnut belt of Nasarawa State³⁷, and the Almajirai and their mallams usually provide labour.

Educationally, the almajiri schools benefited a lot from the activities of agricultural production, especially in Lafia. The interview conducted shows that the Almajirai were frequently employed as labourers on farms and to convey goods to various stores for reservation, preservation, and storage. Crop production impacted on these Almajirai educationally, it contributed a lot to parents and their wards, whose efforts (cultivation of crops and the labourer expended the power of purchasing) helped the children to acquire education. On acquiring the Islamic education, the almajirai were able to purchase their personal attire largely from the money they got from the labour on cash crop farms. Some pupils married the daughters of their mallams.

Economically, the impact of cash crop production on the almajiri educational system in Lafia town is something to be reckoned with. A cursory examination of Lafia town indicates that numerous products of the schools that came to the area are currently businessmen, and some of them began as Almajirai, some of whom are wealthy men in the area.

Socially, cash crop production played a significant role in the almajiri system. It established a kind of mutual relationship between Lafia town and the far northern states. It contributed to the exchange of knowledge, language, and ideas³⁸.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The colonial and post-colonial eras marked significant milestones in the history of cash crop production and its impacts on the almajiri system of education in Lafia. It is realized that the development of a cash crop economy made a remarkable impact on the socio-economic as well as educational development of the town.

Based on the findings gathered while conducting this research, it is therefore recommended that:

- i. Parents and guardians must train their children from childhood by sending them to school.

- ii. There should be moral education from the parents to ensure that their children do not move about on the streets aimlessly.
- iii. Government must ensure inclusivity in education; all children of school age must be enrolled in school.
- iv. There should be adequate provision of social amenities in all nooks and crannies of the area.
- v. Early marriage should be strongly discouraged.

ENDNOTES

1. Obaro Ikime (Ed), *Groundwork of Nigerian History*, Published by Heineman, Ibadan, 1980, p. 509, see footnote on the page.
2. Musa Ahmed, "The Role of Railway in the Socio-Economic Development of Lafia Town 1930-1980 Unpublished B.A. History Dissertation Department of History, University of Jos.
3. Ambrose Inusa Sule, "The History of Drought Occurrence in Nigeria" in *People's Daily Newspaper*, Thursday, March 11, 2010, Edition p. 12.
4. Personal interview with Muhammadu Musa, a retired Farmer. Place of Interview: Lafia, Age: 82, Date of Interview: 25 July 2025.
5. Jibrin Muhammad Waziri, "A History of Cash Crop Trade in the Lafia Area, 1903-1996, unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, Department of History, Benue State University, Makurdi, 2016.
6. Walter Rodney in "How Europe Underdeveloped Africa," Published by Bogle. Coverture, 1972, p.240; see Monday Y. Mangvwat in "A History of Labour in Nigeria" (Ed), Published by Jos University Press Limited 1998, p. 26; see also Claude Ake, in "A Political Economy of Africa Published by Longman Group Limited, 1981, pp. 117 and 118.
7. *Almajiri and Qur'anic Education*, Published by the Almajirai Directorate, National Council for the Welfare of the Destitute. Printed by Rishab Printing Press, Kaduna, 2021, p.13.
8. These children are visible in almost all the major cities of northern Nigeria, including Lafia. The description perfectly fits the comments of every discerning mind.
9. Personal interview with an Almajiri named Musa Iliyasu in Lafia, aged 12 on 16th October, 2025. The child even told me that he is an orphan, having lost both

parents at 6, and his uncle, who is his guardian, handed him over to a mallam for Qur'anic education.

- ¹⁰. Jibrin Muhammad Waziri, "A History of Cash Trade in the Lafia Area, 1903-1996, Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis Department of History Benue State University, Makurdi 2016.
- ¹¹. Jibrin Muhammad Waziri, "A History of Cash Trade in the Lafia Area, 1903-1996, Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, Department of History, Benue State University, Makurdi, 2016.
- ¹². Bukar Dan'Azumi, Lafia Food Economy: A History of Production and Control of Surplus Ph.D Thesis, Department of History, University of Jos.
- ¹³. Jibrin Muhammad Waziri, "A History of Cash Trade in the Lafia Area, 1903-1996, Unpublished Ph.D Thesis, Department of History, Benue State University, Makurdi, 2016.
- ¹⁴. Abdurrahman I. Roi, Shariah the Islamic Law, Published by Ta-Ha Publishers, 1984, p. 104.
- ¹⁵. J.F. Abe Ajayi and Jan Espie (Ed), A Thousand Years of West African History, Published by Thomas Nelson and Sons Limited, 1967, pp. 270-279.
- ¹⁶. Students seeking Islamic Knowledge used to come from various West African Countries to seek Islamic Knowledge in Zaria, particularly in Theology, Jurisprudence, as well as Islamic History.
- ¹⁷. This type of Qur'anic Schools or Tsangaya are mostly called Madrasah in much of Asia.
- ¹⁸. Almajiri Qur'anic Education, published by the Almajirai Directorate, National Council for the Welfare of the Destitute, Printed by Rishab Printing Press, Kaduna 2021, pp. 14-15.
- ¹⁹. Almajiri Qur'anic Education, published by the Almajirai Directorate, National Council for the Welfare of the Destitute, Printed by Rishab Printing Press, Kaduna 2021, pp. 15.
- ²⁰. Almajiri Qur'anic Education, published by the Almajirai Directorate, National Council for the Welfare of the Destitute, Printed by Rishab Printing Press, Kaduna 2021, pp. 15.
- ²¹. Almajiri Qur'anic Education, published by the Almajirai Directorate, National Council for the Welfare of the Destitute, Printed by Rishab Printing Press, Kaduna 2021, pp. 15.

22. Almajiri Qur'anic Education, published by the Almajirai Directorate, National Council for the Welfare of the Destitute, Printed by Rishab Printing Press, Kaduna, 2021, pp. 15.
23. Almajiri Qur'anic Education, published by the Almajirai Directorate, National Council for the Welfare of the Destitute, Printed by Rishab Printing Press, Kaduna 2021, pp. 15.
24. Personal Interview with Malam Musa Ahmed, a retired Civil servant and Historian in Lafia, aged 61 on 28th October, 2025.
25. Personal Interview with Malam Musa Ahmed, a retired Civil servant and Historian in Lafia, aged 61 on 28th October, 2025.
26. Jibrin Muhammad Waziri, A History of Cash Crop Trade in the Lafia Area, 1903-1996 Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, Department of History, Benue State University, Makurdi. 2016
27. Personal Interview with some residents of Lafia in September 2025 at Lafia.
28. Personal interview with Malam Musa Ahmed, a retired civil servant and a historian.
29. Personal interview with Malam Musa Ahmed, a retired civil servant and a historian.
30. General Sani Abacha formally announced the creation of Nasarawa State on 1st October, 1996, thereby bringing the total number of states to 36 in Nigeria.
31. Jibrin Muhammad Waziri, A History of Cash Crop Trade in the Lafia Area, 1903-1996 Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, Department of History, Benue State University, Makurdi. 2016
32. Jibrin Muhammad Waziri, A History of Cash Crop Trade in the Lafia Area, 1903-1996 Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, Department of History, Benue State University, Makurdi. 2016
33. Jibrin Muhammad Waziri, A History of Cash Crop Trade in the Lafia Area, 1903-1996 Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, Department of History, Benue State University, Makurdi. 2016
34. Almajiri and Qur'anic Education, published by the Almajirai Directorate, National Council for the welfare of the Destitute, printed by Rishab Printing Press, Kaduna, 2021, p. 13.
35. Personal interview with Malam Musa Ahmed
36. Personal interview with Malam Musa Ahmed
37. Personal interview with Malam Musa Ahmed
38. Personal interview with Malam Musa Ahmed

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