

PERFORMING POVERTY: ENTERTAINING FOR ALMS AND EMERGING VOICES IN STREET PERFORMANCE IN AWKA

Kosy Añulika Okafor (PhD)
Department of Theatre and Film Studies
Faculty of Arts
Nnamdi Azikiwe University Awka
ka.okafor@unizik.edu.ng
&
Geraldine Ebele Ojukwu (PhD)
Department of Film Production,
Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka
ge.ojukwu@unizik.edu.ng

Abstract

This study examines street begging as a form of performance and investigates how visually impaired street beggars in Awka transform poverty into performative acts through entertainment-oriented strategies aimed at attracting alms. Anchored in Richard Schechner's Performance Theory, the study adopts a qualitative research design utilizing participant observation and content analysis of four selected visually impaired mobile beggars operating in public spaces across Awka. The findings reveal that the beggars employ organized artistic and communicative techniques such as musical performances, praise singing, storytelling, instrumental display, vocal modulation, bodily expression, and strategic spatial positioning to engage passersby and sustain audience interaction. These performative practices function not only as survival strategies but also as forms of informal street theatre that communicate socio-economic realities, vulnerability, and resilience within urban spaces. The study further reveals that the interaction between beggars and passersby reflects core theatrical elements, including performers, audiences, performance spaces, and symbolic communication. It argues that entertaining for alms constitutes an emerging mode of street performance that challenges conventional notions of theatre as being restricted to formal stages and professionally trained performers. The study concludes that street beggars represent marginalized yet significant voices within contemporary Nigerian street performance culture. The study therefore recommends broader scholarly engagement with alternative, informal, and everyday performance traditions in Nigeria as part of efforts to expand the boundaries of theatre and performance studies.

Keywords: Performing Poverty, Entertaining for Alms, Emerging Voices, Street Performance, Survival Performance, Beggars' Artistry, Performance Studies, Nigerian Theatre.

Introduction

Almsgiving, the act of offering material or financial assistance to individuals experiencing poverty or deprivation, has historically occupied an important place within human societies. Across cultures and religious traditions, it has been associated with compassion, charity, and moral obligation. Studies by McCabe et al. (2018) reveal that almsgiving in pre-Famine Ireland was regarded as a Christian obligation across social classes, while Victor et al. (2011) and Araújo (2016) observe that Islamic traditions institutionalized charitable giving through practices such as Zakat and Sadaqa, framing almsgiving as both a spiritual duty and a pathway to salvation. These perspectives demonstrate that almsgiving extends beyond mere economic assistance to function as a culturally and religiously sanctioned social practice.

Closely connected to almsgiving is the practice of begging, which has existed across civilizations and historical epochs. Wardhaugh (2009) notes that begging is a phenomenon found across cultures and historical periods, while Hassan et al. (2013) affirm that it is not peculiar to any single society but exists in both developed and developing nations. Historical evidence further illustrates the longevity of the practice. In classical Greek literature, Homer's portrayal of Odysseus disguised as a beggar and his encounter with Arnaeus (Irus) demonstrates that begging had already emerged as a recognizable social institution in ancient societies (Kehinde, 2020). Such accounts establish begging as a historically enduring aspect of human social organization.

Scholars generally define begging as the act of soliciting money, food, shelter, or other necessities from members of the public within shared social spaces (Hassan et al., 2013). While existing studies have predominantly examined begging from socio-economic, religious, and humanitarian perspectives, recent scholarship has begun to explore its communicative and performative dimensions. Henry (2009), for instance, conceptualizes begging in China as a form of street theatre intended to evoke emotional responses from passersby. Similarly, Melkegnaw (2019), in a study of Ethiopian beggars, identifies the use of blessings, poetic recitations, and performative gratitude as persuasive strategies for attracting donations. In Indonesia, Sulastri (2022) employs a dramaturgical

framework to examine the distinction between the public and private identities of beggars, while Owusu-Sekyere (2018) highlights the organized structures underlying child begging networks in Ghana. These studies collectively suggest that begging often involves carefully constructed performances designed to engage audiences emotionally and socially.

In Nigeria, street begging remains a visible feature of urban life, particularly in major cities and commercial centres. Existing Nigerian scholarship has largely attributed the persistence of begging to poverty, unemployment, disability, displacement, and socio-religious practices (Fatai, 2020). Studies also indicate that visually impaired individuals are especially vulnerable because of limited access to education, employment opportunities, and adequate welfare support systems (Balarabe, 2014). In Northern Nigeria, professional beggars popularly known as *Mabarata* have historically constituted an identifiable social group. Despite these contributions, Nigerian studies on begging have focused mainly on its causes, social implications, and policy concerns, with minimal attention given to its artistic and theatrical dimensions.

This neglect creates an important gap within theatre and performance scholarship. In Awka, Anambra State, visually impaired street beggars frequently employ music, praise singing, rhythmic chanting, storytelling, instrumental performance, gestures, and bodily expressions as strategies for attracting public attention and eliciting sympathy from passersby. These expressive practices reveal elements commonly associated with performance, including performers, audiences, performance spaces, improvisation, symbolic communication, and audience interaction. Through these techniques, begging transcends a purely economic activity and assumes the characteristics of a performative act embedded within everyday urban culture.

It is against this background that this study investigates street begging as a form of performance and theatrical expression in Awka. The study interrogates how visually impaired street beggars transform poverty into performative acts for survival and how these practices constitute emerging voices within contemporary Nigerian street theatre and urban performance culture. By foregrounding the artistic and communicative dimensions of begging, the study contributes to expanding theatre and performance scholarship beyond conventional stage practices to include marginalized forms of everyday public performance.

Literature Review

The literature underpinning this study may be grouped into three interrelated areas: socio-economic analyses of begging, religious and historical perspectives on almsgiving, and performance-oriented interpretations of street begging. While these scholarly perspectives provide important insights into the phenomenon of begging, there remains limited integration of these dimensions within theatre and performance scholarship, particularly in relation to Nigerian urban contexts.

The first category of literature focuses on the socio-economic foundations of begging. Scholars such as Gabriel et al. (2015) and Fatai et al. (2020) identify poverty, unemployment, disability, and social exclusion as major factors contributing to the persistence of street begging. These studies are valuable because they situate begging within broader material and structural realities. However, many of these analyses primarily portray beggars as passive victims of circumstance, paying limited attention to the agency, creativity, and performative strategies employed by beggars in negotiating survival within urban environments. Consequently, these studies leave insufficient room for understanding begging as an expressive social practice.

The second body of literature examines begging and almsgiving from religious and historical perspectives. McCabe et al. (2018), Singer et al. (2014), and Victor et al. (2011) emphasize the moral and spiritual dimensions of charity within Christianity and Islam. These studies explain why members of the public may feel morally obligated to respond positively to beggars through acts of giving. While such scholarship provides important cultural and religious context for understanding almsgiving practices, it rarely interrogates the interaction between beggars and donors as a performative encounter involving emotional appeal, symbolic communication, and audience engagement.

The third and most relevant strand of literature conceptualizes begging as performance. Henry (2009) describes begging in China as a form of “street theatre” in which beggars deploy recognizable scripts and emotional strategies to attract sympathy and donations. Similarly, Melkegnaw (2019) demonstrates how beggars in Ethiopia utilize blessings, poetic recitations, and performative speech as persuasive tools, while Sulastrî (2022) applies dramaturgical analysis to explain how beggars construct public identities during street interactions. These studies collectively shift attention from begging as a purely economic activity to begging as a structured social performance involving role-playing, communication, and audience participation.

Within the Nigerian context, Esan et al. (2009) and Fafiyebi et al. (2023) contribute significantly to performance-oriented understandings of begging by examining the linguistic and pragmatic dimensions of beggars’ interactions.

Their studies reveal that beggars employ persuasive discourse strategies such as pleading, vindication, justification, blessings, and emotional appeal to influence public responses. These findings reinforce the argument that begging involves carefully constructed communicative practices comparable to theatrical performance.

Despite these contributions, existing studies remain geographically fragmented and theoretically underdeveloped in relation to performance studies. Few studies explicitly engage established performance theories such as Richard Schechner's Performance Theory in analyzing begging practices. This theoretical gap is significant because Schechner's conceptualization of performance as a continuum encompassing ritual, theatre, and everyday life provides an appropriate framework for understanding begging as both social behaviour and artistic expression. This study therefore advances existing scholarship by synthesizing socio-economic, religious, and performative perspectives within a unified theoretical framework. By applying Schechner's Performance Theory, the study reconceptualizes street begging not merely as an act of deprivation but as a form of "survival performance" in which economic necessity, artistic expression, and social communication intersect within urban public spaces.

Theoretical Framework: Performance Theory

This study is anchored on Richard Schechner's Performance Theory, which conceptualizes performance as a continuum that extends beyond conventional theatre to include rituals, ceremonies, social interactions, and everyday human behaviour. Schechner (2003) argues that performance is not restricted to formal theatrical spaces but occurs in various aspects of social life where individuals enact roles, communicate meanings, and engage audiences.

According to Schechner, performance involves intentional behaviour designed to produce responses from observers. This perspective broadens the understanding of theatre by recognizing that ordinary activities may possess performative qualities when they involve symbolic action, repetition, role construction, audience interaction, and structured presentation. Performance therefore exists not only on formal stages but also within everyday spaces such as markets, streets, religious gatherings, and public institutions.

Within this framework, street beggars may be understood as performers who strategically construct narratives of need through artistic and communicative practices aimed at influencing public response. Their activities involve essential performative elements including:

- Performer (the beggar)
- Audience (passersby and potential donors)
- Performance space (street environment)
- Time (duration and repetition of performance)
- Action (music, storytelling, gestures, praise singing, and bodily expression)

These elements correspond with fundamental characteristics of theatrical performance and support the interpretation of street begging as a form of street theatre. The theory is particularly relevant to this study because it provides a framework for analyzing how visually impaired beggars transform public spaces into performance arenas through artistic expression and audience engagement.

Street begging in Awka may therefore be conceptualized as a form of "survival performance" in which performance functions simultaneously as an economic strategy, communicative act, and artistic expression. Through this lens, begging becomes more than a passive act of soliciting assistance; it emerges as an organized performative practice embedded within everyday urban life.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design combining participant observation and content analysis to examine street begging as a lived performance practice in Awka. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because the study seeks to interpret social behaviour, artistic expression, and performance patterns within natural settings rather than quantify numerical variables. The study specifically investigates how visually impaired beggars employ performance elements such as music, vocal modulation, bodily gestures, instrumental display, and spatial positioning to engage passersby and solicit alms.

A purposive sampling technique was used to select four visually impaired mobile beggars operating in different locations within Awka metropolis. The participants were deliberately chosen because they consistently incorporated artistic elements such as singing, rhythmic chanting, instrumental accompaniment, storytelling, and expressive bodily performance into their begging activities. This sampling approach ensured that the selected participants possessed characteristics relevant to the study's objective of examining begging as a structured performance practice rather than merely an economic activity.

Data were collected primarily through participant observation, which involved sustained engagement with the performers within their natural street environments. The researcher observed the participants during their routine begging activities to document performance structures, audience responses, spatial arrangements, and environmental influences. This method enabled the researcher to capture the spontaneous and dynamic nature of the performances while minimizing artificial interference.

Additional data were obtained through field notes, informal interactions, and photographic documentation. Field notes provided detailed descriptions of costume appearance, musical patterns, bodily movement, vocal techniques, audience engagement, and performance sequences. Informal interactions with the performers offered insights into their motivations, artistic choices, and lived experiences. Photographic documentation further served as visual evidence of performance practices, spatial positioning, and performer–audience relationships, thereby strengthening the reliability and validity of the observations.

The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis. This analytical method enabled the identification of recurring patterns and performance characteristics across the observed cases. The analysis focused on major thematic categories such as artistic techniques, performance structure, audience interaction, spatial organization, bodily presentation, and social messaging. These themes provided a framework for interpreting the artistic and communicative dimensions of street begging as performance.

Through this methodological approach, the study systematically documents street begging as a lived and performative practice, highlighting how visually impaired beggars creatively transform urban spaces into informal performance arenas while engaging audiences through structured artistic expression.

Street Beggars' Artistry as Emerging Street Performance

Street begging may be understood as a form of informal street performance in which individuals construct narratives of need through expressive, artistic, and communicative strategies aimed at obtaining alms. Although begging is commonly examined as a socio-economic problem associated with poverty, disability, and unemployment, field observations in Awka reveal that many beggars employ deliberate artistic techniques that transform solicitation into structured public performance.

Existing scholarship supports this performance-oriented interpretation of begging. Henry et al. (2009) conceptualize begging in Shenyang, China, as a form of street theatre in which performers employ culturally recognizable scripts and emotional strategies to attract sympathy and donations. Similarly, Agyemang et al. (2024) identify three deliberate economic strategies among street beggars in Ghana—child advertisement, body marketing, and narrative marketing—demonstrating that begging often involves calculated methods of presentation designed to evoke emotional responses from the public.

Within the Nigerian context, Esan et al. (2009) observe that beggars utilize discourse conventions such as vindication, pleading, and justification to frame their conditions in socially acceptable ways, while Fafiyebi et al. (2023) identify multiple pragmatic linguistic goals within begging interactions, with pleading emerging as the dominant strategy. Collectively, these studies indicate that begging frequently involves organized expressive practices resembling theatrical performance.

Nevertheless, much of the broader literature continues to emphasize the socio-economic foundations of begging. Gabriel et al. (2015) and Fatai et al. (2020), for instance, identify poverty, unemployment, disability, and inadequate welfare structures as major drivers of street begging. While these explanations remain valid, this study adopts a dual perspective that understands begging simultaneously as a survival strategy and as a form of artistic performance. Rather than dismissing socio-economic interpretations, the study expands existing discourse by demonstrating how artistic and communicative strategies are employed to negotiate sympathy, visibility, and material support.

From a performance perspective, street begging involves deliberate self-presentation, symbolic communication, and audience engagement. Public spaces function as performance arenas where interactions between beggars and passersby resemble theatrical encounters embedded within everyday urban life. Artistic expression therefore becomes the medium through which performers construct relationships with audiences and sustain attention within crowded public environments.

Musical and Verbal Performance

Music emerged as the most dominant artistic element among the observed performers. The beggars employ songs to narrate experiences of hardship, disability, suffering, and economic struggle, while some performances also reflect broader social realities affecting marginalized populations. Music functions simultaneously as an expressive and economic tool, enabling performers to attract public attention, sustain audience engagement, and evoke

emotional responses from listeners.

Praise singing further complements musical performance by personalizing interactions between performers and potential donors. Beggars frequently address passersby with affectionate titles, prayers, blessings, and expressions of goodwill, thereby creating emotional connections that encourage participation in the act of giving. In this context, the giving of alms becomes a form of audience response analogous to applause, tipping, or patronage within formal theatrical settings.

Instrumental Performance

Instrumental sounds also play a significant role in attracting attention within busy urban environments. The observed performers employ local percussion instruments, metal plates, hand drums, and improvised sound objects to produce rhythmic patterns that announce their presence and distinguish them from surrounding street activities. These auditory signals function as performative markers that draw audiences into the interactional space of the performance.

The use of improvised instruments further demonstrates the creativity and adaptability of the performers, as ordinary objects are transformed into tools of artistic expression. This improvisational quality reinforces the notion of begging as a dynamic and resourceful performance practice embedded within everyday urban realities.

Spatial Performance

Spatial positioning constitutes another important dimension of street begging performance. The observed beggars carefully select locations capable of maximizing visibility, audience interaction, and economic return. Common performance spaces include market entrances, roadside intersections, motor parks, and other high-traffic urban areas. Similar observations have been made in studies of begging practices in Nigerian cities, where beggars strategically occupy spaces associated with continuous pedestrian movement.

These public locations function as informal stages that facilitate interaction between performers and audiences. The street therefore becomes a performative environment in which social exchange, artistic expression, and economic negotiation occur simultaneously.

Embodied Performance

Bodily presentation forms a central component of street begging performance. Performers employ posture, gesture, facial expression, bodily movement, and visual appearance to communicate narratives of suffering, vulnerability, and need. In some cases, silent bodily expression alone functions as a powerful performative strategy capable of eliciting sympathy from passersby.

The body thus becomes an expressive medium through which performers construct meaning and communicate with audiences. Through embodied performance, beggars transform personal experiences of hardship into visible and symbolic acts capable of generating social and economic responses.

Essentially, street begging shares significant structural similarities with theatrical performance, including performers, audiences, performance spaces, symbolic communication, and audience participation. The street functions as a stage, beggars operate as performers, and passersby become audiences whose donations signify responses to the performance. Street begging may therefore be understood as a form of informal urban theatre in which survival practices intersect with artistic and communicative expression. This perspective broadens contemporary theatrical discourse by recognizing marginalized individuals as active participants in urban cultural production.

Discussion of Findings and Pictorial Analysis of the Four Street Beggars' Performance

The findings of this study reveal that street begging in Awka operates as a structured and intentional form of performance rather than a passive act of requesting alms. Observations of the selected performers indicate clear elements of organized performance, including rehearsed songs, repetitive performance routines, strategic spatial positioning within high-traffic areas, coordinated audience engagement, and deliberate use of expressive techniques aimed at attracting public attention and sympathy.

These characteristics correspond with established features of performance art and support the interpretation of street begging within a theatrical framework. The findings particularly reinforce Schechner's conception of performance as a continuum encompassing both formal theatrical productions and everyday social activities. Street begging in Awka therefore exemplifies how ordinary social practices may function as performative acts involving symbolic communication, role enactment, and audience interaction.

The study further reveals that the beggars' activities function simultaneously as survival strategies and artistic expressions communicating social realities of poverty, disability, exclusion, and resilience. Through music, praise singing, instrumental display, storytelling, and bodily performance, the beggars transform public spaces into informal stages of urban theatre. Their performances also serve as subtle forms of social commentary on urban

inequality and economic hardship within contemporary Nigerian society.

Consequently, street beggars may be understood as representing an emerging yet often overlooked voice within contemporary Nigerian street performance culture. Their artistry challenges conventional assumptions that theatre exists only within formal performance institutions, designated stages, or professionally trained performance spaces. Instead, the study demonstrates that performance may emerge organically within everyday urban life as marginalized individuals creatively negotiate survival through expressive practice.

Pictorial Analysis of Beggars' Artistry in Awka

Plate 1: Street Performers being surrounded by audiences in the market.



Plate 2: Visually impaired beggars singing and playing instruments



Plate 3: Four visually impaired beggars occupying roadside space as a performance arena.



Plate 4: Two street beggars engaged in live public performance along the street.



Conclusion

This study demonstrates that street begging in Awka constitutes an emerging form of street performance that broadens contemporary understandings of theatre and performance practice. The findings reveal that visually impaired beggars employ organized artistic techniques such as music, praise singing, storytelling, instrumental performance, vocal modulation, bodily expression, and strategic spatial positioning to engage audiences and solicit alms in urban public spaces.

These practices challenge conventional definitions of theatre as an activity restricted to formal stages, scripted productions, and professionally trained performers. Instead, the study establishes that performance can exist within everyday social interactions, where individuals creatively utilize artistic expression for survival, communication, and audience engagement.

Drawing on Richard Schechner's Performance Theory, the study reconceptualizes street begging as a form of "survival performance" in which economic necessity intersects with theatrical expression and social

communication. The street emerges as an informal stage, beggars function as performers, and passersby become audiences who participate in performative exchanges through acts of giving.

The study therefore concludes that street beggars represent marginalized yet significant voices within Nigerian street theatre and urban performance culture. Recognizing the artistry embedded in begging practices contributes to broader discussions on theatre, poverty, public space, and everyday performance traditions. The study recommends increased scholarly attention to informal and alternative modes of performance in Nigeria, particularly those emerging from marginalized communities whose artistic contributions often remain excluded from mainstream theatre discourse.

Works cited

- Abalo, Jannette. "Is Street Begging a Result of Poverty, Budding Trade, or the Manipulation of Sentiments by Some Vested Interest Groups? Exploring Street Beggary." (2018).
- Araújo, de Maria Marta Lobo. *Pedir, dar y recibir: las limosnas a los pobres en La de Misericordia de Braga (siglos XVII-XVIII)*. Instituto de Ciências Sociais, Universidade do Minho, Portugal. DOI:<https://doi.org/10.5944/etfiv.29.2016.16029>
- Balarabe, Aliyu Hamza and Abdulraheem Olarongbe Mahmoud. "Approaches to tackling the menace of street begging by visually disabled persons in Northern Nigeria." *Sub-Saharan African Journal of Medicine* 1 (2014): 161-167.
- Bennett, Susan. "Contemporary Street Arts in Europe: Aesthetics and Politics." *Performance Research* 18 (2013): 154 - 156.
- Chinweoke, Nwaeze et al. "The Macrotheme Review A multidisciplinary journal of global macro trends Microfinance Banks and Rural Poverty Alleviation in Nigeria." (2015).
- Fatai, Afeez Olansile. "Security and Socio-economic Consequences of Street Begging in Nigerian Cities." (2020).
- Fawole, Olufemi Adeniyi et al. "The menace of begging in Nigerian cities: A sociological analysis." (2011).
- Guevara, Castillo and Andrés Estéfano. "Guía metodológica para la realización de espectáculos al aire libre." 2011.
- Hassan, Tarique. "BEGGING IS A CURSE ON SOCIETY: AN EMPIRICAL STUDY." (2013).
- Henry, Eric S. "The Beggar's Play: Poverty, Coercion, and Performance in Shenyang, China." *Anthropological Quarterly* 82 (2009): 35 - 7.
- Henke, Robert. "Studies in Theatre History and Culture" in Gerhard, Ernst. "Poverty and Charity in Early Modern Theater and Performance" Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2015; pp. xiii + 198, 11 illustrations. \$55 paper, \$55 e-book." *Theatre Survey* 59 (2018): 110-111.
- Hitchcock, Tim. "Begging on the streets of eighteenth-century London." *Journal of British Studies* 44 (2005): 478-498.
- Kirschner, Julianna. "Performing in Space and Place." 2015.
- McCabe, Ciara. "Introduction." *Begging, Charity and Religion in Pre-Famine Ireland* (2018): n. pg.
- McCabe, Ciara. "Defining Begging and Almsgiving." *Begging, Charity and Religion in Pre-Famine Ireland* (2018): n. pg.
- Ndem, Nkem. "7 Types of Beggars on the Streets of Lagos - Nigeria" 2015. <http://www.bellanaija.com/2015/12/nkem-ndem-7-Types-of-Beggars-on-the-Streets-of-Lagos-Nig/amp/> 18 Dec.2015
- Odey, Stephen Adi and Ngutor Sambe. "Analysis of Precipitating Factors and Practices Relating to Trafficking in Persons in Cross River State, Nigeria." *Research on humanities and social sciences* 8 (2018): 30-38.
- Onifade, Dare Seun. "Street Begging Practices." (2019).
- Owusu-Sekyere, Ebenezer et al. "Begging in the City: Complexities, Degree of Organization, and Embedded Risks." *Child Development Research* (2018): n. pg.
- Paterson, Andrew J. "Performance: A Performance: A working script in three movements." *Canadian Theatre Review* (1996): n.pg.
- Raven, Arlene. "Art In the Public Interest." (1993).
- Sulastri, Irta et al. "The Dramaturgy Communication of Beggars in an Indonesian Market." *Pertanika Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities* (2022): n. pg.
- Safiu, Kehinde. "Street Beggars: Begging in coats of many colours" 2020. <http://www.guardian.ng/opinion/street-beggars-begging-in-coat-of-many-colours/> 14 Feb.2024
- Schechner, R. *Performance Studies: an introduction*. Routledge, London. 2002.
- Schechner, R. *Performance Theory*. Routledge, London. 2003.
- Simpson, Paul L. "Street Performance and the City." *Space and Culture* 14 (2011): 415 - 430.
- Vos, R. De. "Imagination, Realization and the Performing of Australia." 2010.
- Singer, Amy E. "Giving Practices in Islamic Societies." *Social Research: An International Quarterly* 80 (2014): 341 - 358.
- Victor, David A. "Begging and almsgiving in Nigeria: The Islamic perspective." (2011).
- Wardhaugh, Julia. "Regulating social space: Begging in two South Asian cities." *Crime, Media, Culture: An International Journal* 5 (2009): 333 - 341.