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# Exploring the socio pragmatic aspect of Almajirai discourse : Bara in Niger

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## ABSTRACT

This study investigated the socio-pragmatic content and functions of Bara. It seeks to provide insights on the way a given social group (Aalmajirai) constructed language patterns, bara in view to impacting positively on the minds of their addressees and serve their purpose within a given social fabric. Besides, Bara is viewed as a significant sociocultural phenomenon which has arguably been around since the event of Islamic religion in most West African countries. The naturally occurring data used were collected randomly based on observation and experience at different times, transcribed and analysed based on various available approaches.

The study found out that the expressions used are true reflections of the feelings, concerns and needs of the population under study. The findings also revealed that Bara fulfilled the six functions of language. Strikingly, in this study the wind of linguistic and cultural dynamism did not blow in the context of this phenomenon as no variations nor change were depicted regarding this language. Laden with social and cultural dimensions these expressions Almajirai have developed as unique linguistic nuances that are socio-linguistically tied to their social and educational (Almajirci system) background are useful strategic competent communicative tools in their hands. As such and as things have since deteriorated, that the concept of Bara begging for food is misconceived, misinterpreted as synonymous to street begging translated as 'un fait social', worse as a social malaise, it is recommended further research should be undertaken to study the other face of the phenomenon. It is hoped the study will be of valued contribution to linguistic studies, sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics, educational psychology, education and least but not last to authority.

**KEYWORDS:** Bara, Almajirai, Socio-Pragmatics, strategic competence communicative tools, ,language variation, fait social,

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## I. INTRODUCTION

It is a well-known fact that language, culture, and society are closely interwoven. As a matter of fact, Language is the veritable means by which members of a speech community communicate their different feelings and ideas with one another whereas Culture, according to Hofstede (2005)[1] is the discernible practices of the society. Moreover, language and culture are seen 'to rub one on the other for the achievement of a cohesive and indivisible societal tie'. Besides, "meaning is to be constructed in a manner that is socially acceptable" (Olateju and Oyeleye, 2005:74)[2]. It is within this scope that the present research paper aims at investigating the meaning Almajiri conveyed through Bara which refers to any discourse to serve as a means for social communication.

It is customary in Niger like in other West African countries (Nigeria, Senegal, Mali, Gambia, Guinée, etc.,) children are to make a kind of fieldtrip (travel to distant places) under a scholar (Malam) control to seek for Islamic knowledge (learn about the Qur'an/Islam); that is parents leave parental responsibilities to Malam. This situation has led to the questionable Almajiri and Bara, the popularity of this phenomenon and the proliferation of almajirai in major cities in Niger. The significance of Bara stems from the fact that it has been considered as a source that encompasses insightful psychological, societal, and cultural information worthy of thoughtful attention. To highlight the motivation and goals behind almajirai language use and the way they express themselves necessitates that attention should be given to the messages and calls for an academic inquiry.

The choice of the title for this paper thus plays on the word "Bara", a form of discourse used as strategic competence. It is the way Almajirai use language to aim for communicative strategy in relation to the sociocultural value of the society. It is the medium through which a social group namely Almajirai voice, verbalise their feelings, articulate genuine concerns and worries with a view to impacting positively on the listeners. What is more pertinent is that most of the expressions are said in very interesting attention getter style with their contents (noticeable due to a poetic and rhetoric vigour that emanate and make their meanings profound and thought-provoking) arousing scholarly attention. Consequently, this study investigates the Almajirai language use to construct language patterns to convey meaning and serve their purpose.

As a matter of fact, this well-known phenomenon has also assumed a significant and global phenomenon as a means of communicating message across to the hearers. Almajirai are visible throughout Niger and most West Africa major cities.

Hence, this study offers a socio-pragmatic investigation of the verbal discourse pictured as the Almajirai strategic means of communication which comes in the form of words, phrases, and clauses, therefore, focuses on lexical, grammatical, and semantic aspects. In this vein, the paper explores the social context of Bara considering its communicative value and the intended messages sought to be conveyed as well as the extent to which the message transmitted overwhelmingly impact on the attitudes /lives of respectively the addressees and addressors assisting in the understanding of social relationships. This is to the extent that language is basic to social interactions and significantly represents important aspects of social behaviour and human interaction Tanimu Y. & Chidimma E. (2021:253)[3]. Besides, the study is an exploration of some of the socio-pragmatic features encompassing a spectrum of practices that help reveal the social fabric in terms of the values and cultural norms of the Nigerien society within the scope of sociolinguistics which has to do with language use and a society's response to it and pragmatics interested in the analysis of meaning as expressed via a speaker and understood via a listener Yule (1996:3) [4]. This is to say, meaning is derived from context and situations which in turn, determine the specific purposes or messages expressed through language, to the extent that Mey (2001: 6)[5] believes that a genuine pragmatic account must deal with the language users in their social context; it cannot confine itself to those grammatically encoded aspects of context.

More so, an inquiry of this nature is bound to provide insights on how language works in different contexts, the way people utilise language to serve their purposes and the societal factors that contribute to language maintenance/change. In addition, an examination of the language usage of a particular group such as the subjects under study can provide information that government would utilise towards taking steps (decisions and policies) as this phenomenon becomes so visible it reveals currently a "fait social".

To achieve our aim, we also approach Bara as oral texts in that "they arguably constitute a form of discourse, the purpose of which is to constitute a uniformed whole as well as communicate a certain message" Faniran (2019: 62)[6], "a text being 'any stretch of language, regardless of length, that is spoken or written for the purpose of communication" Bloor and Bloor (2004:5)[7]. Furthermore, Chiluwa (2008) [8], quoting Foucault (1981), also remarks that discourse is to be viewed as "discursive practices that account for a number of statements regulated by a set of rules that

lead to the distribution and circulation of certain utterances and statements".

The guiding objective of this paper is to determine the functions and semanticity (pragmatic) of the expressions used and to establish the impact of communicating by *Bara*. In this regard, the study attempted to answer the following questions: How do Almajirai air, voice their feelings to spur people to act in their favour? How do listeners make meaning/interpret this discourse? systematically decode the message? And to what extent can Almajirai believe that the intended message is actually conveyed to the listener.

The study, it is hoped, will provide a valuable (socio-pragmatic) analysis of language use in society, and its import in revealing great information about the communicative competence strategy depicted as Bara a social group use to express themselves in society. Moreover, it is hoped that the findings of the study can contribute to the universal body of research in discourse analysis; also, it may offer a valued source of data to the field of sociolinguistics and other fields of study such as politics (destined to policy and decision makers), sociology *(*Bara reveals 'un fait social' par excellence), education psychology/psycholinguistics, education, and religions.

## II. ALMAJIRCI SYSTEM AND ITS RESULTANT: Bara in Niger - An overview

The practice of 'Almajirci' (Islamic educational system) in Northern Nigeria, Niger, Senegal, Mali, Guinea, Somalia, Gambia etc. urban centers as in other parts of West Africa with large Muslim populations is not a novel phenomenon; it is an aged-long system having started with the advent of Islam. The term Almajiri in Hausa, etymologically derives from the Arabic word 'al-muhajirun' which refers to a person who migrated his home in a quest or for search of Islamic knowledge. In other words, it means knowledge seeker, literarily student at the Qur'anic school or makaranta. The system gained popularity across Muslim world. Since then, people made it a kind of field trip. At the early stage of their children's life, for them to assess and build on the best of what's inside them to attain the height of greatness in their quest of knowledge parents send them far away. Keeping them away from their milieu, it is hoped will keep them devoted to studying the Qur'an, to in still into them the virtue of patience, resilience and endurance that may lead them to experience success in their search of knowledge. In addition, it will help them shun indolence and cultivate the spirit of hard work; This is also to prepare them to the hardship of life for them to develop more in the little and big

challenges they will come to face everyday. This practice has become such a culturally sterling virtue which primary objective is to serve shape a desired bright future to children through societal norms and shared values.

Thus, perceived as a pointer to the future showing how significantly Almajirci (as an education system) field trips contribute to education as they widen, encourage students to learn freely and think critically, parents are rightly firmly convinced that this period helps to reaffirm their hope that the child will be well, strong and humble, pious, and good for the society. In this regard, they committed themselves to accompanying the process in that they provided their child's foodstuffs, a token of thanks and gratitude to Malam to whom it worth noting, parents have delegated if not left their God ordained parental responsibility from this moment to care for the children and provide for their daily needs. However, from time to time, parents paid visit to their children to know their conditions and took advantage of the opportunity to renew their supply if ever they come to know about their whereabouts. Malam cares for and respects the rights of the children ensuring that they do not beg for food on the street. It is just that, this societal practice which carries messages of hope to parents and in which they believe blindly, produce a fruitful result for them in the end. This is how it all began.

For the benefit and clear understanding of readers of this paper, it is worthy to note the misconception/misinterpretation of the concept of Bara or Almajirci (as a state of being part Almajirci as educational system) as described above to be synonymous to street begging or beggars. Since situation has deteriorated and the term has expanded to refer to any young person who begs on the street. This research is primarily concerned with the phenomenon of Bara/Almajirci before the situation has run out of control and lead to those spending most of their time if not all day on the streets begging, and purportedly do not learn the Qur'an at all, becoming more visible in the major urban centres.

## III.    THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study endeavours to investigate the socio-pragmatic aspect of the phenomenon of Bara. Therefore, the topic entails both linguistic, sociolinguistic, and pragmatic models of analysis.

This study is thus, premised on different models, beginning with Hymes (1962:22)[9] who posits that 'speech cannot be considered separate from the sociological factors that help shape linguistic forms and create meaning'. In other words, this model is

primarily concerned with the contextual use of language as well as how the cultural and linguistic factors necessarily combine to provide an understanding of how a certain linguistic behaviour achieves its objectives.

Another relevant model for the study is the theory propounded by Halliday (1985), the Systemic Functional Grammar SFG which provides the framework for studying language in context. As to Chapelle (1998:1)[10] ''This theory holds that the form of a language is determined by the function it is made to perform and the multidimensional architecture of language, a reflection of the multidimensional nature of human experience and interpersonal relations''. Taking into account the contextual dimensions of language, SFG views language as a social semiotic, a resource people use to accomplish their purposes by expressing meaning in context. To argue in the same line as Judith (2013:531)[11] this model therefore provides the framework for examining the functions which the samples of data for this study are meant to perform in their context of usage.

Other model apposite for the study is Fairclough (1995) [12] discourse analysis. "Fairclough (1989, 1995) extends the concept of discourse from the traditional, spontaneous, and natural 'language in use' (Brown and Yule, 1983) and a tool to understand the intentions of the speaker (van Dijk, 1985) to be in itself a social practice (Chiluwa, 2008)''. In this regard, Bara is looked upon as an agent in the hands of addressees to get access to Almajirai social group minds to interpret and respond to their concerns. To paraphrase Fairclough (1995)[12], viewed as discursive tools in the hands of their authors, such texts are in fact the product of a complex system of social and institutional (cultural) practices which produce and reproduce them with a view to maintaining their continuous existence consciously or unconsciously. Nevertheless, these Bara texts, which serve as a discursive sociocultural practice provide a clear image and understanding of the import of this system and the role it plays on the societal level.

On the other hand, Cutting (2002:2)[13] believes that pragmatics and discourse analysis have much in common in the sense that both investigate context, text and function. Both fields concentrate on the significance of words in communication and how interlocutors convey more than the words they utilised. Additionally, both study discourse and text focusing on how pieces of language become significant and integrated for their users. Nonetheless, individually, and broadly speaking, pragmatics is concerned with those facets of meaning that are context-variable

## IV.  METHODOLOGY

### (1)  Research design and Procedure

Data were gathered using qualitative research method. It is designed in such a way the researcher focuses on studying meaning that is associated to a particular social problem. According to Denzin and Lincoln (1994:2)[14], in qualitative research, the researcher studies "things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them". Human behaviour is also explained best using this approach (Mugenda & Mugenda 2003) [15].

The aim of the researcher was to collect factual information on the study subject and proffer answers to the research questions and presents possible recommendations to the problems addressed. In this regard, to account for the data, the researcher based on observation and experience recorded discursive expressions from random samples who going from door to door, in the neighbourhood house air their voice, expressing genuine concerns with the intention to impact positively on the addressees and achieve their aim, initially the quest of food. The data obtained were analysed using linguistic, sociolinguistic and pragmatic models.

### (2)  Data analysis

Fairclough (1995, 2003-)[12] argues that when analyzing a text, various elements like language function, lexicon, grammar, coherence and cohesion, and text structure should be taken into consideration. He goes on to extending the analysis to consider the language as a "social practice" that influences or shapes the use of language. As a result, the speaker's intention as a product will be clearly identified. Thus, using this approach will offer explanations which adequately accounts for the successful interpretation to elements that constitute the language of Bara.

Another tool to help the researcher understand/interpret the meaning of the expressions used through *Bara* was Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) which according to Van Dijk (2006)[16], is primarily interested in and motivated by the endeavour to understand pressing social issues. McGregor (2010)[17] argues that CDA challenges us to move from seeing language as abstract to seeing our words as having meaning in a particular historical, social, and political condition. Hence, CDA analysis studies real, and often extended, instances of social interaction which take particularly in linguistic form (Blommaert & Bulcaen 2000)[18]. Furthermore, CDA according to Wodak (2009)[19] is the method that one must employ to study ideas, values, and status behind

the language used which are not always overtly stated. With concerns pragmatics, Cutting (2002:2)[13] believes that pragmatics and discourse analysis have much in common. Furthermore, scholars in Fareed (2017:95)[20] argued that both -pragmatics and discourse analysis- concentrate on the significance of words in communication and how interlocutors convey more than the words they utilised. Additionally, both study discourse and text focus on how pieces of language become significant and integrated for their users Cutting (2002:2)[13]. Similarly, Puig (2003: 1)[21] states that the two domains, pragmatics and discourse analysis, move behind the formal description of phrases and concentrate on upper components, for instance, speech acts (…) Nevertheless, pragmatics exerts more effort to the identification of the speaker's intention in addition to the recovering of the covert ingredients which the hearer needs to access.

Integrating the above-mentioned methods of analysis is hoped will strengthen and enrich the analysis and findings of the research and ensure objectivity as well. Therefore, these methods assisted in interpreting the pressing social issue which takes particularly in linguistic form namely Bara. The text was transcribed and translated, an explanation given and interpretation of each done in terms of meaning of message communicated.

## (3)  Socio Pragmatic Analysis

This section presents the results obtained from the analysis of the data collected. The data were transcribed using Standard Hausa orthography. The examples in the data were analysed using various approaches to obtain an overview of the socio-pragmatic significance and multidimensional functions of the language use in view to impact positively on the minds of the addressees and spur them to action as stated earlier.

To make readily understandable the messages and the communication productive the users made use of lexical items, phrases, and sentences. They also make conscious choices on how to express themselves. The data are presented in the table below.

**Table**: This table displays the expressions that make the content of Bara, the tool Almairai use as communicative strategic competence in view to impacting their hearers and move them to action in their favour.

| EXPRESSIONS | MEANING |
|---|---|
| Allaro The expression is coined from a fusion of arabic lexical item, Allah, which means God and kanuri noun forming suffix, -ro); | In the name of God (I am imploring you, give me sadaka, alms) |
| Waahidin. Allah is unique aimed to invoke the power of God and seek assistance | In the name of Allah, the Unique! |
| Sadaka | (Give) alms |
| Ko dan tsaki-tsaki ; dan dago-dago ; dan kamzo-kamzo ; dan kashi-kashi, iya | I conjure you, give me if only scraps; if only crumbs; if leftovers; if only crumbles, mum |
| Almajiri Bara | Almajiri is looking for your assistance/help |
| Ko loma ce iya, ko da gaya ne | if only a mouthful, even if without sauce |
| Ko kwano ne a ba ni in sude | If only the plate for me to scrape |
| A taimaka mini, iyata Iya danki bai karya ba | Make help, assist me mother of mine Mother, your son did not have breakfast |
| Iyata a ba ni sadakal miya tuwona gaya ne, | Mother of mine, help me with sauce; my millet pudding without sauce |
| iyata, yinwa nake ji. Iya, danki yinwa yake ji, iya. Iya danki bai koshi ba | Mother of me, I am hungry. Mother, your son is hungry, mother. Mother, your son is not full |
| Allah ya ba ku mu samu iya, In kun samu mun samu Iya danki bai samu ba | May Allah enrich you so we may get some, mother. If ever you are enriched, give us. Mum, your son had nothing |
| masu gida, Almajiri yana Bara | people of this house, Almajiri is soliciting/seeking for your help, assistance. |
| Sadaka sabo da Allah da Annabi(S.A.W), | (Seeking for/give) sadaka/alms in the sake of Allah and Prophet (PBU) |
| Iya, albarkacin Manzon Allah (S.A.W) | Mother, (give) alms for the Prophet's (PBH) sake |
| Iya a ba mu don Allah | Mother, give us for God's sake |
| Iya, a ba mu sabo da Allah da Annabi (PBU) Iya, zo ko yaka | Mother, give us some food in the name of Allah and his Prophet (PBU), Mother, to come or to come |
| Masu gida, sabo da Allah. | people of this house, (seeking for/give sadaka) in the name of God |

The analysis first revealed these expressions (language) conformed to the six communicative functions of language identified in Jacobson (1960) as emotive, referential, conative, phatic, poetic and meta-lingual and their goals.

Also, considering those models of analysis mainly those arguing that both pragmatics and discourse analysis concentrate on the significance of words in communication and how interlocutors convey more than the words they utilised, Puig (2003: 1)[21] who stated that the two domains, pragmatics and discourse analysis, move behind the formal description of phrases and concentrate on upper components, for instance, speech acts (…), the present research findings revealed Austin observations that not all utterances have 'truth value' (Brinton, 301) applicable to the topic under study. Consequently, expressions used can be distinguished as "Constatives" and "Performatives". Constative assertions are either true or false as with the expression: *danki bai karya ba* meaning your son did not have breakfast or *bai samu ba* meaning he had nothing. For instance, the Almajiri employed the expression 'danki yinwa yake ji' (your son is hungry) to construct a message which expression has dual connotation. That is to say, the expressions could either mean he is hungry because he had nothing (bai samu ba) or that he is hungry as he, may be, (did get something too small) he had not eaten to his full meaning *danki bai koshi ba*. Here, both interpretations stand true.

Also, the expression "zo" ko "yaka" meaning either "come" or "come" refers to the meta-lingual function thus rendering either interpretation valid.

Additionally, both pragmatics and text focussing on how pieces of language become significant and integrated for their users Cutting (2002:2) [13], our results displayed expressions that came in the form of lexical items such as 'Allaro', 'Waahidin', 'Sadaka' as significantly implied. The intended message or what the sender sought to communicate was clear enough; the receiver interpreted the message based on cultural and social and religious dimensions.

In the light of Pragmatics (described to exert more effort to the identification of the speaker's intention in addition to the recovering of the covert ingredients which the hearer needs to access) in addition to the various elements to be taken in consideration when analysing a text as advocated by Fairclough and the Hymes speaking model, the Almajiri was viewed to chose to present the messages "danki yinwa yake ji, iya" and "ko dan dago-dago, iya!"; "ko dan tsaki-tsaki", "ko dan kamzo-kamzo, iya"; "ko loma ce, iya!"; 'ko kwano ne a ba ni in sude" in a poetic falling or humming tone. In fact, the raising falling tone of the expressions, yet significantly however presented the message in an impressive poetic, pity, and touching manner all supported by those verbs though understood in form of imploring, begging, pleading, soliciting, conjuring, beseeching assistance, help, aid in whatever way especially food and may be cloths and wishing good to the household; even a leitmotive ('iya', 'iyata', 'danki', 'sabo da Allah') running through the whole text. Thus, the messages inherent contained noticeable poetic vigour in addition to the leitmotive that made their meanings profound and meant to instruct those hearing the messages as buttressed by the following stances: 'A taimaka mini, iyata'; 'Ko loma ce iya'; 'ko da gaya ne, iyata'; 'Sadaka sabo da Allah da Annabi(S.A.W)'; 'Iya, albarkacin Manzon Allah (S.A.W)'; 'Iya a ba mu don Allah'; 'Iya, a ba mu sabo da Allah da Annabi (PBU)'; 'Allah ya ba ku mu samu'; ' iya, in kun samu mun samu' etc,.

Moreover, the expressions used by an Almajiri revealed a form of language determined by the function it is made to perform, a social practice looked upon as an agent in the hands of Almajirai social group aiming at influencing another social group.

Surprisingly enough, despite the changing nature of language and cultural values the discourse was found to be an exception to the rules that stipulate change/variation in language over time as this language has constituted a communicative strategic competence users go through to serve their purpose for quite a long time now. Subsequently, it has become a form of communication which has acquired clear-cut sociocultural, linguistic, and pragmatic dimensions.

## V. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

To argue in the same line as Ngulube (2015) it is valuable and essential to acknowledge the importance of Almajirci system (of Islamic education) particularly its resultant in this case Bara discourse which is a product of linguistic behaviour, a social practice besides the nature and impact of the message being conveyed, as there is an interaction between the text, discursive practices, and the social context.

Integrating different linguistic and pragmatic models of analysis the content and the purpose which *Bara* is meant to serve have been highlighted. The analysis of the samples presented as data in this study clearly revealed *Bara* as those expressions used wishing to achieve effective communication. Our findings first corroborated to the actual form and content of what is said: the precise words used, how they are used, and the relationship of what is said to the actual topic at hand. This in our context was depicted by the Almajirai voicing their feelings to seek for assistance, aid.

However, the choice of the 'oral' channel as medium of communication suggested that they know exactly what they want to achieve and the most effective way to achieve this. This was evinced further by their choice of the content and forms of expressions, the use of declaratives and commissives, and their ingenuity in using their voice which served as a very effective means of attention getters, to achieve competent communication and got hearers' support. The tone of the voice (heartrending, lamentable, pathetic, weeping, and so on) also depicted the spirit in which the speech is carried out in view to convey the intended message. It additionally indicated an aim towards competent communicative strategy.

In fact, keeping in mind the way others can view and interpret their messages this group opted for poetic diction, humming tone and rhetoric behaviour to serve as a remarkable medium aimed at enriching the addressees' knowledge about their situation to indirectly make their message readily understandable. Our findings also depicted *Bara* as having undergone no change despite Sociolinguists assertion of the relationships between language and society. Thus, sociolinguistics convention in Labov (2001)[22]'s model on language variation (often times yield to language change) and Wardhaugh (2006)[23] who posited that «The use of a certain expression may be affected by the social norms» are not seen to have worked. Our findings correspond to Judith (2013) in that no socio-cultural factors nor individual experiences seemed to have influenced the phenomenon to variations in the usage or change meaning. The above discourse has for quite a long time now been the way it is. We argue with El-Nashar, M. & Nayef, H. (2016)[24] that viewed as discursive tools in the hands of their authors, such texts are in fact the product of a complex system of social and institutional (cultural) practices which produce and reproduce them with a view to maintaining their continuous existence consciously or unconsciously. Nevertheless, these *Bara* texts, which serve as a discursive sociocultural practice provide a clear image and understanding of the import of this system initially (Almajirci education system) and the role it plays on the societal level.

## VI. CONCLUSION

From the foregoing, Bara constitutes a social practice which translates a key aspect of the culture as a result of a system (Almajirci) in place initially in the hope to help educate children. The examination of the language of communication by Bara also, highlights that the language usage for this sector further reflects the functionality of language in serving one of the myriad needs and purposes of man in the society: education and food. Despite the relationships between language and society, Bara language has not been affected by the social norms to variations/change. In a nutshell, it can be concluded that Bara is a peculiar, distinctive way aimed at enriching the addressees' knowledge about their situations, a strategic competence of communication in society Almajirai mostly engage in with the aim to spur people to action.

## VII.   RECOMMANDATIONS AND SUGGESTION FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

1. It is strongly recommended that Almajirci (system of Islamic education) be reviewed, reformed and made a formal education system as Islamic Studies Programme just like in Northern Nigeria, Senegal and other countries.

2. Government create law if not already done which will clearly regulate and, if needs be forbid Almajirci as synonymous to street begging in Niger like elsewhere in Nigeria, Senegal where existing laws clearly preclude it.

For further research, as things have changed, it might be valuable to study the other face of Bara/Almajirci as street begging/begging for food practiced by indigent, poor tramp, vagabond, wanderer, etc who can hardly make 2 square meal a day. Hence, as such it revealed a fait social reflecting a social malaise.

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