

# Public alms solicitation among the Yoruba elderly in Nigeria

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## Abstract

*This paper reports on a pilot study of 108 Yoruba elderly persons engaged in public solicitation for alms in three major towns in south-western Nigeria. Data were collected through taped in-depth interviews of the elderly subjects on or near the locations in which they were soliciting alms. The aim of the study was to understand the circumstances which led to this choice of occupation. Specifically explored were the extent of the subjects' social embeddedness in their communities, their reasons for soliciting alms, and their perceptions of the advantages and disadvantages of this means of livelihood. It was found that the majority of the elderly beggars were those who for personal and health-related reasons "fell through" the informal traditional social safety net and for whom society provides no formal alternatives. These findings are used to draw attention to the increasing frailty of the extended family system in coping with the old-age demands in an increasingly urbanized and heterogeneous Nigerian society. The authors conclude that the need for formal social welfare services for poor, urban elderly persons is an imperative of equitable social development.*

## Introduction

Recent demographic projections have indicated that the pace and pattern of ageing in developing countries will be without precedent. Specifically, it has been predicted that by the year 2025, 72% of the world's elderly population will be living in developing countries (United Nations, 1991). With reference to Nigeria, it is predicted that among world countries with over 15 million members of their population aged 60 years and above, Nigeria will move from its twenty-seventh position in 1950 to eleventh position in the year 2025 (United Nations, 1985: 28). It has been suggested that the expected increase in the absolute number and proportion of the elderly raises serious concerns about the ability of the family to care for them, particularly given the absence of formal social welfare services for the old in most African countries. A number of studies have therefore focussed on examining the extent to which the family is involved in providing assistance to the elderly. Peil (1995), Apt and Katila (1994) and Togonu-Bickersteth (1989, 1997) all confirm that the family, particularly children, are the principal source of old-age support in the various African countries studied. Though not always adequate nor in consonance with the elders' expectations, assistance is usually offered by children to ensure some level of physical and economic survival for their elderly to the ex-

tent that the former can afford it. However, as Peil (1995) suggests, it is not always that the family can care for its elderly, for one reason or another. This report focusses on elderly persons who appear to have fallen through the informal traditional safety net: elderly people engaged in public alms solicitation in urban centres in south-western Nigeria.

Public alms solicitation in Nigeria is not new. What is relatively new is the changing faces of those who now beg in public motor parks and markets and on street corners. As a newspaper columnist put it: "Unlike in the past when begging was almost an exclusive job for the handicapped, today, it is a stock in trade for the aged, able-bodied Nigerians" (Ogedengbe, 1995: 8).

This new turn of events is newsworthy because it runs counter to the general expectation that the young should look after the old. In Yoruba area in particular, it was, and is still, considered a shameful thing for one's elderly relations to go around begging for alms (Fadipe, 1970). The purpose of the study is therefore to examine closely this aberrant, yet gradually spreading phenomenon. We in no way argue that these elderly are typical of Yoruba elderly. In fact, they may be regarded as "deviant cases." It is our contention that knowledge is advanced not only by studying the typical but also by studying the atypical, particularly as the emerging patterns may be portentous for future ageing experiences of the poor urban elderly.

It was envisaged that studying this group of elderly will therefore serve four main purposes: First, it allows an examination of a phenomenon whose very existence and visibility run counter to the acclaimed normative prescription concerning family care of its elderly. It can be argued that when behavioural trends are visibly out of sync with normative prescription, then one can infer that perhaps the existential conditions of the people no longer provide the enabling environments for complying with that normative prescription.

Second, the study should also shed light on some of the dynamics which leave an elderly person with no reliable dependable support in old age and thereby on the debate concerning what Chawla (1996) calls the orthodoxy of family care of the elderly in Third World developing countries.

Third, the study will provide source materials for future, more extensive research on economic well-being among the elderly in Third World African countries.

Fourth, and more importantly, it is expected that the findings will have implications for encouraging appropriate social welfare policy responses to the needs of the elderly

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who might and will fall through the informal safety net as African societies become more urbanized and the extended family less able to care for them.

## Methodology

### Study area

The study was conducted in three Yoruba towns: Ibadan, Osogbo and Ile-Ife. Ibadan, the capital of Oyo State, is said to be the largest African town south of the Sahara. With an estimated population of 122 590, Ibadan is very heterogeneous, as its inhabitants come from other Yoruba and non-Yoruba towns and villages. Ile-Ife is a university town. It is renowned as the cradle of all Yoruba race in Nigeria and in diaspora. Aside from the university, agriculture is the predominant economic activity. It has an estimated population of 185 256. Osogbo is the state capital of Osun State. It has a population of 108 692. It is a centre of commerce and though smaller in size than Ife, yet it has more urban characteristics.

### Sample

An accidental sample was used, as many of the elderly beggars who were located between June and August 1996 and consented to participate in the study formed our sample. Each informant was interviewed using a structured questionnaire. All interviews were taped.

## Research design

The study was exploratory. No specific hypotheses were tested. An attempt is made to describe who the elderly beggars are, where we found them, how long they had been begging, their reasons for begging, and their perceptions of the advantages and disadvantages of begging. We also explored the nature of social support enjoyed by the informants. Two measures of social support were used: (1) A measure of social embeddedness, defined by Barrera (1986) as the connection that individuals have to significant others in their environment. In this study, we explored the presence of social ties that each informant had with his/her children, spouse, siblings, neighbours, confidants and friends. The assumption behind social embeddedness is that the available social ties could potentially serve as social support resources. (2) The other measure of social support was enacted social support which is defined as actions that other persons perform when they render assistance to the person (Barrera, 1986).

## Sample profile

A total of 130 elderly beggars were located but only 108 agreed to participate in the study and were interviewed. Sixty-four were recruited in Ibadan, 33 in Osogbo and only eleven in Ile-Ife. The less urban the study area, the smaller the number of beggars that could be found, indicating that begging by the elderly seems to thrive better in large faceless urban centres. That 61% of the informants were found begging in towns other than their town of origin confirms this assertion that the anonymity of city life is conducive to the practice. The two most common locations where we found the beggars were at motor parks and markets. The majority of the informants (63.9%) were females.

Interestingly, a greater proportion of the females (75.4%) were widowed, while 92.3% of the males said that they were currently married. This finding reflects the generally higher rate of widowhood among females in developing countries where over two-thirds of all women over 65 years old are widowed (United Nations, 1983). The higher percentage of currently married males also reflects the fact that the Yoruba

culture permits polygamy and allows easier re-marriage for widowed men. This finding on the predominance of females among beggars and the high rate of widowhood found among female beggars lends support to the assertion that being female and being widowed in old age are two factors which almost guarantee poverty in old age (Butler & Davis, 1987; US Government, 1992). It is also instructive to note that close to 75% of the study sample had a disability, although it was not their disability which led them to destitution. The socio-demographic characteristics of the sample are shown in Table 1.

**Table 1**

Socio-demographic characteristics of the sample: frequencies and percentage distribution

Characteristic	n	%
Total	108	100.0
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	39	36.1
Female	69	63.9
<b>Age group (years)</b>		
60-64	27	25.0
65-69	22	20.4
70-79	38	35.2
80+	21	19.4
<b>Town of origin</b>		
Same as current location	42	38.9
Different location	66	61.1
<b>Marital status</b>		
Married	52	48.0
Widowed	54	50.0
Divorced/separated	2	1.9
<b>Religion</b>		
Christian	27	25.0
Muslim	63	58.3
Traditional	2	1.8
None	16	14.8
<b>Disability</b>		
None	24	22.2
Physical	35	32.4
Visual	31	28.7
Other	4	3.7
Not sure	14	12.9
<b>Years of begging</b>		
< 5 years	11	10.2
5-9	30	27.8
10-19	32	29.6
20+	15	13.9
Cannot say	20	18.5

The approximate mean age for the sample was 71.2 years. As is typical of this current cohort of Yoruba elderly, the literacy rate was low (13.9%). Prior to their engaging in public begging, the majority of the elderly informants were working in the unorganized non-formal sector which is not covered by any social security benefits.

In terms of religious affiliation, a sizeable number were Muslims. It is tempting to conclude that this is so because the Islamic religion condones begging but as Yahaya (1996) argues, neither the Hadith nor the Koran supports public begging.

To enhance our understanding of the responses that emanated from our focus on the begging activities of these urban elderly, it is crucial to examine the nature of social supports available to them, keeping in mind the total absence of any formalized social services for the elderly in the study area. We will therefore examine the social embeddedness of the informants and the nature of enacted social support directed to them.

**Table 2**

Social embeddedness indicators of the sample, by gender: frequencies and percentage distribution

Indicator	Males		Females	
	n	%	n	%
Total	39	100.0	69	100.0
<b>Number of surviving sons</b>				
None	4	10.3	13	18.8
1	13	33.3	42	60.9
2	13	33.3	12	17.4
3+	9	23.1	2	2.9
Mean	1.76		1.75	
sd	1.1		1.2	
<b>Number of surviving daughters</b>				
None	10	25.6	29	42.0
1	16	41.0	27	39.1
2	11	28.2	8	11.6
3+	2	5.1	5	7.2
Mean	1.13		.80	
sd	.86		.86	
<b>Marital status</b>				
Married	36	92.3	16	23.2
Widowed	2	5.1	52	75.4
Divorced/separated	1	2.6	1	1.4
<b>Location of children</b>				
Same house	1	2.6	—	—
Same town	7	17.9	15	21.7
Different town	31	79.5	49	71.0
Don't know	—	—	5	7.2
<b>Number of living siblings</b>				
None	3	7.7	9	13.0
1	3	7.7	12	17.4
2	14	35.9	29	42.0
3	12	30.8	16	23.2
4+	6	15.4	3	4.3
Don't know	1	2.5	—	—
Mean	2.56		1.9	
sd	1.39		1.13	
<b>Number of confidants/friends</b>				
None	20	51.3	27	39.1
1	10	25.6	25	36.2
2	7	17.9	3	4.4
3+	2	5.2	14	20.3
Mean	.789		.925	

**Social embeddedness**

Since social embeddedness relates to potentially available helpers, we focussed on surviving children, as different from children ever born. Contrary to the general belief among the populace that the majority of elderly beggars have no surviving children, our study revealed that the majority did have children. Only six informants had no surviving children at all. What is however unusual about these informants is that they seem to have on the average fewer surviving children and, particularly, fewer surviving daughters. This situation of no surviving daughter characterizes 42% of the females in our study, as compared with 26% of the males. Given what we know about the centrality of daughters as caregivers of the elderly (Horowitz, 1985; Togonu-Bickersteth, 1997), the absence of daughters may be an important factor in the plight of the informants. We found the number of children, particularly daughters, to be smaller than for other community-dwelling elders (Togonu-Bickersteth, Akinnawo, Akinyele & Ayeni, 1996). In addition, the majority of their children were said to be petty traders (50%); some were local craftsmen (12%), some were junior civil servants (9.3%) and others were jobless. Over 70% of the children did not reside in the same town as the informants. Thus, the picture that emerged is that the elderly beggars have few children, especially daughters. In addition, the majority of their children do

not live in physical proximity and economically are not particularly well-off. In fact, among the male informants some still had children in primary school for whom they paid fees.

The majority of the elderly claimed to have siblings, although most said they were not in touch with them. In fact, most claimed not to have any idea of where the brothers and sisters were as at the time of the study. As a group, the informants had very few confidants or friends. Social embeddedness indicators for the sample are shown in Table 2.

**Enacted social support**

A majority of the informants (close to 50% of the males and 68% of the females) reported receiving no assistance whatsoever from their children. This is hardly surprising given our earlier observation that the majority of the children were not economically well-off. The main type of assistance received by the remainder was money (see Table 3). The frequency of assistance where it was given, was described as irregular – a situation which may arise from the lean pockets of the giver as well as the physical distance between the children and the parents. The assistance from children was also often described as inadequate.

**Table 3**

Enacted social support of the sample, by gender: frequencies and percentage distribution

Type of support	Males		Females	
	n	%	n	%
Total	39	100.0	69	100.0
<b>Main type of assistance from children</b>				
None	19	48.7	47	68.1
Money	17	43.6	15	21.7
Food	1	2.6	3	4.3
Advice	2	5.1	4	5.8
<b>Frequency of assistance from children</b>				
Daily	1	2.6	1	1.4
Weekly	5	12.8	—	—
Monthly	6	15.4	9	13.0
Irregularly	7	17.9	12	17.4
None	20	51.3	47	68.1
<b>Main type of assistance from siblings</b>				
None	26	66.7	53	76.8
Money	5	12.8	7	10.1
Clothing	7	17.9	—	—
Advice	1	2.5	9	13.0
<b>Main type of assistance from confidants</b>				
None	21	53.8	39	56.5
Advice	18	46.2	30	43.5
<b>Main type of assistance from neighbours</b>				
None	22	56.4	47	68.1
Money	7	17.9	5	7.2
Food	3	7.7	5	7.2
Other	6	15.4	12	17.4
Cannot say	1	2.6	—	—

Assistance from sources other than children was even less common. About 67% of the males and 76.8% of the females received no assistance from siblings. As one informant put it: "Everybody with his/her own problem ... they have not finished solving their own problems, why will they assist me? They are also just barely surviving."

Still fewer informants received any instrumental assistance from confidants or neighbours. The most common type of assistance received from confidants was occasional advice and from neighbours, very occasional assistance with money

and food. Enacted social support indicators for the sample are shown in Table 3.

### Begging as a forced choice

As a group the informants averaged 13.5 years of begging career. The mean number of years in the occupation was higher for females (14.5 years) than for males (11.5 years). Begging was the sole source of income for slightly more than 60% of the group. Others reported receiving occasional supplements from their children, some family members and neighbours. The main reason given by almost all the informants for publicly soliciting alms was to collect money to buy food. As one male informant put it: "I am begging so I don't starve to death."

Another informant, a 62-year-old female in Ibadan who has one living son, one daughter and 16 siblings, none of whom were able to assist her, explained her situation this way:

*As for my brothers and sisters, they don't have anything to give. My son is unemployed. He left about five years ago to Lagos to look for work and my daughter who is in Ibadan doesn't work. I sometimes even have to give her money when any of her children is ill and she has to buy medicine. So, I really don't have anyone to assist me and this is why I am begging.*

Thus, it appears that it is not just the density of social embeddedness, i.e. how many people are available to the elderly, that matters in terms of their care. Rather, we became convinced that it is the economic ability or inability of significant others around the elderly that determines the level of comfort or the extent of destitution of the elderly.

Another illustration from our data is that of a 75-year-old female with three sons, three daughters and nine siblings who reported receiving assistance from at least four of the children. She said:

*Yes, I do receive assistance from them [the four older children]. They are the ones taking care of me. They do give me money monthly ... only that it is not enough. They are giving according to their capabilities but it is not enough for my feeding.*

Among other reasons given for publicly soliciting alms were disability and avoidance of boredom. Even though close to 75% of the informants had a disability, only seven cited their disability as their reason for alms solicitation, thus supporting our earlier claim that in the majority of the cases the disabilities were not of the type that should, with proper care, propel the elderly to a life of destitution. Two informants said that they were begging to avoid the boredom and loneliness that come from sitting at home alone all day. It is also insightful to note that these two informants expressed the view that since they move around quite a lot in this business, they are able to keep abreast of current news in town and in the nation because they are able to listen to all manners of people who discuss current affairs in motor parks and other public places.

The main benefit derived from begging is said to be cash. We were informed that the daily cash intake varied by the weather (more on sunny days than rainy days); by the time of the month (more around civil servants' pay days); and by the day of the week (generally more on Fridays and Sundays). However, when encouraged to provide some idea of the general daily average when all these fluctuations had been taken into account, the reported daily cash intake from begging varied between N25 to N350 (US\$4) for the sample. The

reported mean daily income was lower for females (N85.6) than for males (N95.1).

In addition to cash gifts, additional benefits from begging which were mentioned included gifts of used clothing, food-stuffs, kolanuts and poultry items.

When asked about the hazards/problems encountered in begging, the responses clustered around the diminished sense of self that accompanies the job. Comments such as "You lose your self-pride," "People abuse and make fun of you" and "You can't put on nice clothings or else you'll lose patronage" were quite common.

It appeared that the female informants faced more taunting than the males. The hazard of the job most often mentioned or alluded to by the females was the inner fear that people will see them as "evil witches." As one female put it:

*People accuse you of witchcraft, they think you must be a bad person. They insinuate that either you have killed all your children or you are so bad that your children have abandoned you. That is what hurts me the most. To how many people can I explain that I am not a useless person?*

Given therefore the ego-destroying aspect of this job, it is not surprising that the majority of our informants reported often thinking that life is not worth living; close to 80% reported not being satisfied at all with their current life situation.

### Discussion

The conclusions which we can draw from this pilot study can only be tentative, given the exploratory nature of the study. However, some pictures did emerge which are worthy of the attention of African gerontologists and social policy makers.

First, contrary to popular opinion, the destitute urban elderly did have children and relations. The majority had children and siblings – the two categories of relations considered by the Yoruba to be the most closely concerned with one's welfare. A critical factor was the apparent incapability of these relations to offer regular and adequate support. This finding confirms Ward's (1985) assertion that social support resides in the actual fulfilment of needs and that such fulfilment cannot be assumed from simple access to social ties.

Indeed, the sample of elderly beggars may be described as having deteriorated social embeddedness. This is because their sense of social connectedness to the significant others around them was not only tenuous but more often than not, failed to yield the six relational provisions (attachment, social integration, reassurance of social worth, reliable alliance, guidance and opportunity for nurturance) that should naturally flow from relationships with others (Weiss, 1974). Instead of reassurance of worth, what they generally got was suspicion, insults and ego-deflating remarks. Instead of reliable alliance (defined as the assurance that we can count on others for assistance under any circumstance), what most beggars reported experiencing was unreliable or unpredictable alliance, or no alliance at all. What is unclear from our study is whether it was the begging that led to the deterioration of social support, or the deterioration of social support that led to begging. We suspect that the two processes might have occurred in a mutually reinforcing manner.

Some indicators that begging led to the deterioration of social support seem to be provided by the finding that prior to their begging career, 94% of the informants said that they belonged to various trade associations in line with their previous occupations. They also claimed that they were active in religious associations. Another pointer that begging led to further marginalization of the elderly was that most of the informants told us that they could not participate in social

obligatory activities in which they were likely to meet family members or renew acquaintanceship with friends because they felt people would be discussing them and their impoverished state. Others reported avoiding such social gatherings because they were unable to afford the type of clothing/dress expected at such ceremonies, or if they could, were afraid that such elaborate dressing might deprive them of future patronage. Lastly, a number of beggars moved away from their town of origin to avoid running into familiar faces. All these findings indicate that begging is not conducive to a well-integrated social support network. By nature and definition, it is a socio-economic activity which is carried out most profitably between its practitioners and "strangers" – those who are ordinarily not under any moral obligation to provide for the practitioner's needs.

However, other indicators were found which suggest that of the factors that led to begging, two combine to make the career a high possibility in old age for the urban Yoruba elderly. The first is the finding that most of the elderly were formerly self-employed in the non-formal sector, claimed to have led a hand-to-mouth existence before old age, and had no savings upon which to rely when they were no longer able to work. This situation of hand-to-mouth existence meant that the life-chances of their children were already compromised, given that most did not earn enough to educate their children and those who did, could not educate them beyond primary school level but instead enlisted the children as extra farm-hands or extra labour in their own income-generating activities. As adults the children have therefore become operators in the same non-formal sector which led their parents to the economically disadvantaged position. Given the inclement economic situations, most of the children are said not to be earning enough and can only support their parents minimally. Thus, whatever "investment" they have made in their children has not paid the expected dividends because, according to our informants, the children are barely able to support their own families in the new inclement economic dispensation.

Thus, poverty earlier in life becomes compounded in old age when an inability to work is not compensated, as expected with adequate assistance from children. But poverty alone may not fully explain the choice of begging; after all, not all poor urban elderly persons beg.

The second factor which in our observations combines with poverty to make begging a possibility seemed to be the occurrence of a negative life event at a period when the individual's resource base was already depleted and the absence of help at the critical state when assistance was most needed. Most of our informants reported that they were initially able to manage until they experienced a crisis and, finding no reliable alliance, decided not "to starve to death." Some of the crises mentioned most often by men were an accident on the job; a very bad harvest; a bad investment which led to bad debt and appropriation of all they owned by creditors; an illness on which they spent all they owned; and so on – i.e. unplanned negative event(s) which totally wiped out their resources and left them at the mercy of hunger and destitution.

For women, who formed a large proportion of our informants, the critical incident usually mentioned was widowhood. It is well known that the most serious problem of widowhood is the relatively high probability that when a woman becomes widowed, her economic situation will deteriorate seriously (United Nations, 1991: 95). Thus, the parlous economic conditions of the lower-class elderly leave them in a precarious situation in which any unplanned negative life event tends to tilt the adjustment scale grossly in their

disfavour. What is more, the majority of these urban elderly have children or relations who are themselves very poor and who do not have the economic resources with which to offer the necessary short-term or long-term support. It is therefore important that Africanists, gerontologists and others prevail on African governments to re-examine the orthodoxy which prescribes family care as the antidote to elder care in developing countries. There are no doubt many instances where family care is still adequate and is freely given to the elder without demeaning him/her. However, it is obvious from our study that among the poor elderly, there is an urgent need for some non-familial assistance since the family of the poor has little or no ability to give care. Our contention affirms Chawla's claim that the majority of families in the developing world are in a state of acute crisis and cannot consequently take adequate care of the elderly (Chawla, 1996:8).

## Conclusion

In conclusion, our study of elderly beggars in south-western Nigeria provides evidence that it is not childlessness that leads to begging but rather poverty in old age coupled with unplanned negative life event(s) which stretch to the limits the resources of the elderly and those of their kith and kin. It has been suggested that for poor urban families, the family as a unit may be unable to provide adequate elder care because of the very low economic resource base common among them. The need for short-term crisis intervention services for the elderly to tide them over the rough patches and long-term assistance to poor urban elderly should be given serious consideration if the government desires to promote human dignity in old age. The current United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 1996) estimates, that 45% of Nigerians are living below the poverty line and that in another decade that proportion will be over 50%, give a concrete pointer to the need for structural and formal policy intervention to ensure that more and more people, particularly vulnerable groups, do not join the begging train. Begging in old age, as we learnt, is asymmetrical, dehumanizing, gender-biased and marginalizing. It is the very antithesis of development.

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