

Making a Living through Begging: An Enquiry on the Styles of Street Beggars in Ebinat Woreda, Northwest Ethiopia**Emwodew Melkegnaw Demeke**

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Abstract

Nowadays, begging is a widespread occurrence; however, it is the most prominent in developing countries. Street beggars usually found at the public places in urban areas, such as bus stations, restaurants, markets, main roads Mosques, Churches, etc. This problem, in Ethiopia, is growing in all towns year by year. This study examined the styles of street beggars in Ebinatworeda. The study employed a cross-sectional research design. The study population consisted of street beggars, town administrative, staffs from Labor and Social Affairs office, and community members. To this end, focus group discussions (FGDs), key informant interview, field observation and in-depth interview were used. The result indicates that beggars used different pitiful strategies to collect money, such as blessing the almsgivers before and after alms, by crying and dropping tear, shaking hands having cents, by calling the name of tabots like God, St. Mary, St. Michael, St. Gabriel and martyrs and by giving thanks to God. But, the most inspiring strategy employed by beggars was poem; by expressing the nature of human beings, witnessing the almighty of God and his mother. Taking into account, this study highly recommends that government and religious institutions should first distinguish capable and disabled beggars and after identifying them letting the capable beggars back and train them to do their own jobs, while helping disabled ones. Because, from the finding, there were young and working groups who accepted begging as a culture, as their prime choice and taking it as the surest way to get money.

Keywords: Begging, Street Beggar, Styles of Begging

1. Introduction

Begging is an old fashioned social evil all over the world, but mostly noticeable in developing countries (Jelili, 2013). There are no literatures that stated actually where and when it has been started (Kartika, 1994). Despite this, some verbal legends have shown that it was begun when people challenge each other following increment of their number in life across the entire world (Teweldebrhan, 2011). Likewise, MoLSA assured that, begging did not alive in traditional societies since these people were too small in size and largely manifested by living and working together. However, later on when the population increased, resources become weakened at the faster rate and human beings thus were looking competition over the limited resources to meet their endless needs. Because of such life progress, the “haves” and “have-nots” were created. Following this, the “have-nots” were not able to survive so that they started begging as a means of satisfying their basic desires (MoLSA, 1992).

Currently, begging is not an odd situation for only developing and underdeveloped countries; it becomes a global urban problem (Ado, 1997). Evidently, there are urban areas having different categories of beggars, including the poor, the disabled, the homeless and professional beggars for instance, in the USA, Mexico, UK and China (Smith, 2005). Whereas, in most parts of India, this practice is considered as a pride, if people give a charity for those street beggars they feel themselves as fulfilled the required religious faith (Hanchao, 1999). In Africa, most cities of South Africa, Nigeria, Tanzania, Ethiopia, and Kenya are observed as the worst having different categories of beggars found at hotels, religious centers, markets, bus stations, road junctions, public ceremonies, and other public places (Jelili, 2009).

In case of Ethiopia, the exposure to begging is very high and visible if someone watches over the street of urban centers that live and working on it. Approximately, there are 180,000-200,000 people who engaged in begging in the entire country, more than 143,000 of them make their living in Addis Ababa, surprisingly 97% of them are capable of working, but they choose cities for begging because they mind begging as a supplementary source of income. By considering this, they migrate to tourist attraction areas for their begging destinations, like Awassa, Mekele, Axum, Bahir Dar, Lalibela, Harar, Gondar, Adama, Langano, Sodere, etc.(ERDA, 2007).

In the study area, the issue of begging is considered as a culture or a means to earn income. The *woreda* Labor and Social Affairs Bureau officially stated that though there is no real data that show how much the numbers of beggars found in the town, beggars are increasing from time to time as compared with the last few years, particularly in the Church of St. Gabriel, St. Kidane Mihret, St. Mikael and main roads (LSAB, 2014).

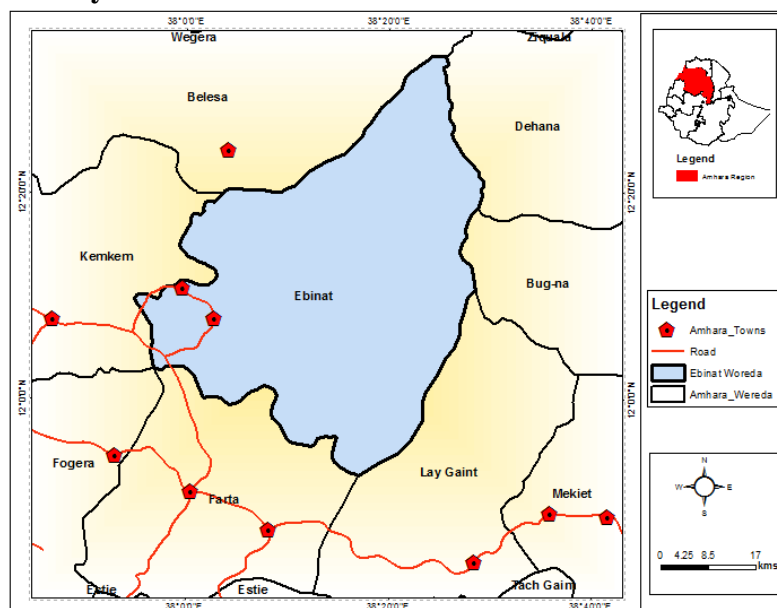
Though begging is still one of the major social problems in Ethiopia, there have been little studies conducted on the issue of begging; for instance, life in the street of Adama town(Kibrom, 2008), children perspectives and approaches of begging and how children forcefully involved to begging (Tatek, 2008), survival strategies of Ethiopian child beggars, focusing on rationales of begging, children perspectives of begging and the complexity and fluidity nature of begging (Tatek, 2009), causes, prevalence and the psychological consequences of begging (Teweldebrhan, 2011) and the socioeconomic conditions of beggars (Lemma, 2013). This ethnographic study, however, has tried to explore the styles/arts of begging whereby street beggars use to persuade people to get alms.

2. Study Area

This cross-sectional study was conducted in Ebinat town, South Gondar administrative zone, Amhara region. According to the 1995 Ethiopian constitution, the Amhara national regional state is one of the nine regional states in the present ethnic federalism structure (FDRE). This Amhara region comprises eleven administrative zones; South Gondar Zone is one of the administrative zones where Ebinat *woreda*, the study area, is located.

Within Ebinat town, the study conducted in some purposively selected areas, such as Churches (Kidane Mihret, Gebriel and Mikeal Churches), public places (such as restaurants, hotels, bus station, market, and main roads).

Figure 1: Map of the Study Area



Source: Department of Geography and Environmental Studies GIS Lab (2014)

3. Research Methods

This study was a cross-sectional, which entirely used qualitative approach. The main reason is because this method allows person-to-person discussion (Moriarty, 2011), it increases the people's insight, thought, feelings and perceptions on the issue being studied (Kitzinger, 1995). Not only these, but also its flexibility and ability to see the non-verbal language behavior of people being studied and it can give the opportunity to raise direct questions (Creswell, 2003).

Of course, qualitative research methods may have its own limitations and strengths, but employing it systematically is a very necessary step for researchers to obtain the nearest correct and realistic picture of necessary information (Creswell, 2008). Thus, by giving due emphasis on its strength, the researcher used this approach, starting from the data collection up to the data analysis stage.

The qualitative approach, according to Bouma (2000) includes in-depth interviews, key informant interview, case study, focus group discussions and direct observation of operations, which are important to get unintended and unanticipated data on the subject under study. He added, these data collection methods can help any researcher to collect rich and diverse information on the intended subject (Bouma, 2000). These methods can also offer opportunities for researchers in order to see the general nature of social life in the study area and helps to answer complex questions in a single study (Heyvaert, 2011). This is why the researcher entirely used this qualitative approach. Indeed, for this title, this approach is very suitable.

This study also used purposive sampling technique in selecting study area and participants. Informants were selected by their knowledge, closeness, proximity, or propinquity to the issue and of the researcher's judgment and earlier information to get the required data.

The data were collected from both primary and secondary sources. Among the primary data collection methods, field observation, key informant interview, FGDs, and in-depth interview were conducted. While, secondary data sources were also collected through extensive review of published and unpublished documents, previous studies, academic journals and annual reviews. Particularly, lots of the secondary data were collected from Labor and Social Affairs Office of Ebinat *woreda*.

Finally, data were analyzed through thematic analysis technique. Initially, the raw data were coded and recoded. Groups of related initial themes were clustered and analyzed using thematic analysis.

In relation to ethical consideration, first the researcher obtained ethical clearance letter from the University of Gondar, College of Social Sciences and the Humanities and the town administrator. Research informants were also informed about the aims of the study, besides oral and written consent.

4. Results and Discussion

This section presents the major findings of the study. It introduces the different styles begging used by beggars to persuade the almsgivers. Besides, it tries to merge previous studies to support the existing finding.

Informants were asked a question about what are the major begging styles of street beggars. In this regard, they provided several begging strategies such as poem, sleeping and crying in the street or Church, blessing, witnessing the kindness of God, brattling cents and shaking piteous hands, calling their beloved arks, and giving thanks to God, etc. However, begging through poem was rated as the most persuasive strategy according to interviewees.

Poem

Amharic	English
imebētē mariyami simīnyi linigerishi	<i>Oh! My Lady, Mary, listen to what I tell you,</i>
tamalijinyi biye ke'ānidu āmilaki lijishi	<i>Will you intercede with your single Creator Son on my behalf?</i>

This means, as they emphasized, “*We are requesting our beloved virgin St. Mary to go between us and the super God so that we can fulfill our need for food*”. They confirmed that, because we “all” know that in the bible, God was promised to St. Mary if people call the name of her, then God will make a forgive for those people. Consequently, first by believing that promise too, we beggars are always calling the name of the Virgin Mary. In fact, the Ethiopian Orthodox Cristian believers have a great affection towards St. Mary and the meaning attached to her is very exceptional. That is why most of the beggars call her name in the street, Churches and Mosques whenever they ask for alms.

However, the strategy of begging may vary from place to place, for instance, in large cities, most beggars use written begging and mobile begging instead of a poem. In this regard, Tatek Abebe (2009) in his study entitled *The Survival Strategies of Ethiopian Child Beggar* has described in the following way:

“...Street children engage in different ‘strands’ of begging. These include ‘lone begging’ in which they may earn and use resources alone rather than with their friends. Others, however, perform ‘group begging’. Some children also prefer ‘oral begging’, while others practice ‘singing-’ or ‘written begging’. In all of these contexts, ‘mobile begging’, in which they frequently change their sites of begging to move to places where there are potential alms givers, is important”.

Amharic	English
bemedihanī'ālemi 'ileti yeteserawi bēti	<i>A house built on the day of the savior,</i>
bīgefuti āyiwedik'imi bīnek'enik'uti	<i>Shall not fall down even if pushed and shaken.</i>

This poem shows that if people give money or any other items for alms seekers, then the door to the promising heaven will be opened and can get a long life from the savior God. In other words, it helps the alms-givers to build the future heaven for his/her soul. It is to mean that alms-giving is the base or mandatory for every religious follower to get access to the main gateway of the everlasting heaven. Therefore, street beggars use this technique to beg people by considering this religious principle.

Amharic	English
besemayi demena sīzori sanayewi	<i>Before we saw the cloud turn in the sky,</i>
begīzē t'alena ch'ik'a hone sewi	<i>The rain fall early and man turned into mud.</i>

According to the interviewees, the main message which attached to the above poem is “*We are just like a mud; composed of soil and created by God*”. It shows that we human beings are under the hands of God, we cannot blame God for whatever; he can take any measurement accidentally such as, he may send us heavy storm, fatal disease or death. So, we are expected to refrain ourselves from doing evil things as long as we are here in the earth, and we must pay attention to our soul. We do not know when God will come to us, we cannot see him, and we do not know when we pass away. Thus,

we must ready always. It indicates that every action is under the control of God, and even we are living as per the will of God.

Amharic	English
hāgerachini k'ola mesiki yelewi kedeji	<i>Our place is a low land with no grassy home yard,</i>
āferochi be'āferi ānich'aweti inji	<i>So, we, the soil, are found to play with soil.</i>

This verse as described by 58 years old man underlined that human for a human being is the most determinant rather than other beings like animals. As long as we are living together, we must love and support each other so that God will help us soon. He added that there is a common religious saying “*God always alive in love*” meaning that if people love and support each other, then God will be with them. However, the contrary is true, if there is a lack of love and solidarity among the people, God will be out of their reach and dream.

Amharic	English
fit'erenyi salilewi fet'ironyi lemekera	<i>Having created me for misery without my quest,</i>
salek'isi inoralehu 'idilē tesebira	<i>I live crying over my broken luck.</i>

The above poem is basically quoted by disabled beggars in rare cases. It seems they were complaining to God regarding their biological nature, but the logic behind is pitting the heart of alms-givers to offer them money by presenting their unlucky life fate. Nevertheless, it does not mean that other section of beggars do not apply such kind of poem.

Amharic	English
ireget'unyi bilehi midiri ātik'ot'a yihī hulu ye'ānite newi ch'erik'u bīnet'at'a	<i>You, earth, do not get angry at being stepped on, All this (humanity) is yours despite being in whitish wear.</i>

This means, even if we wear smart clothes, we eat delicious food and live in well-furnished house in this world, we are human beings, we are empty, God created us for death, we are composed of “mud” and we will return back to mud again, we are meaningless, and our fate is under the hands of the supernatural God. Therefore, so long as our death is unpredictable, we human beings must support each other.

Amharic	English
yesilasē menigedi yik'et'inali kemerifē	<i>The road of Trinity is slimmer than a needle,</i>
beset'ehu yasenyali ch'erik'ēni tegefifē	<i>Their prevails the urge to undress the self and give away the dress.</i>

Usually, beggars exercise this poem especially for those “sinful” people aiming to draw regret about their past life and returning them soon to be kind and pity. The intension of beggars here is heartening the “heartless” people to create feeling sympathy, to remind about their future life and soul by disconnecting them from their painful history. Discussants and key informants from Labor and Social Affairs Office also assured that beggars use this technique which instigates the people who undermine disabled beggars.

Amharic	English
ālemi yik'iri bilo mani yihēdali āwik'o	<i>Who will depart from the world and go away consciously,</i>
moti yiwesidali injij begidi āsich'enik'o	<i>Except that death creates anxiety and takes away forcefully.</i>

We will pass away from this world unconditionally, then we left our resources on this earth so we have to share, drink the water and eat the food together whatever we have at hand. Despite the color, ethnic background, religion, age, sex and interest of the person's death forcefully take away us from our favorite family, world.

Amharic	English
isikī linesana inibayeni lafisisewi	<i>Let me rise and shade my tears,</i>
libu yemīrara bagenyi ānidi ānidi sewi	<i>Should I find some people whose hearts pity me.</i>

The man whose age is 67 reported that this poem is used to show the importance of crying and spilling tears to enter into the door of the people easily. From the field, in addition to other strategies, the researcher also observed that beggars also exceedingly used this pity poem in the form of chant with heart-touching hand movement (song).

Amharic	English
be'imebētē mariyami inanite yemitayunyi inē yemalayachihu	<i>In the name of my Lady, Mary, you who see me, but I do not see you,</i>
kezīhi yek'eni ch'elema āmilaki yadinachihu	<i>May God deliver you from this dark day.</i>

In most occasions, blind street beggars usually use this poem mainly attempting to let know the alms-givers through blessing as they are under dark world, in a state of bad and hopeless condition. One informant at the Church of St. Michael also supported that this technique is commonly implemented by blind beggars and it is very successful in trying to be pleasing the people.

By seeing the above poem, one can simply conclude that those poems used by beggars do have religious meanings, so as to pit the heart of alms-givers. Despite, the place where they beg and the time (the day; for instance, if the day is St. Michael day beggars will going to beg by calling the name of Michael), beggars in most instances refer the name of St. Mary and God in expressing their poems. The sole reason is that they strongly believe that St. Mary and God have a deep acceptance among Orthodox believers.

Some of the beggars also quote the nature of human beings, their economic, social, and religious life by contrasting two extreme divisions such as richer and poorer, almsgivers or softhearted people and heartless. The remaining beggars were highlighted the nature of human death, and the invisible power of God in deciding over every aspect of human life including their fortune of death.

Blessing before alms

Blessing was another style of begging along with poem that this study found. The blessing goes to the people who gave alms to street beggars and their Lord God too. They use it not only after the charity, but surprisingly, they also embrace this before alms by expecting to get more money from the people. According to discussants, some of the street beggars who exercise this technique argued that it is fruitful as compared to other styles.

With regard to this, they reason out on the ground that "*blessing can boost the psychological commitment and satisfaction of the alms-givers*". They added, *blessing can also increase the life*

expectancy and wealth of the alms-giver. Frequently, most elders and some disabled beggars use this style of begging as part of their best strategy as the researcher has confirmed it using field observation.

Witnessing the Almighty of God

This method largely used by beggars, particularly who lack the ability to make an impression over the people through poem, blessing, appreciation, sleeping, shaking hands. To search money, therefore, they beg simply by witnessing the kindness nature of almighty God, they give and left everything to God by believing that God even can give food for blind eagle ("The Master Knows The Master Knew"), associating this with their life and they give emphasis to the promising Amharic proverb "iwiri āmora t'ewarīwi gēta yawik'ilinali". For this group of beggars, the researcher has forwarded a question concerning their best strategy of begging inconvincing the people? Then, responded that what matters is not speaking more poem and other begging strategies, but what matters is deepening our trust on God and his mother as well.

Sleeping

The other strategy of begging what the researcher has observed was sleeping on the street, market place and Church. The day was Sunday, at the Church of St. Kidanemihret and when the researcher was walking through, he found beggars nearest to the Church who begged simply by sleeping. Nonetheless, there are also some capable beggars which apply it, cheating the passerby by covering their face and just through stretching their arms. In some instances, beggars use kids to sit with them and facilitate begging as well as to collect cents or items from the people. Just, they use these kids as an instrument to persuade the almsgivers during their beg.

Brattling cents and shaking hands

Interviewees pointed out that in begging heartening the people is also possible mainly by moving hands and brattling cents together. Here, beggars who cannot express their begging using poems, blessing and other techniques tend to beg regularly taking this for their alternative begging strategy.

Calling the name of Arks

In begging, calling the name of St. Mary, St. Gabriel, St. Michael, the lord God, St. John, Kidanemihret, and other Martyrs are the most common strategy among beggars as a means to earn money or items to satisfy living needs. One aged man stated that *the income which beggars earn in a day by calling arks depends on the time and the place, during the time of the holiday more money will be obtained as compared with other working days, for example, if the day is St. Mary's day then they often mention the name of her until the day will come to an end.* Precisely, this technique is used during the days of the saints. Thus, calling beloved saints is also an alternative survival strategy among street beggars.

Moreover, in line with this, Woubishet Demewozu (2005) in his ethnographic study entitled *Begging as a Means of Livelihood: Conferring with the Poor at the Orthodox Religious Ceremonial Days* in Addis Ababa has also confirmed as follows:

Nowadays, begging in Ethiopia is becoming a business, which demands commitment, competitiveness, tactfulness and alertness of beggars. The fittest survive and the novice and the uncompetitive lose in the social context for the scarce resource, i.e. the alms (Woubishet, 2005).

Lesson from the Observation

As from the field observation, it was indicated that most of the beggars beg in the street nearby Churches along with those who are begging in main roads, market places and bus station by stretching their hands and by saying heartbreaking phrases like "*imagine I am living in the absence of house, food and cloth, give me money by the name of God, about the virgin St. Mary, St. Gabriel...*". So following

this, some people responded by saying let God help you, and for those younger beggars, some people aggressively reply as you are capable to do and raise a question why you beg here?

As a result, sympathetic and old beggars who can draw the big attention of the people by using different styles or mechanisms of begging for instance blessings (before and after alms), verse and stretching arms in a heart-rending ways are potential money receivers. On the contrary, those failed to attract people through these mechanisms do not get enough money or items as compared with the first group. Similarly, previous findings were found for example Adugna (2006) elders/old beggars are generous and sympathetic than young beggars.

Besides, from the observation what made the researcher surprise was capable beggars instead of doing their business they tend to see begging as part of their favorite job, as culture, in general they simply persuaded their internals as they can survive by begging. Not only beggars themselves, but also the alms-givers/people tend to encourage them despite some implicit backbiting particularly against youth beggars.

Another doleful situation was most of the street beggars have many children in the absence of steady income, house, education, food and without taking into account the welfare and other life aspects of their children. To support this situation, a 16 years old boy (Asmamaw Kassahun) has remarked that:

"... I was born and grown up at Qualisa, Segnogebiya. Now, I do not have any work, simply move with my blind father, which he lost both eyes when he was at the age of 42. Starting from that time my prime duty is navigating him to here and there in the search of money and other items for our survival. Although, I am interested to join school with friends it is difficult to leave my father here alone and it will be a big imprecation for my future life. Another challenge for us is difficult to find housing because we arrived here yesterday, we are the newcomers for the people and imagine it is very complicated responsibility for 16 years old boy, me. Beyond this, I want to have a job with wealthy man, however, my father restricted me, and he always warned me to respect his order by saying stay here with me unless God will take harsh punishment over you".

Similar to Asmamaw's explanation, other researchers also revealed that children are highly vulnerable for different, social, economic and moral troubles in the face of begging with their families especially they face social disintegration from neighborhood children.

Furthermore, those who are better singers and are able to cite texts from religious Bible by shaking their hands with cents viewed as pity. On the other side, the contrary is true for the less singers who are failing to cite literatures from the Bible.

On the other hand, there was another nicer look what the researcher has observed in St. Michael Church, equal distribution of money, items or grains. Beggars do have one 67 years old leader whose responsibility is handling money equally for members. For me, it will encourage social tie/social capital among each member.

In the view of comparative advantage, it is very important for those shy beggars who are not able to express those heart-touching phrases and verse as well as for the people who back with nothing to their home. However, it is not always working because there are some individuals (elders and disabled ones) who receive more money having special talent to appeal the people. The distribution may also create dread among competent individuals. Despite this, it is best recommended for the other beggars if and only if they share this experience.

As far, some shy beggars did not have constant strategic seat rather they move here and there and present their stories secretly for selected people. To this end, they covered their face with a piece of cloth to protect the eyes of other people. They believe that eyes have the power to fire people; "yesewi 'ayini isati newi".

5. Conclusion

Nowadays, in Ethiopia, street begging is becoming as a means to make a living, particularly in urban areas of the country. To this end, street beggars apply several begging styles in attempting alms from the people. The first and the most strategy of begging as of informants is a poem; it can be about the nature of human beings, including their fate of death, generosity of almighty God, the virgin Mary or appreciating and blessing the alms-giver. But, most of the poems have religious meanings that consider the time (for example holiday) and the place of begging.

More precisely, some blind beggars expressed their ideas either in the form of a poem or other techniques. Similarly, street beggars try to earn money by presenting their "bad" state of nature so as to pit the heart of others. Sleeping on the street and crying in the street or around the Churches and Mosques is also another mechanism of beggars. On the one hand, those beggars who are unable to use poems try to beg people simply by witnessing the kindness of God, they give and left everything to God because they strongly believed that God even can give food for blind eagle.

However, as usual, most of the street beggars use the name of beloved arks such as almighty lord (God), St. Mary, St. Gabriel, St. Michael and martyrs including by telling their miracles to the people. Surprisingly, shaking hands and brattling cents in front of the people is also another art of begging which used by some of the beggars. By and large, this technique is commonly preferred by those beggars who are unable to communicate with people through oral language.

Besides to the above mentioned styles of beggars, based on the finding of this study, giving thanks to God and his mother found to be the most important strategy among street beggars. Similar to this, beggars also bless the alms-givers before and after alms like God may bless your life, let God give you double, may the lord widen your wealth as good as the root of the tree.

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