

Begging enterprise: A growing trend among Igbo Christians in Nsukka Urban



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It is obvious that the practice of begging is growing exponentially and changing into various forms mostly among the Christians in the Nsukka area. Although begging has long been in existence in the Nsukka area, it has never been encouraged. Financial assistance from family and relatives usually prevents an indigent person from begging in the street. Giving alms to the poor is regarded as a religious duty by many people. But, some beggars take advantage of people's sympathy and thus the practice of begging is encouraged. Many scholars have written about the increase in the number of beggars in Igboland and attributed it to a number of factors such as poverty and ill health. Some see it as an indictment on government. However, this present study attributes the increase in the number of beggars in Nsukka's cultural area to religion, laziness as against hard work, individualism as against communalism, social disorganisation because of urbanisation. These beggars who do nothing other than to beg are less productive, and consequently contribute nothing to the nation's economy. They are a nuisance in the society, as some engage in all kinds of immoral activities that degrade human society. This study therefore attempts to explore the growing trend of begging among Igbo Christians in Nsukka Urban. It aims to identify the different dimensions of begging and the reasons behind this practice. A qualitative phenomenological method was employed in this study.

Contribution: The findings of this study revealed that poverty is not the cause of begging among Christians in Nsukka but rather laziness, individualism, and religious mendicancy, among others. It recommends that the Igbo people should go back to the values that bind them together.

Keywords: begging; Igbo society; hard work; communalism; Christianity.

Introduction

Begging is a global phenomenon, which occurs in every society. However, it is more prevalent in developing nations. According to Ado (1997), and Ogunkan and Fawole (2009), the practice of begging is a global occurrence. Beggars have been found in USA and Mexico (Fabrega 1971; Smith 2005). There are also beggars in the city of Shanghai in China, where they are called *liumin* meaning floating people or *yumin* meaning wandering people (Hanchao 1999). Beggars are also seen in Britain (Jordan 1999). In the city of Johannesburg, South Africa, beggars are seen near shops and along the streets (Jelili 2013).

In Nigeria, the problem of begging is widespread, and is increasing day by day (Bukoye 2015; Ekebosi et al. 2021; Fawole, Ogunkan & Omoruan 2011; Jelili 2013; Nwobodo 2021). According to Bukoye (2015), Adedibu and Jelili (2011) beggars are commonly seen in the northern part of the country, and this is mainly because of the Almajiri system, which allow children to go about in their numbers begging for food and the rest of them. Onoyase (2010) noted that these children who are denied parental care constitute the majority of the beggars in Nigeria. Ogunkan and Fawole (2009) also posit that the majority of beggars are northerners. Jibril (1997) asserts that the reason for the greater number of beggars in the north is because people tend to justify begging with Islamic injunction. However, there are also beggars in the western and the eastern parts of the country, but their numbers are comparatively lower than what is seen in the north. According to Adedibu and Jelili (2011), the occurrence of begging in Kano is seven times more than that of Ibadan, and that of Enugu is one-third of that of Ibadan.

In South-Eastern Nigeria, particularly among the Igbo, street begging was not popular. The people see it as a taboo and thus the practice is frowned upon by them (Jelili 2013). This view is also held by the people of Nsukka's cultural zone in Enugu state, Nigeria. Nsukka's cultural zone

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covers seven local governments. It is a semi urban city which has a popular Nigerian university, and is a Christian dominated area. Nsukka Christians are known to be hard-working and diligent. According to Agozino and Anyanike (2007), Nsukka people do not believe that anyone needs to steal or beg to become rich. They are fiercely communal rather than individualistic. They believe in the saying *Onye ayala nwanne ya* (no one should leave his brother or sister to suffer). In this sense it becomes shameful to relate you to a person who is a beggar.

However, in recent times, there is a growing trend in begging, noticeably among Christians, in Nsukka Urban. Most of these beggars who identified themselves as Christians are seen around church arenas, traffic signals, markets, and other public places. Many scholars have explored the phenomenon of begging among youths, including their socio-economic dimensions, laws that prohibits street begging, and the consequences of street begging. This research examines the different dimensions of begging among Christians in Nsukka Urban, and the reasons for such practice, with a view to unravel the Igbo Christian values for the less privileged. A qualitative phenomenological method was adopted for this study, which basically focuses on the commonality of lived experience within a particular group. Data were collected through primary and secondary sources. An in-depth interview was used for the collection of primary data through a purposive and convenience sampling technique, while content analysis was used for secondary data. Data were analysed through a descriptive analytical approach.

Begging in its general sense

Begging is an act of seeking for a favour from someone with little or no expectation of reciprocation. The favour could be in the form of cash, food items, clothing, or anything which the individual desires and considers useful. There are several definitions for begging. Bukoye (2015) defines begging as the practice of asking others to grant a favour in the form of a gift or food without expecting a reciprocation or refund. Esan (2009) says that beggars are the members of the society who have been neglected entirely in Nigeria, both socio-economically and politically. As a result, they believe they have no dignity to be protected in the society. This definition is one-sided as it places the blame for this problem on the government alone. For instance, some people decide on their own to choose begging as a way of survival. Broun, Ube and Bisong (2010) say that begging is an anti-social behaviour observed in almost all nations of the world especially in developing nations, which involves asking for what the beggar does not have.

Begging is a global social problem which is caused mainly by religious and cultural factors. For instance, in Europe, begging is found among the minority cultures, especially among the Roma and nomadic communities (Cherneva 2011). In Turkey, begging is widely regarded as a survival strategy (Gary 2010). In Nigeria, according to Adedibu and Jelili (2011), culture plays a significant role in the prevalence of begging. While it promotes begging in the North, it

discourages begging in the South, particularly among the Igbo of South-east Nigeria. Beggars are found mainly in the North because of the Almajiri system in the Islamic religious culture (Bukoye 2015). Moreover, most people who give alms to beggars do so because of their religious beliefs. Thus, these people tend to justify the practice of begging (Jibril 1997).

Beggars are usually seen at the heart of cities and towns, where they can see many passers-by, and in places like transport routes, motor parks, markets, churches, and along bank roads. According to Fawole et al. (2010), beggars are mostly seen in public places, commercial centres, residential neighbourhood and even inside campuses and buses. Some beggars beg by singing songs, and others pretend to be lame, blind or dumb. They do anything that will make others look at them with pity and be moved to help them.

Begging is a serious social problem in almost all the countries in the world. According to Khan, Menka and Ghamshad (2014), begging is one of the most complicated social problems with great magnitude, yet remains misunderstood. Most societies frown at it, while it is allowed in others. Bukoye (2015) pointed out the example of the *Safe Street Act 1999*, which is a statute in the province of Ontario, Canada, which restricts some kinds of begging. Also, the Law 61 of 1991 in Romania forbids people from asking alms in public places if they are capable of doing work. Namwata, Mgabo and Dimoso (2012) noted that begging is prohibited in some parts of India. Begging is prohibited in places like Portugal, United Kingdom, United States, and in some parts of San Francisco, California. (Bukoye 2015). However, in Luxembourg, begging is legal. It was also legal in Finland until 2003 when it was completely decriminalised (Johnny 2010). In Yaoundé Cameroon, beggars are being taken off the street as they are said to create public nuisance and inconveniences (Bukoye 2015).

In Nigeria, the government announced a ban on begging in some states like Kaduna, Nasarawa and Kano (Hadiza 2020). Takur (2013) in Premium Times Newspaper stated how Anambra state government arrested beggars in the streets of Awka and swiftly repatriated them to their home states, such as Ebonyi and Akwa Ibom. Street begging generates various reactions from people, regulating it or curbing it entirely will go a long way in the organisation of a society. Bose and Hwang (2002) argue that some advanced countries prohibits begging because of the fact that most beggars use the money they received to buy alcohol and drugs.

There are different forms of begging. Jelili (2009) categorised begging into two, namely, corporate begging and individual begging. Kamruzzaman and Hakim (2017) listed eight categories of beggars. They are juvenile beggars, religious mendicants, able-bodied beggars, aged and infirmed beggars, professional and hereditary beggars, casual beggars, beggars with physical and mental disabilities, and beggars with diseases. Bukoye (2015) categorised begging into three types based on the techniques of begging. They are passive begging, active begging, and aggressive begging. Iqbal (2013) listed 18 different types of begging which includes child beggars,

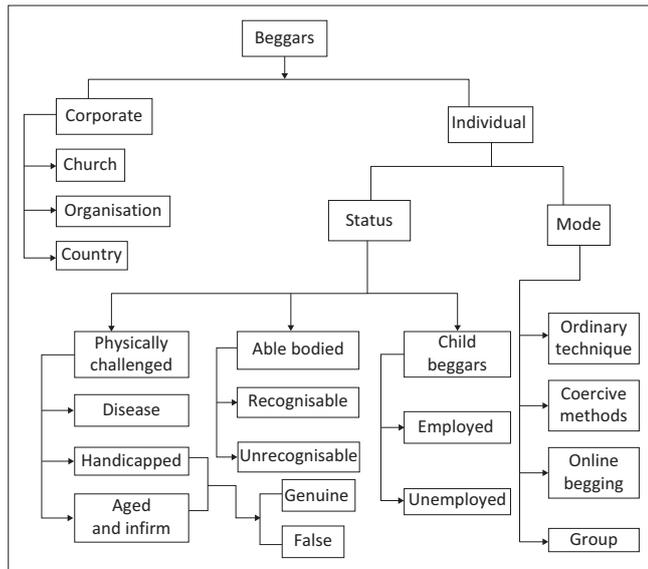


FIGURE 1: Categorisation of beggars.

exploiters beggars, migrant beggars, professional beggars, employed beggars, physically handicapped beggars, mentally handicapped or insane beggars, diseased beggars, religious mendicant beggars, casual beggars, temporarily unemployed but employable beggars, temporarily unemployed who are unemployed beggars, somewhat permanently unemployed who are employable beggars, permanently unemployed and unemployable beggars, permanently unemployed who are viciously and incorrigibly unwilling to work beggars, small trade beggars, tribal beggars, and able-bodied beggars. Some other scholars categorise beggars based on their mode of begging, which includes ordinary and coercive methods, and attempts to beg by deforming their body. Other categories of beggars include professional beggars, genuine beggars, and child beggars. Ogunkan and Fawole also identified some beggars such as online or internet beggars. Different forms or categories of beggars are represented in Figure 1.

As seen from Figure 1, begging is broadly categorised into two, namely, corporate and individual begging. The corporate type of begging comprises of where a country, organisation or church is begging for funds. The second type is individual begging which is the major crux of this article. Individual begging is categorised into two, based on status and the mode of begging. Based on the status of begging, there are physically challenged beggars, able-bodied beggars, and child beggars.

The physically challenged is further categorised into three, namely, beggars with diseases, beggars with disabilities and the aged. Among this group, some may be fake and others genuine. Under the able-bodied category, some of them can be recognised as beggars on seeing them while some cannot be recognised. Some beggars are employed to lead others while some are begging on their own. The third category based on status include child beggars, where some of them are employed to lead the blind or those with disabilities while some beg on their own. Finally based on the mode of begging, some beggars beg ordinarily, some are coercive in begging, some beg online while others move in groups to beg.

There are several reasons why people beg. According to Hanchao (1999), people of China beg because of difficulties in life caused by natural disasters, civil wars, disabilities, and diseases. Iqbal (2013) asserts that in India, several economic, religious, and social factors are responsible for begging. He also added natural calamities, loss of agricultural occupation and biological cause as the reasons for begging in the area. Al-Shuweikh (2020) describes about the psychological, social and economic reasons for begging. Kamruzzaman and Hakim (2017) posit that poverty is the major cause of begging in Bangladesh. According to Fawole et al. (2011), the existence of begging in Nigeria is a product of urban poverty and social deviance. Bukoye (2015) asserts that in Nigeria, socio-economic factors influences begging. Jelili (2006) identifies physical disabilities, unemployment, and old age as the reasons for begging. The reasons for begging vary among different cultures and countries.

Predictors of begging in Nsukka's cultural area

Street begging was not a common feature among the Igbo people. It was a shameful thing in Igbo culture to be referred to as *onye ariro* (a beggar). However, in recent times, there is an exponential increase in the number of beggars in Nsukka's cultural area, Northern Igboland. Nsukka is a Christian-dominated place and many of the beggars who are the residents of this area are Christians. These individuals live among the people, and their Christian identities are well known by the community. Here are some of the issues that have encouraged begging in recent times.

Religion

Religion seems to encourage the practice of begging. Many people view almsgiving as a service to God. Beggars take advantage of this to perpetuate their act of begging. Khan et al. (2014) and Iqbal (2013) assert that the religious faith of people has encouraged begging. According to Ifeanyi (personal interview), when people give alms to beggars, they believe that they are fulfilling a religious obligation. Hence, beggars are encouraged to continue their business of begging. In Nsukka's cultural area, there are some social norms that force people to give alms to beggars and orphans, during celebrations like wedding, child dedication, and other religious ceremonies. There are many chapters in the bible that encourage Christians to give alms to the poor, for instance Psalm 41:1; Proverbs 28:27; Isaiah 58:7-9, and so on. Giving alms to the poor should be encouraged but begging should be discouraged, because it is believed in Igbo culture that one tree cannot make a forest, and *aka nrikwò aka ekpe, aka ekpeakwo aka nri*. Those who are poor should make themselves available to do certain work for the rich, so as to be taken care of, either in cash or kind by the rich. In the precolonial era, alms-giving was practised, but its spread was checked by the different support systems for the dependent people.

Social disintegration

Extended family setup has been a vital social arrangement for the management of the poor and vulnerable in Nsukka, and

Igbo society at large. However, with the incidence of migration, the extended family structure became weak and thus individualised. Thus, members of extended families could no longer receive substantial support from their family members. There was no one to fall back on during hardship. This scenario pushed many people to a life of beggary in Nsukka.

Laziness

Laziness is identified as a major cause of begging among Christians in Nsukka's cultural area. Most of these beggars in Nsukka are able-bodied young men and women. They take advantage of people's kindness and their religious sentiments of giving alms to the poor to continue their begging enterprise. Jelili (2013) describes these people as cunning parasites, who takes advantage of human compassion to make a fortune. According to Anizoba (pers. comm., July 7, 2021), Nsukka people are hard-working. Those able-bodied men who beg do so in disguise. It is not that they are poor, rather they beg to add to what they have already. Laziness especially among the youth is on the increase in Nsukka. According to Ibezim (pers. comm., July 7, 2021), many Nsukka youths are no longer interested in seeking education. They do not even attempt to acquire any entrepreneurial skill, neither will they have the patience to stay under a person to learn a trade. Most of them have resorted to riding tricycles (*keke napep*) and motorcycles (*okada*) without savings that can sustain them to achieve other things in life. When such persons are faced with a serious difficulty such as sickness or an obligation to help their family members, they resort to begging. In Nsukka's cultural area, begging is a practice done by poverty-stricken and disabled individuals. But, there are many able-bodied young men and women who also go for begging in public without shame.

Nsukka Christians and modern-day begging

Employed beggars

In Nsukka's cultural area, it is common these days to see groups of people who move around on uniforms with a sick person or pictures of a sick person begging for alms. These people, who are often not related to the sick but are employed to beg, attract the attention of the public with melodious Christian songs and prayers, often made to solicit for help or bless those who give them. In an interview with one of them, referred here as Chibuike, he confessed:

[W]e are paid daily according to what we realized from begging. We have our 'oga' [*the employer*] in the office. At the end of each day, we go back to the office and give him all the proceeds, and from there, he will pay us for the day. (Chibuike, pers. comm., 2021)

There are also children among this group of beggars. They are tasked to lead the people with disabilities (such as the blind) or others with any diseases to the markets, streets, and churches, soliciting for alms from the public. They are also paid at the end of the day. In an interview with one of the employed child beggars, she said:

[M]y mother is sick, whatever I get from this, I keep it, and use it to start selling pure water and I will make money from there to help my mother. (Ifeoma, pers. comm., July 7, 2021)

Another group of beggars under this category are those who beg in the name of institutions, such as orphanages, motherless baby homes, and churches, begging for help on behalf of the institution. These people are often seen at the motor parks and marketplaces. They move around with an identity card and a book to record whatever is given to them. Usually, they start their practice of begging with Christian songs and prayers, seeking God's intervention in the affairs of their targeted audience. Afterwards, they beg for alms on behalf of the institution, giving scriptural reference to convince their audience on why they should give alms to them. They also tell their audience that their act of begging is not for their own advantage but a service to God, and their own little contribution to help humanity.

Ceremonial beggars

These comprises individuals who take advantage of ceremonies or events like weddings, burials, and child dedications to beg for alms from people. This group of beggars do not come in the form of usual beggars. Instead they use the above-mentioned occasions for their services such as Master of Ceremony (MC), disc jockey (DJ), or ushers to beg for alms from people. While describing the activities of these beggars, Chibuzor (pers. comm., July 7, 2021) stated: 'they do not mind whether the celebrant will pay them for the job or not. They are interested in the caliber of guest that will be coming for the occasion. They subtly take advantage of their service to eulogies the guest in a bid to move such a one to bring out money'. Most times, the guest will be left with no option other than to dig their hand in their pocket and bring out something to avoid embarrassment. It has been observed that most of these beggars are Christians.

Another group of beggars under this category are uninvited entertainers. They will voluntarily attend a social event without being invited by the celebrant. Some of them will bring along musical instruments such as flutes, drums and trumpets to entertain the guests. Others will try to serve the guests by cleaning their shoes using their handkerchief and accompany them by holding umbrellas for them, whether it is raining or not. Some others dress like Father Christmas (commonly referred to as Papa Lolo), although having an untidy look, and tries to delight the guests by praising them and singing songs. They do all these activities to get money from the guests. The guests are forced to give them money, even though they have not intended to do it. It has been observed that the beggars who are involved in this are mostly able-bodied Christian youths.

Recognisable and unrecognisable beggars

In Nsukka, there are recognisable and unrecognisable beggars. Recognisable beggars are those who can be identified as beggars by looking at their physical appearance. They may

be disabled, looking aged or can be perceived as having any illness. Unrecognisable beggars are those who cannot be recognised as beggars, by merely looking at them. The number of unrecognisable beggars are increasing in Nsukka's cultural area. They are well-dressed and stand near ATM counters and schools to beg for money. According to Obioma:

'I went to pick up my children from their school, on reaching the school gate, I met a man well-dressed, good looking and jovial. After exchanging pleasantries with him, he told me that his wife was discharged from the hospital and that he needs some money from me to make up for the hospital bill ...' (Obioma, pers. comm., July 8, 2021)

According to Obioma, it was surprising for her to see a well-dressed and able-bodied man begging for money to pay the hospital bill of his wife who had just delivered a baby. The delivery is not an emergency, there is a nine-month duration before delivery.

These types of beggars are also seen in offices in public service. They take advantage of their position to beg for alms from whoever comes to the office for getting any service. They are commonly seen in the Nsukka Local Government secretariat. Anyone who comes here often hear their solitation such as, 'Oga, anything for the boys?' It is very embarrassing to see those employed for public service begging for money from people to do the job for which the government pays them. They are not ashamed of doing this and does not care about harming the reputation of the country. If one fails to give them what they asked for, they will subject you to rigorous excruciating maltreatment before they will do the job.

Provisions for taking care of the poor in Nsukka's cultural area

Many scholars have argued that poverty is the major reason why people beg. This finding is not true in the case of Nsukka's cultural zone. According to Barnes (2010), the poor are people who have inadequate income and insufficient food, lack shelter and safe drinking water, who live in poor environmental conditions, and who do not have access to primary education. There are many poor people among Christian communities in Nsukka today, just as in the precolonial era.

However, the church has always tried to care for the needs of the poor, by giving them hope during times of distress through prayers, preaching and fellowship with one another. Apart from providing food for the poor, the church has trained them to acquire the necessary skills to help them make a living, such as interior decoration, hairdressing, and *gele* (hair-tie styling), among others (Onah et al. 2018), all of these which have helped to liberate them from their miserable conditions. The church did not engage in this act because the people begged for it, but because the poor in the church were diligent doing the little things they can to survive. It is pertinent to note that a poor person is different from a beggar. There are poor people who are not beggars and there are beggars who are not poor.

There has always been provisions among the Igbo community to care for poor people. This is reflected in the Igbo language for the poor *ndi ogbenye*, which literally means *ndi ogbe na-enye*, that is 'people who are sustained by the help of the community'. This is quite different from *ndi ariro* – which represent a set of people who live by depending on others, repeatedly asking for money from others and thus becoming a nuisance to the community (Onebunne 2018). In Igboland, people always tried to help the poor. They helped the old people, widows and widowers. Parents always advised their children to fetch water and firewood for the old people. In doing so, the Igbo community was sustained, with the poor and the rich living together. Poor people were hard-working employees in the agricultural farms and also actively worked to transport the farm produce to the markets. In return, they were paid enough money to take care of themselves and their families.

During the time of harvest, people do not harvest everything from the farm, and intentionally leave some for the poor. In Nsukka, it is called *isi ukpa ji, ukpa ede* or any other thing that one seeks to find in the farm. This way, the poor had no reason to beg, because there were provisions for them. Onebunne (2018), in addition, noted that the Igbo community had men who donated food stuffs, huts, barns and cowries to the poor through freewill donations, and they were able to cope without begging. Igbo communalism helped a lot in the pre-colonial era to sustain the poor and thereby maintain unity, peace, and belongingness. They strongly believed in the proverb *onye nwere mmadu ka onye nwere ego* (brotherliness is greater than wealth). According to Agozino and Anyanike (2007), a man who is wealthy and keeps the wealth to himself is rarely respected among the Igbo. They believe in the saying, *onye ji gaji eri lota onye ji aka* (he who eats with a golden spoon should remember those who eat with their bare hands). It is not enough for one to be wealthy, but in addition to being wealthy, one should also deserve the honour of his/her people. Uchendu (1995) asserts that a wealthy Igbo man cannot claim prestige if his siblings beg for alms in the market or if his parents are starving.

Begging has never been encouraged among the Igbo people. Jelili (2013) asserts that begging is not common in the Eastern part of the country especially among Igbo people. Adidebu et al. (2011) says that begging is regarded as a taboo in the East. Hard work and selflessness helped the Igbo people a lot in the pre-colonial era. Beggars have nothing to contribute to society. If people do not give alms to beggars, they regard them as enemies, and uncaring individuals. They regard the alms they receive as their right and not as a generous donation. The worst thing is that anything given to a beggar is often squandered without any savings or investment for tomorrow.

Conclusion

This study has established that different kinds of beggars are increasing in number among Christians in Nsukka Urban. Many scholars insist that usually poverty is the major cause of begging. It is clear that most Christians who engage in the

practice of begging in Nsukka do this because of laziness. These beggars should be made to understand that sustaining begging will only perpetuate poverty and also prevent them from recognising their potential, self-worth and other abilities that will lift them out of poverty. There were ways to curb this act of begging both in Igbo culture and in Christianity. It is not wrong for genuinely poor people to seek alms, but regarding begging as a livelihood should be discouraged. It is therefore pertinent that Nsukka Christians should go back to the the cultural values that bind them together. Igbo communalism that features living together and sharing things are some of those values. The poor should also be ready to contribute their quota in the little way they can, so as not to be a thorn in flesh of the society, the proverb *aka ni kwo aka ekpe, aka ekpe akwo aka nri*, (if you help a person today, tomorrow the person will also help you) should be the watch word. We should always strive to help others in whichever way we can, so that together we can make a better society. The rich should also understand that impact and investment in people is the greatest kind of investment. Helping people in your circle to grow will go a long way in making the society a better place.

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The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Authors' contributions

N.V.U. and K.M.O. equally contributed to the design and implementation of the research, analysis of the results and writing of the manuscript.

Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards for research.

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Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

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