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Understanding Principles of Peace Building from the Western Approach, Teachings of the Quran and Sunnah of the Prophet (SAW) for Sustainable Peace in Nigeria

Dahiru Inuwa Ibrahim[1], Muazu Usman Shehu[2]

[1]Department of Religious Studies, Gombe State University, Gombe, Nigeria

[2]Department of Sociology, Gombe State University, Gombe, Nigeria

Email address:
abusumayya74@gmail.com (Dahiru Inuwa Ibrahim), muazusu@gmail.com (Muazu Usman Shehu)

Abstract: Violent conflicts have become a defining feature of Nigeria for some time. Since the return to democracy in 1999, the country has been grappling with complex and multifarious armed violent conflicts ranging from terrorism, ethno-religious conflicts, communal clashes, resource control conflicts, rural banditry etc. Annually, thousands of lives are being lost and property worth billions of Naira destroyed, while the social fabric of the society becomes increasingly eroded as a result of armed conflicts affecting virtually all parts of the country. Security measures aimed at arresting these crises, as well as dispute and conflict resolutions efforts, have proved ineffective in curbing the spate of violent conflicts across the country. As policy makers, experts and researchers continue to search for viable alternatives to conventional peace building strategies. This paper examines the potentials for applying Islamic principles of peace building and conflict resolution to addressing pressing issues that have the potential to lead to violent conflicts. The paper draws from pioneering studies in Islamic peace building and textual analysis of the Quran and Sunnah of the Prophet (SAW) to highlight various ways in which Islamic values and principles can be used to mitigate conflict situations. The paper concludes by highlighting the need for further empirical studies on existing Islamic and interfaith peace initiatives to develop a workable Islamic model of peace building that can be suitable to the religious and cultural contexts of Northern Nigeria.

Keywords: Qur'an, Sunnah, Islam, Peace Building, Sustainable Peace

1. Introduction

The northern region of Nigeria is home to hundreds of ethnic groups and numerous religious communities. The region occupies two thirds of the Nigerian landmass, accommodating more than half of its nearly 200 million population [1]. Although the majority of the population of the region live in rural areas, there are a number of historic urban centres that played important role in the development of the African sub-region as centres of Islamic learning, Tran Saharan trade and industry long before the British colonial rule. Politically, the northern region played an important role in the political transformations in the pre-colonial era, first with the establishment and consolidation of the 7 major Hausa city-states, the Borno Empire and their associated states, and later, with the establishment of the largest political entity in the sub-region - the Sokoto Caliphate. Currently, the region is sharing borders with the Republics of Chad, Cameroon, Niger and Benin.

Political and economic developments and transformations have led to the region becoming one of the most volatile regions of Africa. Violent conflicts over economic resources (especially land), communal, tribal or religiously motivated violence characterised life in many parts of the region since the independence in 1960. Organised crimes such as banditry, cattle rustling, kidnapping for ransom, political thuggery are widespread and often escalate to full-blown bloody confrontations, when ethnicity and religious differences between the victims and perceived perpetrators are mobilised.

The fragile security situation in the region was worsened by the brutal insurgency waged by the militant group which claims to be fighting to establish an Islamic state in the region. The combined human toll and economic costs of these conflicts and security challenges are unquantifiable. There is a great concern on the part of policy makers, experts, leaders and ordinary people that security strategies and conflict resolution mechanisms put in place to tackle these myriads of conflicts and crimes are not yielding desired results. Failure to arrest the root causes of the crises is leading to heightened animosity and tension, especially between the major religious groups in the country (Muslims and Christians), as well as between warring tribes and communities. This is further threatening hopes and efforts of achieving peaceful coexistence in the future.

In this paper, we intend to make a case for an Islamic approach to conflict resolution and peacebuilding in Northern Nigeria. Our analysis draws from pioneering empirical and theoretical works in the emerging field of Islamic peace building by Mohammed Abu-Nimer [2-5] and other Muslim scholars and academics.

2. Religion and Peacebuilding

Research and policy discourse on the connection between religion and intergroup relations have largely focuses on the role of religious identity and ideology in conflict. The majority of studies examined the use of religious beliefs by radical movements that often turned violent and destructive [3]. The extensive focus on the use of religion in conflict situations is largely due to the increasing realisation of the central role religion plays in shaping individual attitudes and behaviour, as well as in influencing group identity and relations in most conflict ravaged regions of the world. Recent examples of racial, ethnic, regional, political and resource conflicts are evidence of how human actors consider and utilise religion as an effective tool for mobilising people and legitimising violence.

Interestingly, recent efforts are turning to the present and potential role of religions in conflict resolution and peace building [2-6]. Although decades of research and analysis have focused on how radical movements across the world politicise religion and emphasise aspects of religious texts that justify violence and warfare, the significance of religion to peacebuilding, conflict transformation and resolution is also becoming increasingly acknowledged by experts and policy makers. By virtue of its unique capacity to bring people together to achieve a common goal, religion is believed to be an effective instrument for reaching out to people, building consensus, addressing grievances and resolving disputes [3, 5-7]. Religious values can play an effective role in mobilising people to dialogue, reconcile, forgive and unite. Religious rituals such as volunteering, alms giving, problem-solving, etc. can also serve as useful tools in conflict transformation and resolution. According to Abu-Nimer [3], religious resources (social, moral, spiritual) can provide a 'sense of engagement' and 'commitment to

peace'.

However, compared to the Judeo-Christian societies, efforts to integrate indigenous, culturally-sensitive models of peacebuilding have not been quite successful in Islamic societies. This is due to what some analysts describe as a well-publicised narrative by western media and political analysts that the Islamic religion and culture are opposed to the basic principles of conflict resolution, peacebuilding and democratic governance. The acceptance of this negative media campaign in the peacebuilding enterprise has hampered attempts to draw from and appreciate Islamic principles and approaches to peace and conflict resolution that had been effectively utilised in Muslim communities for many centuries [4].

3. Western Models of Conflict Resolution and Peacebuilding

For the past three decades, western European and American organisations and experts have been actively engaged in training Nigerians and Africans in various (democratic) methods and approaches to conflict resolution and peacebuilding. Some of these organisations have also become principal actors (mediators and negotiators) in many conflict situations in inter-religious and inter-ethnic conflicts in different parts of the country. In addition, governments at various levels, have also accepted and introduced same western models and strategies of dispute resolution into policies aimed at addressing conflicts. Recently, analysts and experts are beginning to question the appropriateness of using western approaches to conflict resolution and peacebuilding in non-western contexts. First, a part of the critique of the appropriateness and suitability of western models of dispute and conflict resolution is based on the belief that western models emerged from some specific socio-cultural milieus that are entirely different from those obtainable in Nigeria. Second, the nature, causes, manifestations and impacts of conflicts in developing countries such as Nigeria are very different from those of the western countries where the models were developed. Lastly, the basic assumptions, philosophies and concepts that underpin western procedures of dispute and conflict resolution are also believed to differ strikingly from the realities of conflicts in Nigeria.

For instance, an assessment of dominant conflict resolution procedures in western countries by Abu Nimer [3], among other things found that 'individualism' is at the heart of western models of conflict resolution. Since western societies are inherently individualistic [8], western approaches to conflict resolution operate in such a way that 'social pressure and relationships' do not influence dispute resolution. Similarly, the long established legal and democratic conventions serve as the main framework for dispute resolution. Also, third parties (usually volunteers, businesses and NGOs) are the agencies and institutions responsible for designing and implementing conflict resolution interventions.

In their attempts to apply these models to conflicts in developing societies such as Nigeria, western experts and local policy makers are confronted with a number of obstacles. Chief among these obstacles are the absence of local value systems to support 'individualised' conflict resolution interventions; lack of effective democratic institutions and legal frameworks; and apathy or even opposition to western influences and values. Overcoming these obstacles would require developing 'indigenous' models of conflict resolution and peacebuilding. By indigenous, we mean approaches that are embedded in the values and norms of the people at the grassroots. Being the most important source of social values and norms in the majority of communities in northern Nigeria [9], we argue that Islam provides some distinct resources for effective resolution of conflicts and peacebuilding in the region. As Abu Nimer [5], concedes, conflict resolution scholars and practitioners need to have a good understanding of existing mechanisms, approaches and ideas of conflict management in the local communities they operate. In predominantly Muslim societies, this will require acknowledging and understanding that Islam provides values, beliefs and customs that can offer workable frameworks for conflict prevention and management. The next section attempts to identify key concepts, assumptions and practices of Islamic models of conflict resolution with a view to showcasing their relevance to the practice of conflict resolution and peacebuilding in northern Nigeria.

4. An Overview of Islamic Models of Peacebuilding and Conflict Resolution

Violent conflicts were common features in the pre-Islamic Arabia. The prevalence of violence and numerous other social vices was part of the reason why Islamic scholars and historians of Islam described the period as (*Jahiliyya*) period or the time of ignorance. Political and social disorder characterized the lives of Arabs and other tribal groups in the pre-Islamic era. According to scholars, lack of organised religion and legitimate political authority, combined with competitive struggle for existence in an arid environment with limited natural resources make war and violence common features of the pre-Islamic Arabia. Hereditary monarchies of socially and ethnically differentiated city-states had grappled with frequent feuds, killings, revenge assaults, rebellion, slave capture raids, armed robbery, tribal and communal skirmishes [10]. Although polytheistic religions were important facts of the tribal societies of the pre-Islamic Arabia, there were no spiritual, political and social frameworks and institution for mitigating social disorder, crime and violence of all forms.

The coming of the Prophet Muhammad (SAW) therefore marked a turning point for the introduction and entrenchment of institutional mechanisms of conflict prevention, dispute resolution and social order in these utterly chaotic and warring communities. At the heart of the divine message of the Prophet, from the onset, was the concept of 'spiritual brotherhood'. The Prophet of Islam preached spiritual brotherhood as a mechanism for social solidarity.

Another important tenet of Islamic peacebuilding, conflict prevention and resolution is the concept of 'universal law' (Shariah). Adherence to this universal law is regarded as a basic requirement for the establishment and maintenance of social and political control order. Embedded in the notion of universal law are concepts that depict social values critical to conflict prevention and management. Key among these concepts are *adl* (justice), *ihsan* (beneficence) and *hikmah* (wisdom). A better understanding of the conceptual foundations of Islamic peacebuilding and conflict resolution model can best be achieved through a contextual analysis of these key principles and values.

Scholars of Islam and peacebuilding have emphasised the concept of universality of humanity. The doctrine of universality of humanity, as preached by the Quran and Prophet (SAW), stressed the equality of origins of all humans. By recognising the equality of origins of humans regardless of race, culture, class, status etc, scholars believe that Islam is expressly calling for the respect of the rights of all humans; commanding good treatment to humans and enhancing solidarity (not disunity) among humans. In the same vein, the concept is also understood by scholars to mandate Muslims towards the protection of human life and dignity, as Allah said in the Quran (17:7) "We have honoured the sons of Adam...." [4]. The principle of equality in Islam has an important implication for peacebuilding and conflict resolution in that all efforts towards dispute resolution must be anchored on the principle that humans must be treated equally and not privilege should be given to any one on the basis of their status, ethnicity, race or other things.

A close analysis of Islamic historical sources by scholars shows that the Prophet (SAW) practically implemented this Qur'anic principle of unity of mankind. Examples of how he lived, preached unity and protection of human life during his life in Makkah and even after Migration to Madinah (when changing conditions made him to allow limited and proportionate use of force) are many. The prophet (SAW) associated with polytheists (pagans), Jews and Christians, he (SAW) stayed with them in Madinah peacefully. As Allah (SWT) said in the Qur'an:

"Allah does not forbid you to deal justly and kindly with those who fought not against you on account of religion nor drive you out of your homes. Verily, Allah loves those who deal with equity. It is only with reference those who fought against the Muslim community on account of faith and have driven them out of their homes and helped (other non-believers) to drive them out, that Allah forbids you to befriend them. And whosoever will befriend them, then such are wrong doers, those who disobey Allah." (Q, 60: 8-9).

A related principle is encapsulated in the concept of solidarity (*ummah*). An ideal community is a community that promotes unity/solidarity and discourages disunity.

Adl (justice) is also an important concept in the Islamic

peacebuilding literature. According to scholars, the pursuit of justice is not only a principle of maintaining peace and equality, but a universal code of ethics applicable to all affairs and situation of the Muslim. Islamic scholars set the criterion for measuring all social actions on the basis of whether or not the intent and outcome are aimed at and/or achieve justice. Direct commands from the Quran and Sunnah are interpreted to suggest that the pursuit of social justice, the rejection of injustice and oppression are seen as important duties of every Muslim. The following verses of the Quran are few examples of textual origins of the principle of *adl* (justice) in Islam:

1) "Oh you who believe! Stand out firmly for justice as witnesses to Allah, even if it be against yourselves or your parents, or your kin, rich or poor, Allah is a better protector to both (than you). So, follow not the lusts (of your hearts), lest you avoid justice and if you distort your witness or refuse to give it verily, Allah is Ever Well-Acquainted with what you do." (Q4: 135).

2) "Verily, Allah commands that you should render back the trusts to those to whom they are due and that when you judge between men, you judge with justice. Verily, how excellent is the teaching which He (Allah) gives you! Truly, Allah is Ever All-Hearer, All-Seer" (Q4: 58).

3) "Oh you who believe! Stand out firmly for Allah as just witnesses and let not the enmity and hatred of others make you avoid justice. Be just, that is nearer to piety and fear Allah. Verily, Allah is Well-Acquainted with what you do." (Q5: 8).

The exemplification of this principle during the life of the Prophet (SAW) are said to have led to his tremendous successes in maintaining justice and fairness and establishing a peaceful and orderly society. Even after his death, successive Caliphs were equally reputable advocates and dispensers of justice and fairness. The history of the regime of Caliph 'Umar (RA), for example, is incomplete without the mention of his vigorous pursuit of justice and fairness.

The Quranic approach to peace is fundamentally based on the belief that justice and peace are intricately interconnected and interdependent. In Islam, justice and fairness are necessary preconditions for peace and security. In a nutshell, without justice, there can be no peace. By the same token, injustice is a leading cause of conflict and instability. Pursuing justice and promoting fairness (*qist*) are the necessary starting points for conflict prevention and dispute resolution efforts. The Quranic concept of justice, as some of the verses quoted above suggest, is not limited to social aspects of justice. Emphasis on social justice is followed by an equal emphasis on economic justice. Economic justice is enshrined in the Islamic policy of *Zakat* (almsgiving), *Waqf* (institutionalised charity), *Sadaqah* (voluntary charity) etc. [2-4].

Another related Islamic concept with practical peacebuilding implications is *Ihsan* (beneficence). This is closely related to the concept of *khair* (doing good). *Ihsan* and *Khair* represent core Islamic values whose practice can bring about social empowerment of people, leading to the accomplishment of 'justice'. Scholars often emphasised supporting and helping the poor, the weak, the underprivileged alongside other core Islamic values such as justice, equality and fairness (see Quran 3:104; 2:62; 17:26). In relation to peacebuilding and conflict prevention, these principal Islamic values (*Ihsan, Khair* and those mentioned earlier) suggest that a Muslim is not responsible to himself/herself alone but is equally responsible to other members of the community, especially the needy and the weak. The Prophet (SAW) was reported to have been very compassionate to the less privileged and vulnerable people such as the orphans, slaves and women. He extended same level of compassion to all people who have suffered misfortunes due to injustice or criminality. By practicing and preaching these core principles, the Prophet guided Muslims on how to achieve peace through social empowerment and the creation of a sense of community.

Other important principles of Islam that are significant to peacebuilding include: *Afw* (forgiveness): Like patience, forgiveness is a high moral virtue that all Muslims are enjoined to uphold in dealing with one another and with other humans. According to the Quran, Muslims should "keep to forgiveness (O Muhammad) and enjoin kindness and turn away from the ignorant" (7:199). Even when wronged, the Quran (23:96) clearly instructs Muslims to "repel evil (not withevil) but with something that is better (*ahsan*) that is, with forgiveness and amnesty" (Abu-Nimer, 2015:248). A similar virtue is *rahma* (mercy). Showing mercy to all living creatures is considered a necessary condition for spiritual wellbeing in Islam. The Prophet (SAW) was sent to be a source of mercy and compassion to all mankind (Qur'an 21:107).

Sabr (patience): Muslims are required to as much as possible hold on to *sabr* (patience). Sabr (patience), among other things, involves enduring difficulties. In their day-to-day pursuits, Muslims are enjoined to persevere difficulties and afflictions, insults and harmful actions of others and so on. In the Islamic tradition, patience brings about solidarity and unity and prevents disputes, quarrels, misunderstandings and conflicts (see Qur'an 70:5; 2:200; 2:153; 2:155).

Sulh (reconciliation): In the event of misunderstanding and discord, the standard recommendation of Islam is reconciliation. As a basic Islamic approach to peace, reconciliation involves communication and dialogue, rebuilding severed relationships and social bonds. Allah says in the Quran (4:114): "There is no good in most of their secret talks, save (in) him who orders charity or kindness, or conciliation between mankind and he who do this seeking the good pleasure of Allah, We shall give him great reward."

Salamah (peace): The quest for peace is an ultimate goal of human life in Islam. Peace is seen to connote "a state of physical, mental, spiritual and social harmony" (Abu Nimer 2015:243). The social and political policy of the Prophet (SAW) was characterised by the pursuit of peace.

The sacredness of human life: As analysts [4, 5] observe, although all peacebuilding models emphasised the value of human life and efforts to protect the value of human life are

the bases of peacebuilding initiatives, Islamic peacebuilding principles stress that an important responsibility of all mankind is the maintenance of the sacredness of human life (Quran 5:32; 17:33). In Islam, even the destruction and waste of natural resources such as plants, animals and water that serve human needs are explicitly prohibited [4].

5. Utilising Islamic Models and Strategies of Conflict Resolution and Peacebuilding in Nigeria

Having outlined some the basic principles and concepts underpinning both Western and Islamic peacebuilding and conflict resolution models, we will make an attempt in this section to identify some few instances where Islamic peacebuilding techniques and principles can offer a useful alternative to the western models that experts and practitioners in Nigeria prioritise.

One of the major shortcomings of imported intervention models we identified from the survey of extant literature on peacebuilding is the discrepancy between the cultural systems and processes of western countries and those of countries like Nigeria. These differences affect the application and support for such models in conflict situation in places like Northern Nigeria. For instance, the social reality of life in individualistic countries of the west, coupled with the existence of democratic principles and institutions of justice and rule of law are fundamentally different from the communalism and solidarity, weak legal and political institutions obtainable in Nigeria. Thus, the (Northern) Nigerian social structure is more amenable to the social solidarity, unity and reconciliation central to Islamic peacebuilding approach. In other words, the religious and social patterns of Norther Nigeria is more suitable for Islamic peacebuilding approach than it is for western models.

Similarly, the religious and cultural differences between the west and the predominantly Muslim society of Northern Nigeria makes some of the basic assumptions and concepts used in western peacebuilding strategies irrelevant and meaningless to many people in Northern Nigeria. Assumptions and concepts such as 'interest-based' negotiation, for example, may not come across as straightforward as say *ihsan (goodness)*, *sulh (reconciliation)* etc. to devoutly religious actors in Nigeria.

Another issue we raised in the preceding discussion is that one notable distinction between Islamic peacebuilding approach and western/international models is that while the Islamic approach seeks to address the root causes of conflict proactively, western models emphasise curing the symptoms of social disintegration and conflict. Going by the nature of conflicts in Nigeria, achieving durable solutions would require addressing the root causes of the conflict. This makes the notion of *adl* (social justice) as emphasised in the Noble Quran, more relevant to our situation than international models that are based on the concept of democratic governance.

Also, the fact that ethnicity and religion/sectarian differences are central mobilisation factors in the majority of conflicts in the Northern Nigeria, Islamic principles that preach the sacredness of human life and sanction respect for human dignity and rights can be potent instruments for arresting hostile intergroup relations and discord. Same efficacy could be found in the principles of *sabr* (patience) and *afw* (forgiveness) when dealing with conflicts emanating from perceived economic injustices.

6. Conclusion

This paper makes an attempt to outline some major conceptual frameworks and practical examples of Islamic peacebuilding with a view to stimulating discussion and research into the relevance, advantages and potential obstacles to applying Islamic conflict resolution techniques in the prevention and mitigation of conflicts in Northern Nigeria. Although faith-based and interfaith peacebuilding initiatives are gradually surfacing, scholarly efforts to develop conceptual frameworks on which Islamic peacebuilding practice can be established is still scanty in Nigeria. To create a robust theoretical and methodological foundations for Islamic peacebuilding in Nigeria, we recommend that future research should seek to analyse empirical data from the few existing Islamic peace initiatives in Nigeria. It is our opinion that this is a necessary step towards developing a practical model for the training of Islamic peacebuilding practitioners as well as for designing interventions for resolving conflicts based on the teachings of the Qur'an and Sunnah.

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