

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

MUHAMMAD WAZIRI JIBRIN

College of Education, Akwanga

AND

AWWAL SIDI SUFYAN

Federal University, Lafia

AND

ABDULLAHI HASHIMU

College of Education, Akwanga

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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**AN ETHNO-BOTANICAL STUDY OF PLANT RESOURCES IN
BENKINDA COMMUNITY, WUKARI LOCAL GOVERNMENT
AREA OF TARABA STATE, NIGERIA**

INALEGWU STEPHANY AKIPU

University of Jos

AND

GLORIA BALA BULUS

University of Jos

ABSTRACT

This study explores the ethnobotanical knowledge of the Benkinda community, with a focus on the use of plants for medicine, food, cultural and religious practices, and their heritage significance. Data was collected through oral interviews with traditional healers, elderly farmers, and women, complemented by botanical identification of species of plants. Findings reveal that plants play a vital role in health care and survival strategies. Species such as *Ahin-ten*, *Ahin-dashe*, *Ahin-sen*, and *Atswi Mbenu* are widely used in treating ailments like sore throat, ulcer, stomach pain, and typhoid. Food crops such as yams, maize, groundnut, benniseed, and locust beans also hold medicinal and cultural significance. Trees like *Parkia biglobosa*, *Moringa oleifera*, *Cissus quadrangularis*, and *Vernonia amygdalina* demonstrate the interconnection between health and nutrition. The study highlights how oral traditions sustain plant knowledge, passed across generations, and emphasizes the cultural value of indigenous healing, inadvertently, through plants and their religious significance. This research is relevant as it documents practices at risk of erosion due to modernization, while stressing the importance of conserving plant resources and local knowledge for health security and cultural identity.

KEYWORDS: Plant resources, Benkinda, ethnobotany, Medicine, and ethnography.

INTRODUCTION

Ethnobotany is the study of the relationship between people and plants, examining how human societies use, manage, and conserve plant resources for survival and cultural purposes (Cotton, 1996). Ethnobotany is the study of how people of a particular culture and region make use of indigenous plants. Plants provide food, medicine, shelter, dyes, fibres, oils, resins, gums, soaps, waxes, latex, tannins, and even contribute to the air we breathe (USDA Forest Service).

This research is significant because it contributes to the preservation of indigenous knowledge. To be sure, much of the plant knowledge in Benkinda is oral, and if not documented, stands the risk of being lost with the passing of elders who are knowledgeable in this regard. By recording this knowledge, the research helps preserve the community's cultural heritage.

Furthermore, this paper is seen as significant because it has practical importance for biodiversity conservation and rural development. Understanding how local people use and manage plant resources provides insights into sustainable practices that can be integrated into modern development projects. For example, the cultivation of drought-resistant crops and the preservation of medicinal plants can improve food security and health care in rural communities, which is of utmost concern to every Nigerian today.

Ethnobotany is an interdisciplinary field that links anthropology, archaeology, botany, and environmental studies, thereby giving this paper academic value that cuts across disciplines.

Lastly, the research is significant for policy and cultural identity. For policymakers, the findings can guide community-based conservation strategies and agricultural extension programs. For the Benkinda people, the research provides recognition of their traditional knowledge and reinforces the value of their culture in the modern world. All the aforementioned reasons validate the significance of this research.

This research aims to examine the ethnobotanical knowledge and practices of the Benkinda community in Wukari Local Government Area of Taraba State and the objectives are To identify and document the plant resources found in the Benkinda community, to examine the different uses of these plant resources (food, medicine, rituals, construction, and trade), to analyse the cultural meanings attached to plant use in Benkinda and to highlight the significance of preserving traditional plant knowledge for cultural and environmental sustainability.

It is important to note that Ethnobotany forms the underlying basis for this paper, hence intermittent reference will be made to the term, as it also investigates the symbolic, spiritual, and religious meanings that plants hold for different cultures. It provides insight into indigenous knowledge systems, traditional medicine, agricultural practices, and the cultural values attached to plants. Across the world, plants have provided food, medicine, fiber, construction materials, and spiritual significance. In rural communities in Africa, the survival of households is deeply tied to their ability to cultivate and use plants effectively. In Nigeria, one of the most culturally and biologically diverse countries in Africa, rural communities continue to depend largely on plant resources. Despite modernization, the knowledge of plant use remains strong in local communities, often transmitted orally across generations. However, with the rising influence of Western education, health care, and religious changes, much of this knowledge is under threat of extinction. Documenting such

knowledge has therefore become pertinent, not only for cultural preservation but also for developing strategies that link indigenous practices with modern science.

The Benkinda community in Wukari Local Government Area of Taraba State provides a valuable case study. The community traces its origins to the Abakwariga people, who migrated alongside the Jukun from Kwararafa, originally believed to have come from Yemen through Kanem-Bornu, before settling around the Benue valley. The people of Benkinda are agriculturalists who cultivate yams, cassava, maize, millet, guinea corn, rice, melon seeds, and groundnuts. Trees such as Locust bean (*Parkia biglobosa*), Neem (*Azadirachta indica*), and Melina (*Gmelina arborea*) trees are also part of their landscape. These plants serve not only as food sources but also as materials for trade, medicine, and cultural identity.

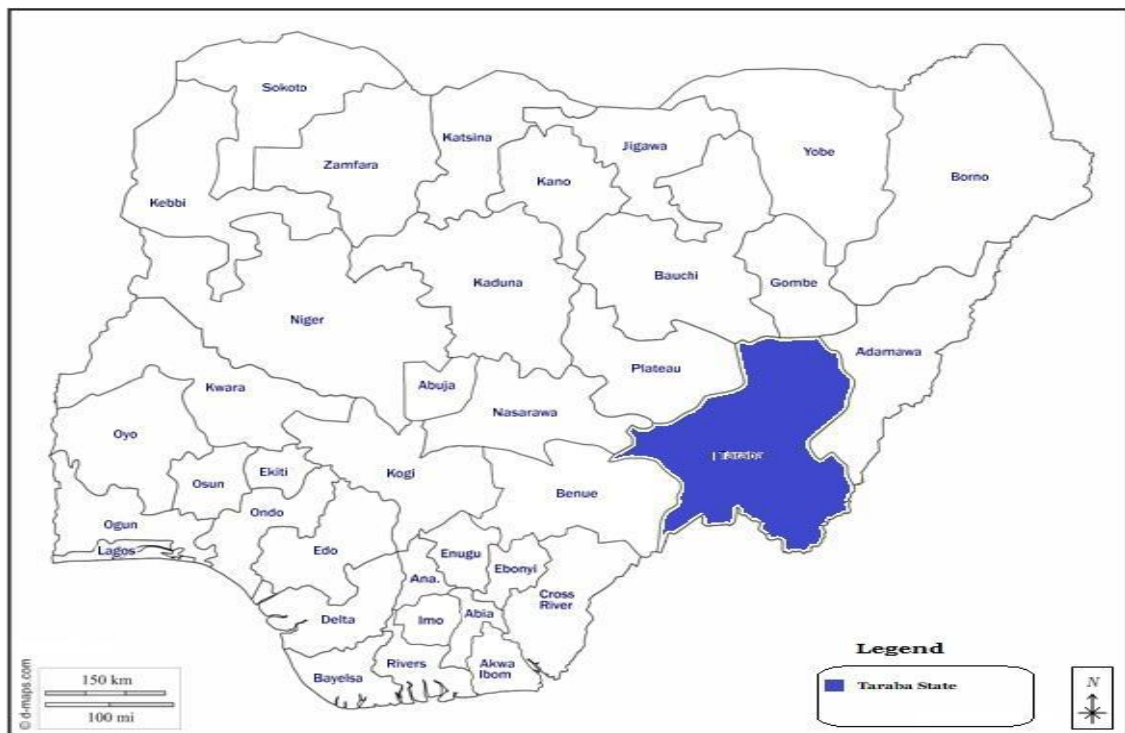


Figure 1: Map of Nigeria Showing Taraba State

Source: Cartography Unit, Department of Geography, University of Jos 2025

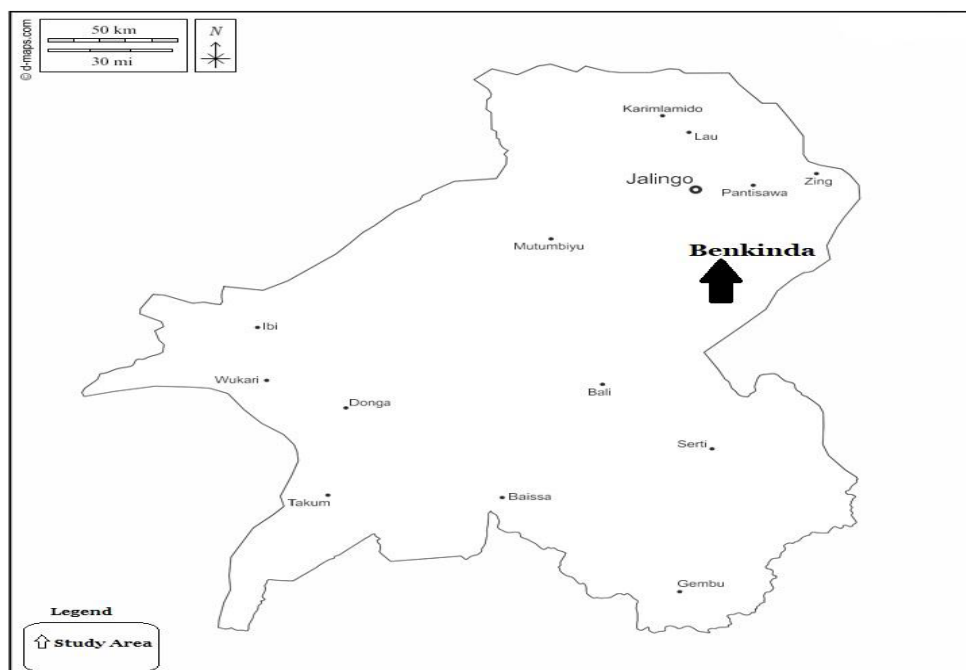


Figure 2: Map of Taraba State Showing the Study Area

Source: Cartography Unit, Department of Geography, University of Jos 2025

Over the years, Benkinda has also experienced cultural interactions with neighboring groups such as the Tiv people of Benue State. Although conflicts arose over land ownership in the past, the two groups today share agricultural practices, and some aspects of plant use traditions. Such interactions highlight the dynamic nature of plants and ethnobotanical knowledge, which evolves through migration, settlement, and inter-community relations. Despite this rich history, there is limited academic research specifically on the ethnobotany and religious aspects of the people of Benkinda. Most of what exists is general information about Wukari or Taraba State, hence the need to carry out an ethnobotanical study of plant resources in Benkinda, focusing on their uses, cultural relevance, and contribution to the people's livelihoods, to document their plant resources, traditional uses, and the cultural meanings attached to them. Such documentation can contribute to preserving indigenous knowledge, promoting biodiversity conservation, and guiding development projects in rural communities because this knowledge in many African communities is at risk of disappearing due to modernization, migration, and the influence of Western science. Indigenous plant knowledge, once central to food security, traditional medicine, and cultural rituals, is no longer valued as it used to be. This is particularly true in Nigeria, where rural communities face challenges such as climate change, land degradation, and the loss of cultural heritage. In Taraba State, several ethnic groups, including the Jukun, Tiv, Kuteb, Chamba, and

Abakwariga, rely on plant resources for survival, making these challenges of utmost concern to researchers. Furthermore, most researchers of similar themes tend to focus on plants used for medicine, and often neglect other aspects such as plants for food, construction, rituals, and religious and cultural identity. In Benkinda, plant resources serve multiple purposes that go beyond medicine, when they are central to agriculture, social life, and environmental sustainability. Sadly, younger generations are less engaged in indigenous practices, a case which increases the risk of cultural erosion. This makes it necessary to document, analyse, and preserve the diverse plants used and the knowledge of the Benkinda people before it is lost. As such, this paper aims to document their plant resources, their uses, and the meanings attached to them. It will also contribute to academic debates on the role of indigenous knowledge in rural development, biodiversity conservation, cultural, religious, and environmental sustainability.

METHODOLOGY

The methods of research adopted include ethnography, the use of written sources, and oral tradition.

Ethnography

Ethnography is the systematic study of people and cultures through direct observation and participation (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). It involves immersing oneself in the daily life of a community to understand its practices, beliefs, and social interactions. In the context of this research, ethnography provided the primary means of collecting data on how plants are used, managed, and valued in Benkinda.

Through ethnographic interaction, informal conversations were held with farmers, women, elders, and youths. These interactions provided practical insights into the everyday uses of plants. For instance, the locust bean tree (*Parkia biglobosa*) was observed not only as a source of food but also as an economic resource sold in markets. Similarly, neem (*Azadirachta indica*) was noted as a common source of traditional medicine for treating malaria and other ailments.

Written sources

Written materials were also an important source of information in this study. These included books, journal articles, government reports, and unpublished theses related to ethnobotany, agriculture, and the cultural history of Taraba State and Wukari. Written sources provided a broader context within which the ethnobotanical practices of Benkinda could be understood.

For example, works on ethnobotany in Nigeria highlighted the importance of documenting plant knowledge as part of cultural preservation and biodiversity conservation (Okigbo, 1980; Kayode, 2006). Studies on Wukari and the Jukun

people provided historical context about migration, settlement, and cultural identity in the region (Meek, 1931; Danfulani, 1999). These written sources were used to compare and validate information obtained through oral tradition and ethnographic observation. Additionally, written materials helped identify gaps in the literature, particularly the lack of focused studies on Benkinda itself. While there were general references to the Abakwariga and Jukun groups, specific documentation of plant use in Benkinda was largely absent. Through written materials, the study was able to reinforce the relevance of this research as well as establish academic grounding, connect local knowledge with broader debates on ethnobotany, and situate Benkinda within the wider history of Taraba State.

Oral Tradition

Oral tradition refers to the transmission of knowledge, history, and cultural practices through spoken word across generations (Vansina, 1985). Since Benkinda's history and much of its ethnobotanical knowledge are not documented in written sources, oral tradition was an essential method of data collection in this research.

Over ten Elders and community leaders were interviewed to gather historical information about the origins of Benkinda, its leadership genealogy, and the role of plant resources in the community's survival. These informants provided valuable testimonies about migration history, agricultural practices, and the cultural significance of certain plants. For example, the origin of the name "Benkinda" was traced to a river near the settlement, highlighting the cultural association of water bodies and plant life with community identity.

Oral tradition also provided information about past conflicts, particularly between the Benkinda people and the Tiv settlers. These narratives revealed how plants and farmlands were central to disputes, underlining the importance of land and vegetation to social relations. Furthermore, oral tradition shed light on the spiritual and medicinal uses of plants, such as rituals involving leaves or trees considered sacred.

By relying on oral testimonies, information that is not available in archives or libraries was easily accessed. Oral tradition, therefore, served as both a historical source and an ethnobotanical record. As such, ethnography provided detailed qualitative data on the lived experiences of the people, allowing the study to capture both the practical and symbolic dimensions of plant use in Benkinda.

The data was obtained through interviews with traditional healers, elderly farmers, and women who use plants in their daily lives. Oral testimonies were complemented with botanical identification of species to ensure accurate documentation. Each plant or crop is described in terms of its local name, botanical name, uses, and preparation methods.

A review of selected scholarly works reveals both the contributions of earlier research and the gaps that this current study seeks to fill. One of the pioneering contributions to Nigerian ethnobotany was made by Okigbo (1980) in his article

“Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Rural Development in Nigeria,” published in the *Nigerian Journal of Agricultural Science*. He highlighted the critical role plants play in rural survival, documenting how local communities relied on their environment to meet dietary and medicinal needs. For example, indigenous vegetables and fruits were shown to supplement food security, while roots, leaves, and barks were processed into medicine for common ailments. Okigbo’s argument that ethnobotanical knowledge could complement modern medicine remains influential. However, the study was broad in scope and lacked community-specific detail, leaving gaps in understanding the cultural contexts of plant use in regions like Benkinda.

A more localized approach was taken by Kayode (2006) in his book *Ethnobotanical Studies of Medicinal Plants in Ekiti State, Nigeria*. Kayode categorized plants according to therapeutic properties and stressed the urgency of conservation, noting that many species were under threat from deforestation and neglect. He also emphasized the economic potential of indigenous plants in rural healthcare. While Kayode’s contribution is significant, it is geographically narrow, focused on southwestern Nigeria, and does not extend to Taraba State or the Jukun-Abakwariga context that frames Benkinda’s ethnobotanical practices.

Another relevant contribution is the study by Musa and Yusufu (2012), published in the *Journal of Ethnobiology and Ethnomedicine* under the title “Ethnobotanical Knowledge among the Tiv and Idoma Peoples of Benue State”. Their work showed how indigenous crops such as yams, cassava, and maize were central not only to nutrition but also to rituals and cultural identity. For instance, yam was associated with agricultural festivals, while medicinal plants were tied to healing practices. This study is particularly useful because of Tiv people’s historical interactions with Benkinda. Oral accounts confirm that the Tiv once settled in Benkinda and influenced agricultural and medicinal practices. Nonetheless, Musa and Yusufu’s focus on Benue excluded Taraba, leaving Benkinda ethnobotany undocumented.

Historical perspectives on the Jukun and Abakwariga were provided by Meek (1931) in his anthropological classic *Tribal Studies in Northern Nigeria*. Meek traced the origins, political institutions, and settlement patterns of the Jukun and related groups. His work is valuable for understanding Benkinda’s cultural background, as the community is linked to Abakwariga migrants from the Kwararafa confederacy. However, Meek’s emphasis was on social and political systems rather than ethnobotany. He gave little attention to how plants were used for survival, highlighting the absence of detailed plant knowledge in early anthropological literature.

More recently, Ibrahim (2018) carried out an ethnobotanical survey in Adamawa State, documented in the *Nigerian Journal of Botany* under the title “Ethnobotanical Knowledge and its Erosion in Northeastern Nigeria.” His study catalogued food and medicinal plants while examining how modernization,

migration, and Western education were eroding indigenous knowledge. He observed that younger generations were abandoning traditional plant use, leading to the loss of valuable knowledge. While geographically closer to Taraba, Ibrahim's work stopped short of Wukari and Benkinda, leaving the specific ethnobotanical practices of the community unexplored.

From this review, while Nigerian ethnobotany has been widely studied, gaps remain. Okigbo (1980) offered a broad national perspective but lacked a community-specific focus. Kayode (2006) provided an in-depth analysis of Ekiti but did not extend to the northeast. Musa and Yusufu (2012) gave insight into Tiv and Idoma plant knowledge but excluded Taraba. Meek (1931) supplied historical background without ethnobotanical detail. Ibrahim (2018) drew attention to the erosion of knowledge in Adamawa but did not cover Wukari or Benkinda.

Three key gaps emerge from these reviewed works. First, most studies have focused disproportionately on medicinal plants, neglecting the broader spectrum of plant uses such as food, rituals, construction, and economic activities. This creates a partial picture of ethnobotany, failing to capture the full cultural and ecological roles of plants in communities. Second, very few studies have been conducted specifically in Taraba State, and none focus on the Benkinda community. This leaves an entire region underrepresented in Nigerian ethnobotanical literature. Third, existing studies often rely heavily on either written sources or interviews without combining ethnography and oral traditions. As a result, they lack the depth that comes from observing lived practices and listening to local narratives.

This present research addresses these gaps by focusing squarely on the Benkinda community of Wukari Local Government Area. It aims to document not just medicinal plants but also food crops, trees, and plants used for rituals, construction, and trade. By employing ethnography, oral tradition, and written materials, the study integrates multiple sources of evidence to build a more comprehensive understanding of plant knowledge. In doing so, it not only preserves the cultural heritage of Benkinda but also contributes to broader debates on sustainability, biodiversity, and the importance of indigenous knowledge systems in rural development.

MEDICINAL PLANTS IN BENKINDA

Traditional medicine remains one of the most important systems of healthcare in Benkinda. For most households, plants are the first option in the treatment of sickness, particularly in cases of common ailments such as fever, stomach pain, ulcers, cough, and typhoid. This reliance on plants is not only a matter of accessibility but also of trust in remedies that have been tested for generations. From oral tradition, it was garnered that before hospitals came to Wukari, their forefathers successfully healed themselves with roots and leaves, showing how

traditional knowledge has been passed down and how it continues to serve the people.

The plants described below are among the most frequently used in the community. They include trees, shrubs, vines, and crops whose leaves, roots, bark, and seeds are applied for healing and food purposes. Some of these plants are used singly, while others are combined with different species for greater effectiveness. Their uses go beyond treating illness; they also form part of rituals, preventive practices, and everyday nutrition. In this way, the plant world in Benkinda reflects both cultural heritage and the community's approach to health and survival.

Ahin-ten

This plant is widely known for its role in treating sore throat and ulcers. Oral tradition records that when someone has throat pain, three wraps of its leaves are boiled in water, and the liquid is used for gargling before spitting out. For ulcer treatment, the leaves are combined with other medicinal trees, boiled, and swallowed. According to community healers, this method helps cool the stomach and reduce internal wounds. The people believe that *ahin-ten* is a gift from the ancestors to fight ailments related to the throat and stomach.



Plate 1: *Ahin-Ten*

Ahin-dashe Another important medicinal plant in Benkinda is *ahin-dashe*, which is mainly used for ulcers and typhoid. Its leaves are boiled and consumed as medicine. Oral informants stated that it is often combined with other trees because “one tree alone does not end the sickness” (personal communication, 2025). The cultural meaning here is the belief in collective strength, reflected in the way multiple plants are mixed to create a stronger medicine.



Plate 2: *Ahin-Dashe*

Ahin-sen

The root of *ahin-sen* is the part commonly used. It is prepared by drying the root, then boiling it in water or soaking it in cold water before drinking. Community members use it to treat stomach pain, which is described as “fire in the stomach.” Oral sources confirm that the plant is respected because it works even when other treatments fail (Auta John, Personal communication, 2025). The reliance on roots highlights the depth of plant knowledge and the ability of local people to distinguish which part of the plant is effective for healing.



Plate 3: *Ahin-Sen*

Atswi Mbenu

This plant is specifically used for the treatment of typhoid and piles. According to elder women in the community, its leaves are cooked and drunk by patients suffering from high fever or severe stomach problems (Maryam Abdu, personal communication, 2025). Typhoid is a common ailment in the region, and plants like *atswi mbenu* remain important because not all villagers can afford hospital treatment.

FOOD CROPS WITH ETHNO-BOTANICAL SIGNIFICANCE

Apart from medicinal plants, crops also hold cultural and survival value. These crops not only provide nutrition but are tied to identity, culture, festivals, religion, rituals, and inheritance. Below is a list of some of these plants with their cultural significance.

Yam (*Asi* / *Dioscorea rotundata*)

Yam (*Dioscorea rotundata*) is one of the most valued food crops in Benkinda. It is considered a symbol of wealth, and men are respected for the heaps of yams they cultivate. Oral testimonies reveal that yam is eaten daily and used in rituals during harvest (Gambo Ibrahim, Personal communication, 2025). It is also a crop that connects the people to wider Nigerian yam traditions.

Locust Bean (*Ahin-nyu* / *Parkia biglobosa*)

The African locust bean is one of the most economically and medicinally important trees in Benkinda. Locally called *Rogol*, the seeds are fermented into the popular food seasoning *dawa-dawa*. The stem bark is used for treating back pain, while the leaves and pods are applied for general well-being. Informants explained that locust bean trees are “never cut down” because they are too valuable (Aliyu Musa, personal communication, 2025).

Benniseed (*Sesamum indicum*)

This crop is cultivated widely and is eaten both as food and as medicine. The roots are dried and used for treating stomach upset and diarrhea. According to healers, it also serves as an antidote to poisoning (Tanko Danjuma, Personal communication, 2025). The seeds are processed into oil and are used during festivals as part of ritual food.



Plate 4: Benniseed

Maize (*Zankpa/ Zea mays*)

Maize is a staple crop, eaten boiled, roasted, or ground into flour for porridge. Community elders stated that maize is the first crop planted when rains begin because it grows fast and signals the start of the farming season (Abdu Ibrahim, oral communication, 2025). It is also shared during ceremonies, showing its cultural role beyond food.

Groundnut (*Fheken/ Arachis hypogaea*)

Groundnut is grown in large quantities and sold in Wukari markets. The seeds are eaten raw, roasted, or made into paste. Groundnut oil is important for cooking. Oral informants noted that it is also used for treating cough when boiled with honey (Halima Ibrahim, personal communication, 2025).

TREES AND SHRUBS OF MEDICINAL AND RELIGIOUS IMPORTANCE

***Moringa oleifera* (Zogale)**

Moringa (*Moringa oleifera*), locally referred to as “Never Die” because of its remarkable ability to withstand harsh weather conditions, is highly valued in Benkinda for both nutritional and medicinal purposes. The leaves are commonly prepared in soups and are believed to help in managing ailments such as high blood pressure, stroke, and headaches. According to women in the community, the daily consumption of moringa leaves helps to “clean the blood” and promote general well-

being (Mary John, personal communication, 2025). In addition, the seeds are sometimes taken as aphrodisiacs. Beyond its medicinal role, moringa also has culinary versatility; the fresh leaves can be eaten with *kulikuli* (groundnut cake) and are often mixed with other vegetables to create a nutritious, protein-rich meal enjoyed by both adults and children.

***Cissus quadrangularis* (Ogbakiki)**

This climbing plant is used for healing wounds. The leaves are squeezed and the juice is applied to sores, while the burnt stem mixed with coconut oil is applied on skin wounds. Informants emphasized that it is mainly used for external medicine (Auta Musa, personal communication, 2025).

***Vernonia amygdalina* (Bitterleaf)**

This is one of the most common medicinal plants. In Benkinda, its leaves are eaten to cleanse the stomach. It is also boiled to treat fever and ulcers. Informants stressed that “without bitterleaf, no household can survive” because it is both food and medicine (Grace Aliyu, personal communication, 2025).

CONCLUSION

From the discourse above, these seemingly common plants and trees are very important in the everyday life of man ranging from religious beliefs to his health and relationship with the earth and the resources therein from time immemorial till date. This goes without saying that ethnobotanical knowledge is more than just a list of plants and their uses; it is a reflection of how people understand health, environment, ritual acts, and survival.

The people of Benkinda use plants not only for healing but also for food, rituals, and cultural identity and their reliance on indigenous species shows a resilient system of local knowledge that has been passed down orally for generations. This paper therefore examined medicinal plants, food crops, and shrubs as cultural resources, and their symbolic roles in health and as well as economy. It also considers the role of oral tradition, gender, adaptation to modern influences, and the overall significance of preserving ethnobotanical knowledge, especially as regards its cultural, archaeological, and religious significances.

Considering the importance of this study, at this juncture, it becomes pertinent to suggest three recommendations as outlined.

1. There is an urgent need for documentation and preservation of ethnobotanical knowledge. Since most of the knowledge is transmitted orally, efforts should be made to record it in written and digital forms. Schools and local institutions should be involved in collecting plant names, uses, and preparation methods. Elders who hold this knowledge should be supported to share it before it disappears upon their death or loss of memory. This will

help create a permanent record that future generations can rely on, and it will also help researchers and policymakers who are interested in traditional medicine and food systems.

2. Furthermore, there is a need to encourage collaboration between traditional and modern healthcare systems. Many of the plants used in Benkinda are known to have strong medicinal properties, but their potential remains under-researched. Partnerships between local healers, scientists, and healthcare providers can help to test, refine, and standardize some of these remedies. This will not only give more recognition to indigenous knowledge but also create safer and more reliable treatments. At the same time, local people will benefit from a healthcare system that respects their culture and improves their wellbeing.
3. Lastly, the promotion of sustainable use and conservation of useful plants is very important. As farming, logging, and modern development expand, many plant species face the risk of depletion. The community should be encouraged to plant and protect species like moringa, locust bean, and bitter leaf, which have high value. Conservation projects that involve the youth will also create awareness and transfer knowledge to the younger generation. Linking ethnobotanical knowledge with modern agriculture and conservation strategies will ensure that plants continue to serve both economic and cultural needs.

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INTERNET SOURCE

USDA-Forest service- accessed on 10th December 2025

ORAL INFORMANTS

S/N	NAME OF INFORMANT	AGE	GENDER	OCCUPATION /ROLE	TYPE OF INFORMATION	DATE
1	Abdu Ibrahim	54	male	Farmer	Cultural significance of maize	2015
2	Halima Ibrahim	49	Female	Trader	Use of groundnut for cough remedy	2025
3	Mary John	52	female	Farmer	Use of <i>moringa oleifera</i> for medicine and food	2025
4	Auta Musa	57	male	Herbalist	Wound treatment with <i>Cissus quadrangularis</i>	2025
5	Aliyu Ibrahim	72	male	Traditional healer	Historical and medicinal use of Plants	2025
6	Tanko Danjuma	61	male	Healer	Use of Benniseed for treatment	2025
7	Maryam Abdu	63	Female	Elder	Use of <i>Atswi Mbenu</i> for typhoid and piles	2025
8	Gambo Ibrahim	58	Male	Farmer	Yam cultivation and ritual significance	2025
9	Grace Aliyu	56	female	Farmer	Stomach cleansing with <i>Vernonia amygdalina</i>	2025
10	Auta John	55	Male	Herbalist	Root preparations of <i>Ahin-sen</i> for stomach pain	2025

PLANT USE TABLE

S/N	LOCAL NAME	SCIENTIFIC NAME	USE
1	<i>Ahin-nya</i> /locust bean	<i>ParkiaBiglobosa</i>	Food/trade
2	Neem	<i>Azadiratcha Indica</i>	Medicine
3	Melina	<i>Gmelina Arborea</i>	Economic tree/trade
4	Yam	<i>Dioscorea rotundata</i>	Food/trade/social status
5	Benniseed	<i>Sssamum indicum</i>	Food/ trade/medicine
6	Maize	<i>Zea Mays</i>	Food/trade/medicine
7	Groundnut/ <i>Fhekan</i>	<i>Arachis hypogaea</i>	Food/ medicine
8	Zogole	<i>Moringa oleifera</i>	Medicine/Food
9	<i>Ogbakiki</i>	<i>Cissus uadrangulasis</i>	Food/ medicine
10	Bitterleaf	<i>Vernonea Amygdalina</i>	Food/ Medicine/ Trade

BOOK REVIEW

A DESCRIPTIVE SYNOPSIS OF AONDOWASE MNGUVE AND KATOR SOMBO'S *CANTOS OF THE WAILING BARDS*

JACOB SHIMRUMUN IORAA

University of Maiduguri

Title of Book:	Cantos of the Wailing Bards
Authors/Poets:	Aondowase Mnguve and Benjamin Kator Sombo
Publisher:	Old Press, Mpape, Abuja
Year of Publication:	2020
Genre:	Poetry
Pages:	63
ISBN:	978-978-959-426-9

INTRODUCTION

At various times in history, the poet has been worshipped, honoured, feared, despised, or ignored. Yet always, poets have continued to write and read poems. There are many poets and poetry collections the world over. In Nigeria, for example, the greatest poets over the decades include John Pepper Clark, Chinua Achebe, Christopher Okigbo, Adedayo Agaru, Hussain Ahmed, Niyi Osundare, Hyginus Ekwazi, Aondowase Mnguve, and Kator Sombo, just to mention a few. Poetry is, of course, one form of literature, and literature is, to put it simply, the expression and communication of human experience in meaningful language. Poetry is the language of emotion; its musical rhythms and patterns of sound can make a deeper, more direct impact on the reader than the ordinary language of prose. Thus, writers may use it to express a moment of joy or sorrow, to tell a story, or to make ideas more memorable. The two poets, Aondowase Mnguve and Benjamin Kator Sombo, in *Cantos of the Wailing Bards*, express and explore complex emotions through their poems. In other words, their poems are drawn from personal experiences and observations. The poets also used their poems to comment on social issues, politics, or cultural norms as well as explore fundamental questions about life, existence, and human nature.

SUMMARY OF THE BOOK

Cantos of the Wailing Bards is a collection of poetry, creatively packaged in three sections: 1. Tribute, laurels, and eulogies, 2. God, nature, and life; and 3. Politics, conflict, and society. While the first section basically concerns itself with tribute, respect, and honour to distinguish fallen heroes who have left this world with footprints on the sand of history and deserve to be remembered, the second section of this collection draws inspiration from nature, exploring themes of spirituality, existence, and human experience. Simply, it depicts nature's beauty, often incorporating spiritual or symbolic elements. The final section of this collection dwells a lot on social cohesion-politics, and conflict, which can either unite or divide societies, depending on how they are managed. In other words, the way politics and conflicts are handled can affect trust in institutions and social stability.

Among the emotions and ideas that have always inspired poets, "love" probably takes first place. However, in *Cantos of the Wailing Bards*, our poets Aondowase Mnguve and Benjamin Kator Sombo have not just relied on love ideas alone but have also decided to consider the vast exploitation of other areas or themes as well.

CRITICAL ANALYSIS

Cantos of the Wailing Bards is a collection of thirty-eight poems. The first four poems mourn the loss of some people. Specifically, the first poem titled "Threnody of a Legend" is written by Aondowase Mnguve. The primary purpose of the poem is a tribute to a community District Head who has done so much for his community before kicking the bucket. The poem concerns itself with the life and times of this noble man:

Where are you today?
Though you have slept in soft peace
It is difficult to believe you have gone home
Your virtues still stare us in the face as though you were here... (Stanza 2).

The message presented here by the poet is that one should do well while alive so that when one dies, society will remember one for that. The poem, which is an elegy, mourns the loss of someone special. It has simile as a figure of speech in the last stanza: "Are like attempts to fill a basket with water", "Like the biblical Sarah", which helps create vivid and evocative language.

The second poem is titled "Tortoise of Africa", written by Sombo. In the poem, tribute is paid to a great hero, Mahmud. The mood is one of sadness:

Though you are dead, your words live
We feel you more than the living dead (Stanza 2).

The notion it is trying to deal with is nature and death. This poem is also an elegy.

The third poem in this collection is "A Man for all Seasons", written by Sombo, in honour of Dennis Orkuma Nev. The elegy mourns, describing him as:

The lion hearted one that spreads his elephant back
For the needy to climb and seek refuge
The one who God has lit a candle in his head
To see where his pear cannot venture
The three on which we lean in the times of storms (Stanza 2).

The most common figure of speech in "A Man for all Season" is a simile. Some of the examples are: "Like the magical song of an enchantress", "That clings like the leprosy of Naaman", "Spreading hope like shrubs in the early rains".

The fourth poem, titled "Teacher," written by Kator, is a decaetich with specific rhyme or meter. It is a stanza poem written in free verse style without adhering to specific forms of structure. The poet highlights the duties of a teacher who suffered a lot to train others to become well-to-do people in society, in no distant time. Yet the teacher remains one of the poorest in society.

Yesterday
You raised the kings
You nurtured the priests
You decorated the knights
But where is your reward today
Dying wretched by the road
Bypassed by heroes you raised

For the teacher, especially in Nigeria, society feels that his reward should be in heaven. The poet strongly believes that the teacher's reward should also start here on earth, just like others:

Let thy reward come
Let it be done to you here on earth
And it will please heaven

The fifth poem, "Mysteries of the Night," is written by Mnguve. The poet uses these mysteries of the night as a metaphor for personal struggles, hopes, or fears:

Night comes in layers
Like an onion bulb
To some an end to dusk
And the start of a new dawn (Stanza 1).

Poem number six, "The Chameleon," is written by Mnguve. In some cultures, chameleons are associated with transformation, wisdom, and patience.

Sluggishly, sluggishly, the Chameleon
Makes to cross the road
As "the moon moves slowly
But day by day
It crosses the sky" (Stanza 2).

The truth is that Nigeria will become a better place to dwell in if the principles of transformation, wisdom, and patience are adopted.

Poem number seven, titled "Almajiri Industry," is written by Mnguve. It is one of the most worrisome poems in this collection. The Almajiri struggle for survival day and night, eating remnants, even from the dustbin. The poet is concerned about their condition:

Almajiri, oh! Almajiri,
I commend your high spirit of endurance
"Quizoting" all day long for survival
As the moon moves slowly and by daybreak, crosses the sky.
So shall you (Stanza 3).

"The Sky" by Mnguve is the eighth poem in *Cantos of the Wailing Bards*. The sky often represents limitless possibilities, freedom, and endless opportunities. A clear blue sky can evoke feelings of hope, optimism, and joy. The memory and wandering of a childhood fascinated by the sky is creatively presented by Mnguve.

Poem number nine, written by Mnguve is titled "ORMEE", meaning "Satan". Ormee can symbolize rebellion, free will, and the struggle between good and evil. Ormee is depicted in this poem as a symbol of rebellion or evil tormenting so many individuals in our society from time immemorial:

"Ormee" a bloody liar
An armless robber
Who robs
With cunning (Stanza 1)

Leading souls astray
To the smooth road of doom
Where destruction awaits like goats
With unbroken tether at festivities (Stanza 2).

There are similes in the poems. For example: "where destruction awaits like a goat", "Like scanty drops of rain in the desert".

Poem number ten, titled "A Doll at Stake," is written by Mnguve. "A doll at Stake" here implies a metaphorical meaning, mainly a fragile situation. It represents something delicate or fragile, and at stake suggests risk or uncertainty. It implies that something precious or emotionally significant is at risk.

Poem number eleven, titled "The Foolishness of God", is written by Mnguve. It is the paradox and mystery of divine wisdom, which may not align with human expectations. The poet has tried to distinguish between God and man:

"The foolishness of God is greater than the wisdom of men
Refrain from all evil

In poem number twelve, Mnguve titled it "God is Love". The subject of Love is so basic that the expression of it in poetry has an enormous appeal for humanity in general. In this poem, the poet raises questions about the nature of God, the relationship between God and humanity, and the role of love in spirituality.

Poem number thirteen, which is written by Mnguve is titled "Vanity upon Vanity". The book of Ecclesiastes in the Holy bible explores the theme of vanity and the fleeting nature of human pursuits. This is likely where the poet got his title. In all five stanzas, the phrase "the world is vanity" is mentioned. The poem suggests that something is futile, empty, lacking in substance, in most parts of the world.

Poem number fourteen by Mnguve is titled, "Nothing Lasts Forever". In this poem, the poet considers the fact that everything in life is transient, including relationships, experiences, possessions, positions, and wealth. Change is a natural part of life, and nothing remains static:

Nothing lasts forever
I wish they know
That nothing last forever

Also:

The Politician enjoys the siren and the convoy movement
Through the dark spectacted caravans
Blowing "pim-pim, pim-pim" And "pom-pom, pom-pom"
Their tenure is endless

They are not different from myopes
I wish they know
That nothing lasts forever (Stanza 4)

Poem number fifteen by Sombo is titled "Dreams". The poem points to the fact that dreams often use symbolism, metaphors, and imagery to convey messages. Poem number sixteen, written by Sombo, is titled "This World". In this poem, the poet highlights the good, the bad, and the ugly of this world. The first Stanza particularly states that:

This world is full of good and bad
This world is full of good and evil
This world is beautifully created
This world is wonderfully done
It is spherical in shape

Poem number seventeen by Sombo is titled "Endless Journey". Endless Journey in this poem represents the search for life's purpose, meaning, and significance. It symbolizes spiritual growth, enlightenment, or transcendence. In the beginning lines, the poet has this to say:

The endless journey is when you are born in this world
The endless journey is chasing the air, and not his will
Chasing the air is endless (Stanza 1).

Poem number eighteen by Sombo is titled "Decision". The phrase decision-making as applicable in this poem involves evaluating choices and considering potential outcomes. Decisions can lead to personal growth as individuals learn from their choices and experiences.

"The Cold Lonely Earth" by Sombo is poem number nineteen in *Cantos of the Wailing Bards*. It is a short poem of eight lines that talks about life after death.

The next poem, titled "Love" by Sombo, is poem number twenty. It demonstrates the true meaning of love. To some, love is all about sex. To the poet, love is "the solid rock of friendship".

"Desire" by Sombo is poem number twenty-one. It is also a short poem of eight lines, which concerns itself with passion and drive. This can motivate individuals to pursue their goals, dreams, and aspirations.

"Prophecy" by Sombo is poem number twenty-two. It is a lyric poem, in two stanzas, which expresses the poet's feeling or thought on the true meaning of prophecy.

"Nothing is New" by Sombo is poem number twenty-three. In this poem, the poet points out the fact that, "there is nothing on earth that is new". Therefore, while alive, cognizance should be given to the fact that:

The world will remember you
Not for your coming in, but going out.

Poem number twenty-four, titled "Campus at Night," is written by Mnguve. It portrays some of the atrocities and societal vices committed on Nigerian university campuses, especially amongst the female students. In the quest for survival, some of the female students engage in prostitution with customers who patronize them. But this act is bad, and it should be discouraged.

Poem number twenty-five, written by Mnguve is titled "Metropolis". A Metropolis is often a large, bustling city with a high population density. Metropolises often serve as centres for commerce, culture, innovation, and entertainment. Abuja is an example of a metropolis. In this poem, the poet is concerned with various activities that take place in any given metropolis, especially by traders in the quest for survival of the fittest. While some of these activities are genuine, others are fraudulent.

Poem number twenty-six by Mnguve is titled, "At the NYSC Orientation Camp". In this poem, the poet takes a critical look at life during his National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) orientation camp. Come sun, come rain, corp members are always at work. Though the NYSC orientation camp is hectic and tedious, the poet concludes: "It is fun". Endurance is indeed the key to success.

Poem number twenty-seven is a short poem of twelve lines written by Mnguve. It is titled "Friendship". True friendships are supposed to last for a lifetime, providing a sense of continuity and stability. During the Nigerian oil boom era, Nigeria had a lot of friends as "Greedy nation scrambled for the sake of gain". The poet draws a distinction between true and fake friendship. In times of trouble or difficulty, a true friend will stand with you, whatever happens. But fake friends abscond immediately they sense that you are in trouble.

Poem number twenty-eight, written by Mnguve is titled "Master of the Sahara". Sahara is a desert area in Africa where poverty is so alarming. The subject matter of this poem is on how the Sahara areas can work hard to get rid of poverty and embrace wealth. In the poem, the poet suggests:

I charge you
Free yourself from a fathom venture
That earn you nothing but carnage

To crush your race
To save my ears from slap and bangs
My palms from stains and stench
And my body from your plight (Stanza 3).

Poem number twenty-nine by Mnguve is titled "The Peva Crimson Clash". It is a lyrical poem that expresses the poet's feelings or thoughts. To the poet, the killing of innocent people in Peva community is too rampant and should be stopped:

There has been a crimson clash
The land irrigated with blood
Turned black and bare
Corpses piled up the fields
Like dead flies (Stanza 1).

"Watch Dog" by Mnguve is poem number thirty in *Cantos of the Wailing Bards*. It is written in eight stanzas. The purpose of the poem is to take a critical look at the phrase "watch Dog," a person who guards against loss, waste, theft, or undesirable practices. A watchdog gathers information about the actions of the people in power and informs the public in order to hold elected officials to account. In Nigeria, those referred to as watchdogs include: the police, the Economic and Financial Crime Commission (EFCC), the Independent Corrupt Practices Commission (ICPC), the military, the paramilitary, and the Department of State Services (DSS). The concern of the poet here is whether the present-day watchdogs are sincerely doing their work as expected, since corruption is on the increase:

Watch dog, watch dog, watchdog?
The 21 century, watch dog
What different are you from the concept
Known phenomenon?
There are doubts on the minds
Are you really watching over? (Stanza 1).

The message in this poem is on the war against corruption, that those saddled with the responsibilities of watching over must have to wake up from their slumber to sanitize the society.

Mnguve's "War without End" is poem number thirty-one in this collection. The poem is all about war against terrorism, which is today, so rampant all over the world, including Nigeria. The truth of the matter is that, terrorism has caused so much destruction in our society. The poet feels it is time to put an end to terrorism in our society because:

One thing is for sure
There comes the Day of Judgment
Where the Master of the day
Shall demand every soul to account for his deeds (Stanza 8).

Mnguve's "Flood in the Valley" is poem number thirty-two in *Cantos of the Wailing Bards*. It is a sonnet with a specific rhyme scheme. The poem is about the flood that happened in the Benue valley in the past, which was devastating. The message in this poem is that, as a matter of urgency, something should be done by the government to control or avoid future occurrences.

"The Middle Belt Region" by Mnguve is poem number thirty-three in this collection. In the poem, the writer is worried that the Middle Belt region, which used to be the land overflowing with milk and honey, has now become a war zone as a result of anarchy. Thousands of lives have been lost, widows and orphans are all over the land, while millions of homes are also deserted. To the poet, enough is enough of these atrocities. The poet calls on the Middle Belt to embrace peace.

"Senator of a Republic" by Mnguve is poem number thirty-four. Politicians are often known for campaign promises during electioneering periods. It is a truism that after winning elections, some of them become inaccessible as they care less about the communities that voted for them. Such politicians are only seen in their various communities after four years-during the time of another election. In the Poem, the writer puts it this way:

Sooner than later,
We shall receive the august visitor
Appearing like an eagle
Once in a long while
Only for the senate race
Disappearing in the horizon soon afterwards
The glimpse of him becomes a wishful thinking (Stanza 1).

A change of attitude is needed on the part of politicians.

"Living in the Present Day Africa" by Mnguve is poem number thirty-five. It is one of the longest poems in this collection— a narrative poem that tells the story of the African continent. The poem has a total of ten stanzas. The writer is seriously worried that we live in present-day Africa, where we have lost our pride and dignity, and nothing is working. The collapse of the agricultural sector, engineering, health, education, and governance is worrisome. The poet in the last Stanza is of the view that:

But we need a change
A reconnection to our root
That's for the old
For the younger generation needs
Redirection and reorientation. We must be proud as a people
To stand tall in the committee of nations.... (Stanza 10).

"I am a Nigerian Soldier" by Mnguve is poem number thirty-six in *Cantos of the Wailing Bards*. The poem is written with a figurative inclination. The creative inspiration is apparently a mirror into the life of the poet who happens to be in active service in the Nigerian military. His personal experiences, as stated in the poem, prove that the life of a soldier is indeed NOT an easy one.

The soldier always risks his life, misses church services and sermons, misses sleep and pleasure, misses his family, misses special occasions to protect his fatherland. Despite all these sacrifices, a Nigerian soldier is not well appreciated or rewarded. Despite all these, the poet considers the military job as a noble one, and to him, there is no going back:

Until a warhead shatters my skull
Or I drop the barrel and the national raiment (Stanza 8).

The phrase, "I am a Nigerian Soldier," is repeated in the poem seven times. This is obviously for emphasis, considering the poet's military background.

"The Saracened Benue Siege" by Mnguve is poem number thirty-seven in this collection. In this poem, the poet has tried to convey to his readers the incessant activities of the nomadic herdsmen across the Benue valley. They come well-armed not only to graze but to fight a jihadist war. And in the following words from the poem by the poet:

The continuous siege is a harbinger to plague of starvation
As farmers meet untimely death
And survivals fled their abode and cocoon But only living to tell the tell
(Stanza 4).

One thing is sure:

Alas, Benue may seem defenceless
The voice of the voiceless
And the defence of the defenceless
Shall rise for her people against the heretics sooner
And the once weak shall become strong
And victory shall adorn her poor breast.

The final poem in *Cantos of the Wailing Bards* is titled "Sunset at Noon". The poem is a sonnet written by Aondowase Mnguve. Like "The Saracened Benue Valley," "Sunset at Noon" also laments herdsmen's activities in the Middle Belt, Nigeria. This has brought about more harm than good, and it must be resisted.

THE BOOK'S STRENGTH

Considering the thirty-eight poems analysed above, it is crystal clear that the poets have exploited quite a good number of themes. For example, love, morality, the evil in humans, death, poverty, politics, flood, etc. The subject matter and language of the poetry are well handled. The poems try to express the inner nature of objects or experiences. Most, if not all, the themes are so basic that the expression in poetry has an enormous appeal for humanity in general. The writing style of the poems by Aondowase Mnguve and Benjamin Kator is commendable, and the themes are captivating. The collection is indeed one of the best creative works in Nigeria in recent times.

CONCLUSION

In this essay, we have critically focused on the description and synopses in Aondowase Mnguve and Benjamin Kator Sombo's collection of poems titled *Kantos of the Wailing Bards*. The poems focus on several themes, ranging from love, war, societal vices, poverty, corruption, insecurity, and flooding, among others. The poems argue that Nigeria as a nation is full of the good, the bad, and the ugly. However, members of the society are encouraged to work hard to bring about positive change. All hands must be on deck, and the poets and readers should not be exempted.