Remaking society from within: An investigation into contemporary Islamic activism in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

The changing roles of Muslim organisations in the dynamics of public relations in Nigeria can be appraised in the light of the recognition of the growing importance of religious associations across the country and within the framework of discourse on society, religion, and activism. This study investigates the meaning and practice of Islamic activism in Nigeria and how it affects socio-religious and national development challenges in remaking Nigeria. Drawing empirical evidence from the activities of Muslim organisations in the country through a qualitative and quantitative approach, the findings revealed how a localised and socially embedded construct of Islamic activism practices seen among Muslim organisations in Nigeria affirms organisations’ responses to the socio-religious reality of the country as well as development.

1. Introduction

There have been several studies on religion in the public sphere in Nigeria, many of which have, mainly, focused on intense religious rivalry among organisations and groups and less on social action (Abdullahi and Saka, 2007; Dowd, 2014; John et al., 2007; Okafor, 2007; Suberu, 2009; Ushe, 2012). If the Islamic activism practices of Muslim organisations reflect the national socio-religious situations of their home countries, as Al-Arian (2014) argues, the question, therefore, arises on how Nigerian Muslim organisations perceive and practice Islamic activism. In other words, is there a Nigerian brand of Islamic activism or is it an imitation of social action practices in other places?.

In Wiktorowicz (2004a, b) work on Islamic activism, he defined it as "the mobilization of contentions to support Muslim causes" (p. 2). Hendrick (2007) defines it as "the political and social mobilization of actors who deploy a specifically Islamic discourse to express their aspirations for social change" (n.p.). While the Islamic activism construct may be seen as a relatively new coinage, it is not a new practice. The history of Islamic activism among Muslims dates back to over 14 centuries ago when moral and ethical values were introduced in a society plagued with social, religious, economic, and political exploitative practices in the Arabian Peninsula. The resurgent interest in Islamic activism based mainly on the proliferation of propagation movements and insurrectionary groups provides a fertile ground for different discourses and actors, which lends it to various and contested constructions (Wiktorowicz, 2004a, b; Al-Arian, 2014).

Given the dominance of Muslim countries in shaping the Islamic activism agenda, the contemporary Islamic activism movement could be, arguably, said to be largely founded on spirituality, social, political, legal and economic priorities, ideas and values of these countries (Esposito and Voll, 2001; Metcalf, 2002; Clark, 2004; Schmidt, 2005; Regeringsbeleid, 2006a; Bahi, 2008; Schneider, 2009; Wardana, 2015; Fahm and Akinlason, 2019). And as typical of other socio-political concepts, social action in Islam is on its way to being transformed in the storm of ideological debates, especially through modernizing Islam and democratization of political systems (Esposito and Burgat, 2003; Regeringsbeleid, 2006b).

However, a central concern in the current drive for Islamic activism practice is the seeming underlying assumptions of the homogeneity of the Islamic activism construct at a universal level. In this regard, there is a growing literature on the meaning and practice of Islamic activism across cultures and national boundaries (e.g. Hasan, 1997; Ibrahim, 2002; Krause, 2012; Nyers and Rygiel, 2012; Peace, 2015; Regeringsbeleid, 2006b; Sakhanber, 2002; Wiktorowicz, 2001; Wiktorowicz, 2004a, b; Yamani, 2002). A common strand that runs through most of these studies, suggests that the meaning and practice of Islamic activism is socio-culturally embedded.

Also, Islamic activism can be regarded as a mixture of social criticism, moral admonition, and philosophical dictums, all of which are based on Islamic textual sources (Hashem, 2006). Islamic activism is also seen as

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representing an effort to let religion have a say in public space through religious movements that speak on behalf of Islam (Juergensmeyer, 2000).

This paper seeks to contribute to the meagre literature on Islamic activism in a multi-religious society by providing a Nigerian perspective of Islamic activism. Nigeria makes an interesting case to explore the meaning and practice of Islamic activism for many reasons. One is the changing role of Muslim organisations in the dynamics of the public sphere in Nigeria. Besides, there is a growing recognition of the importance of faith-based organisations across Africa, as well as within the framework of the discourse on religion, social responsibility, and in the public domain. At the heart of discourse lies the unstable relationship as religious forces simultaneously complement and undermine the public domain (Obadare, 2004).

In this paper, we explore the current meaning and practice of Islamic activism in Nigeria with emphasis on the modes of Islamic activism amongst Muslim organisations and how this affects the socio-religious development of the country. The study is largely exploratory and does not attempt to present a normative stance or a best practice approach towards the practice and meaning of Islamic activism. In other words, it examines Islamic activism as a neutral practice. The study first explores the context in which Muslim organisations operate in Nigeria – i.e. the peaceful and gradualist approach in order to bring about the desired Islamic order and socio-religious conditions influencing Muslim organisations as well as promoting development. Also, it uses the results derived from a purposive survey of the meaning of Islamic activism among Muslim organisations to conduct an exploratory analysis of the local conception of Islamic activism and socio-religious development. Finally, it discusses the findings, and the conclusion was drawn from the findings.

2. Theoretical perspective on sociocultural, resource mobilization, and social movement

The intersection of social, cultural, economic, and political structures can be seen in the activism of Muslim organisations in Nigeria. This section explores the theoretical bases raised by the connections. The concern for development in society has led to theories and actions that aid individuals and communities. Activism entails efforts to promote, impede, direct, or intervene in societal reforms with the desire to make changes in the society. It can be connected to development because development also have the social, political, economic and environmental dimensions. Activism becomes more meaningful when it promotes policy change and institutional reform that are conducive to social development. In other words, intervenes in alleviating people's livelihoods, rights, etc. That is why Islamic activism has been linked to a form of social movement (Wiiktorowicz, 2002), and sometimes in its extreme, to “religious exclusivism, discrimination against secular forces and religious minorities, as well as women who conform to Islamism, defeat any idea of free participation” (Bayat, 2000, p. 47). Given the importance of achieving success in all areas of human existence, this paper is underpinned by the Sociocultural, Resource Mobilization, and Social Movement theories. That is, these theories combine into a framework that helps in identifying and explaining Islamic activism in Nigeria.

Sociocultural theory founded by Vygotsky (1978) and his colleagues approaches activism via its understanding of human cognition as developmentally formed through social and cultural mediation of the mind. The theory centers on group processes through time and contends that group phenomena cannot be reduced to an explanation in terms of the mental states or actions of the participating individuals. According to Sawyer (2012), “this makes sociocultural theory particularly useful in the analysis of group creativity and group learning because both group creativity and group learning emerge over time from the successive contributions of individual members, and they are difficult to reductively explain in terms of the mental states or actions of participating individuals” (Sawyer, 2012).

This paper argues that a sociocultural perspective is a powerful theoretical framework to support Muslim organisation's activism. This is because the principles of sociocultural theory highlight the importance of social interactions and historicity in development and the need to consider personal and contextual issues comprehensively and systematically. Among the most fundamental concept of sociocultural theory is that the human mind is mediated. Vygotsky opined that people often rely on tools and labour work to effectively change their physical world. This invariably enable them to change their world, and with it, the conditions under which we live on the planet. We additionally utilize representative apparatuses, or signs, to intervene and manage our associations with others and with ourselves and therefore change the nature of our social relationships. The present study argues that development is a comprehensive societal process with two key elements: economic restructuring and sociocultural transformation. While either of these elements alone can initiate change, a strong development plan needs to address both to succeed. This is because to make a strong development plan that is lasting it has to be holistic and must affect various aspects of human endeavours.

Resource mobilization theory emphasises the structure of resources. These include individuals, associations, cash and material things, political chances, and even information. The central matter of Resource mobilization theory is that, for a social movement to get an opportunity of achievement, it needs to prepare, or put into administration, those resources. The theory assumes that participants must have some degree of economic and political resources to make the movement a success. For instance, according to Tilly (1973, 1979), movements are formed and dissolved, mobilized and deactivated, based on cogent decisions about the goals of the groups, available resources, the cost of mobilization and collective action. This implies that widespread discontent alone cannot produce a social movement; adequate resources and motivated people are essential to any concerted social action (Aminzade, 1973; Gamson, 1975; Kendall, 2008). This is why some researchers have observed that resource mobilization theory is grounded in theories of liberal democracy, which narrowly define politics as separate from civic society, personal life, and social movements (Ackelsberg, 1988; Ferrere, 1992).

Furthermore, studies that examine domestic resource mobilization for growth and poverty reduction in African countries have noted how African countries can increase domestic resources and channel them into productive investments (Mavrotas and Shorrocks, 2008; Quartey, 2008; Aryeetey, 2009). They also highlighted how African countries can reclaim development policy space, and give true meaning to, ownership of development strategies that respond to their priorities within the framework of a developmental state (Mavrotas and Shorrocks, 2008; Quartey, 2008; Aryeetey, 2009; Jones et al., 2015). It should be observed that because many Muslim organisations in Nigeria are often small, loosely structured, and democratically governed, they may not fit conveniently into Resource Mobilization Theory. Treating these organisations as parts of larger systems helps to present another perspective on their activism from the standpoint of the theory. The study draws on these theoretical approaches, laying the foundation for how Nigerian Muslim organisations perceive and practice Islamic activism.

Social Movement Theory takes an interdisciplinary approach within the social sciences and seeks to explain why social mobilization occurs, the forms under which it manifests, as well as potential social, cultural, and political consequences. This explains why the theory has been proposed to help reveal the dynamics of the ongoing political and cultural movements in the Muslim world (Wiiktorowicz, 2004a, b, c). The theory is used in understanding how distinct political and social environments affect the development, strategies, goals, and outcomes of a social movement. It has aided the study of social movements and collective action emerging across the world. For several decades, there have been discussions among scholars on the classical and contemporary approaches to social movement theory. According to classical views, the wellsprings of social movements are basic strains. These are shortcomings in the public eye that put people under a specific abstract mental weight, for example, joblessness, quick industrialization, or urbanization.
At the point when the mental aggravation arrives at a specific limit, this pressure will create an attitude to take an interest in eccentric methods for political cooperation, for example, dissenting (McAdam, 2010). Moreover, the classical view share for all intents and purpose that investment in disagreeable governmental issues as puerile, because the struggles are the consequence of a passionate and baffled response to complaints as opposed to a judicious endeavour to improve the circumstance (Van Stekelenburg and Klandermans, 2008).

The contemporary views on social movement theory were mostly influenced by developments in the social movement activities in both Europe and the United States in the early 1960s. Dissenting voices were observed as improving governmental issues and basic for a sound popular government. It is believed that the development in the social movement was greatly enhanced by an increase in government assistance instead of a decrease in government assistance (Suberu, 2009). On account of the way that hardship or deprivation was not a practical clarification any longer, analysts are expected to scan for another clarification. The clarifications that were created were distinctive in the United States than in Europe. The more American-focused basic approaches analysed how qualities of the social and political setting empower or block dissenting voices (Buechler, 1995). The more European-focused social-constructivist approaches dismissed the thought that class-battle is integral to social movements, and underscores different pointers of an aggregate character, similar to sex, ethnicity, or sexuality (Meyer and Minkoff, 2004). Both the classical and contemporary views help explain the origin of some of the Muslim organisations. Many of them can be said to be composed of group of diffusely organized people or organizations striving toward a common goal relating to human society or social change due to the deprivation and structure strain in the polity.

3. Muslim organisations and socio-religious conditions: implications for Islamic activism

Examining the contributions of Nigerian Muslim organisations to socio-religious development – specifically in, religion, economic, health, education, youth development is a way of showing connections between the economy, religion, and social responsibility activities of these organisations. It has been observed that even though the majority of Muslim organisations are founded mainly to fulfill the spiritual demands of Muslims, they often also develop parallel socio-economic activities (Tottoli, 2014). In addition, many Muslim organisations consider welfare programs an important part of their religious strategy (Tottoli, 2014). Hence, in recent decades these organisations have made attempts to increase in strength and have transformed their objectives through welfare services.

Based on prior studies that have noted the importance of faith-based organisations in development (Para-Mallam, 2006; Tomalin, 2012; Wallace, 2014), this research argues that Muslim organisations can be regarded as a major contributor to social, economic and religious development agenda in Nigeria. There are several reported cases of Muslim organisations promoting social, economic and religious welfare programs of benefit to not only Muslims but to Nigeria as a whole (Weiss, 2002; Ogbonnaya, 2012; Sani, 2016). For instance, Ogbonnaya highlights that main Muslim organisations such as the Federation of Muslim Women Association of Nigeria (FOMWAN), Nasrullahi Fathi Society of Nigeria (NASFAT), National Council of Muslim Youth Organisation (NACOMYO) have made significant contributions in terms of intellectual and economic empowerment, rehabilitation of children and orphans, the encouragement of young girls to embrace education and proper and adequate health care. Other programs by these organisations include tackling poverty and ensuring sustainable income for members through granting of loans for small-scale businesses.

Obadare (2007) notes that some of the faith-based organisations were brought into existence with the aim of occupying the lacuna created by state retrenchment especially in important areas such as health and education, with others established for political intent. Bunting (2005) thus observes that faith-based organisations are said to account for around 50 percent of all health and education provision in sub-Saharan Africa. Muslim organisations such as FOMWAN collaborates with other women organisations e.g. National Council of Women Societies (NCWS), Women in Nigeria (WIN), and Federation of Women Lawyers in Nigeria on projects that include HIV/AIDS prevention and sensitization, reproductive health, women's economic empowerment, and elections. Also, there are a number of Muslim scholars (‘ulama’) addressing contemporary issues related to secularism in Nigeria, gender equality, democracy, human rights, and rights of ethnic and religious minorities (Umar, 2001; Aboki, 2019). These are issues found to be discussed on televisions, radio, and even when invited to international media houses such as British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), Voice of America (VOA), and Deutsche Welle (Voice of Germany).

The participation in modern global discourse has also led to Islamic modernism and fundamentalism among Muslim organisations. They are regarded as fundamentalists and modernist because they desire to build the fundamental pillars of Islamic ideology in a modern world. These modernism and fundamentalism can be vividly seen in the ways and manner of their doctrines, organisational structure, leadership displayed and the type of people that constitute members of the organisations. It is also important to state that these developments have been very helpful in forging unity especially among Muslim elite e.g. Muslim Student Society of Nigeria, Association of Muslim Social Scientists, and Muslim Sister's Organisation (Motin and Moten, 1987). The significance of unity is not only seen in checking the advances of Christianity (i.e. proselytization of Christianity) but also in checking Muslim extremist groups (Motin and Moten, 1987).

With this preliminary discussion, this paper presents the characteristics of Muslim organisations in Nigeria as well as the meaning and practice of Islamic activism amongst these organisations in the country. It also highlights the discourse on society, religion, and activism.

4. Methodology

The respondents are leaders of Muslim organisations (n = 35) and some other active members of these organisations (n = 15). The majority of respondents are based in the north-central region of the country (18 participants). These leaders were identified and selected based on their contributions to the organisations, which are visible in the public domain. The interview questions include what is your Muslim/Islamic organisation? What is your understanding of Islamic activism? Do Nigerian Muslim organisations engage in Islamic activism? Please, give reasons for your answers and where possible cite example. How would you rate the awareness and practice of Islamic activism in Nigeria? What do you think are or could be the main drivers of (reasons for) Islamic activism in Nigeria? Please, give some examples of Islamic activism activities in Nigeria and what they are meant to address. In your opinion, what should be the main 5 priorities to be pursued by Muslim organisations as Islamic activism at the moment. Is Islamic Activism necessary in the Nigerian current social, economic, political, and cultural environment? Please, give reasons for your answers. Among the Muslim organisations represented by the respondents are Ansarudeen Society of Nigeria, Federation of Muslim Women Associations of Nigeria (FOMWAN), Islamic Educational Trust, Jama-atu Nasril Islam, Muslim Corps Association of Nigeria, Muslim Rights Concern (MURIC), Muslim Sisters Organisation (MSO), Muslim Students Society of Nigeria (MSSN), Muslim Ummah of South-West, Nigeria (MUSWEN), Nasrul-Lahi-I-Fatih Society (NASFAT), National Council of Muslim Youths Organisations (NACOMYO), The Companion/The Criterion, The Muslim Congress (TMC), Muslim Youth Association of Nigeria, Jama-at-ul Islamiyya of Nigeria, Muslim Teachers' Association of Nigeria, Ahmadiyya Muslim Jama'at Nigeria.
At the time of the interviews these respondents were executives while the active members were recruited based on their frequent attendance of organization activities. However, by virtue of their positions and participation in the organisations’ activities, they have sufficient knowledge in Islamic activism of their organisations and their contributions to national development. Data were collected through structured interviews (face-to-face and via emails). Getting hold of these calibre of people as well as their responses to the questions was very challenging given their very busy schedules and distance. The researcher had to leverage on social networks to overcome these barriers. All the respondents agreed to participate and some gave both oral and written consent. When done with their responses the researcher thanked the respondents for their participation.

The paper focuses on the activities of Muslim organisations, therefore, the issues addressed are closer to the faith than any specific Muslim organisation or Islamic sect ideology. As such, the analysis of Muslim organisations in Nigeria presented here is, inescapably, about the activities of the Muslims in general. In other words, sometimes these activities may not take organizational forms (Obadare, 2007). Moreover, the multi-ethnic composition of the organisations (by extension the country) did not make this any easy. It does not, however, excuse exploration of issues bordering on the structure and organizational capacity of these Muslim organisations, this is why references are made to them as and when necessary.

It is also important to note that not all the Muslim organisations in the country were explored, obviously because of their numbers, which can be said to keep rising as the problems in the society keep acerbating (Salih, 2002). More so, many of these organisations did not register with the Corporate Affairs Commission (CAC), however, this does not rule out their spiritual, economic, social and physical contributions to the development of the country. This raises the issue of the extent of activism of Muslim organisations in various aspects of modern life in the country, and invariably the right point to advance the discourse. For instance, are these organisations complementing the developmental activities of the government, or, are they, perhaps, dislocating it? In reality elements of the two are often displaced in the country’s public space. In Nigeria, the major Muslim organisations are: Ansarudeen Society of Nigeria, Darul Islam (Nigeria), Federation of Muslim Women Associations of Nigeria (FOMWAN), Islamic Educational Trust, Islamic Movement (Nigeria), Izala Society, Jama’atu Nasril Islam, Muslim Corps Association of Nigeria (MCAN), Muslim Rights Concern (MURIC), Muslim Sisters Organisation (MSO), Muslim Students Society of Nigeria (MSSN), Muslim Ummah of South-West, Nigeria (MUSWEN), Nasrul-Lahi-l-Fatih Society (NASFAT), National Council of Muslim Youths Organisations (NACOMYO), Nigeria Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs (NSCIA), The Companion/The Criterion, The Muslim Congress (TMC).

4.1. Demographic characteristics

Before answering to the major questions, respondents were asked to provide information about the name of their organization, number of years with the organisation, headquarters of the organisations, their location, and position in the organization, telephone/email address.

5. Procedure

The structured interviews were designed and developed strictly to elicit responses concerning the meaning and practice of Islamic activism in Nigeria as well as how it affects socio-religious and national development. This study recognises that one of the drawbacks of reporting on Islamic activism is the danger of mixing it with Islamic radical movements and their activities, as such, questions were tailored alongside the objectives of the paper. Also, the questions were phrased to give respondents the leeway to talk about programmes that transcend their organisations. The questions were also brief and straight to the point.

The second phase of the research maps the outcome of the interviews on key issues of the socio-religious and national development to validate the first stage. In this case, Muslim organisations with nationwide coverage were chosen because they have more contributions and more opportunities for national development. It is anticipated that these organisations will provide a much more broad and comprehensive meaning and practice of Islamic activism in Nigeria which has a significant presence of Muslim organisations. This part of the study was based on information found on the websites of these organisations. The results of the structured interviews on Islamic activism of Muslim organisations in Nigeria are presented below.

6. Analyses/discussions

6.1. Meaning of Islamic activism

As expected, the meaning of Islamic activism was largely described to reflect the local realities. In an environment where there are socio-religious challenges as well as the need for Muslims to co-exist peacefully with other faith, Islamic activism was mainly seen from a remedial perspective – a way of “social change” to the society. Almost all the people interviewed defined Islamic activism along the lines of progressive Islamic propagation. Some of these definitions include:

Islamic activism is relative but by my understanding is the activeness of an individual or a group propagating the right principles and doctrines of Islam as enshrined in the Qur’an and exemplified by our noble prophet Muhammad (Salla-llahu ‘alayhi wa salam) in the way and manner we are enjoined to do it. [Chief Imam of a Muslim organisation]

Ability to do what Allah has commanded. [Imam of a Muslim organisation]

Promotion of Islamic awareness and defence of the rights of Muslims [President of a Muslim organisation]

Islamic activism is the act of protecting Islam against religious fanaticism, radicalism, and religious wars. [Imam of a Muslim organisation]

Learning and teaching Islam to Muslims and non-Muslims. [Former leader of a Muslim organisation]

Our understanding of Islamic activism is the belief in the peaceful propagation of all the ideas that Islam has come to establish. [Missioner of a Muslim organisation]

Content analysis of the website of these organisations also confirms this inclination to interpret Islamic activism in terms of progressive Islamic propagation. One of the most widely covered Muslim organisations in Nigeria (NASFAT) states:

Our mission implies that we shall strive towards the development of an enlightened Muslim society. Our activities will be aimed not only at the spiritual development of Muslims but also their welfare. We shall focus on helping the Muslim ummah to develop a true understanding of Islam according to the tenets of the Holy Qur’an and the Sunnah (https://www.nasfat.org/index.php/about-us).

The overwhelming understanding of Islamic activism as progressive Islamic propagation is not unconnected to the socio-political and multi-religious heritage of the country. This is because it is important to maintain a good relationship with other traditional and religious organisations as well as enjoy the support of political authorities. For Islamic activism, therefore, the progressive Islamic propagation would entail that Muslim organisations encouraging Muslim faithful to come together to rub minds with learned Islamic scholars to know more about the teachings of their faith. Progressive Islamic propagation is, therefore,
conceived within the act of protecting Muslims against religious fanaticism, radicalism, and religious wars and as well respect of the right of the Muslim Right Concern (MURIC) engaging in dialogue with Lagos State Television management to recall a sacked Muslim female newscaster due to religious over-zealousness of the management of the TV station.

Islamic activism as progressive Islamic propagation in Nigeria could also be tied to promoting Muslim viewpoints on the national stage. Muslim organisations have worked to spread Islam through da’wah, promotion of education, improving the status of the less privileged, advancement of Nigeria development projects and promotion of positive social behaviour of Muslims. It can be argued that since aids and social support is core to the religion, the same belief could have easily found an outlet in Muslim organisations’ conception and practice of Islamic activism. However, one would have expected this religious inclination to influence many Nigerian organisations to work towards financial independence instead of dependence on financial donations from philanthropists. Also, the proliferation of Muslim organisations is promoting the inability to speak with one voice on issues affecting Muslims. Issues like injustices, high level of corrupt practices, and negligence of some fundamental principles of Islam.

This article explains the role of Muslim organisations as part of Islamic activism in Nigeria and elaborates the local perspective of this activism. There is also the global perspective of some Muslim organisations. Mostly because of the ideological background of their emergence (e.g. global Salafism) which also exists in African countries (Meijer, 2009; Ostebo, 2015; Saalfeld, 2019), including Nigeria. This is what Minami (2019); Tanaka (2019); Suerbaum (2020) calls transnational civil society. Consequently, the Muslim world today cannot be separated from the spread of transnational Islamic organisations. However, the focus of this study and the organisations discussed in the present work were chosen not strictly on ideological backgrounds or bases but for their contributions to national development which is motivated by the understanding of what Islam is and represents, hence, what the present study has termed their “Islamic activism”s

6.2. Islamic activism in Nigeria: community, members, and ideas

All the interviewees acknowledged that Nigerian Muslim organisations are engaged in Islamic activism, that is, in terms of their engagement with Islamic propagation. 60 percent of the respondents said that there is an awareness of Islamic activism in Nigeria but with somewhat considerable actions, while 40 percent claimed there is almost no awareness of Islamic activism respectively as shown in the table below (see Tables 1, 2 and 3):

| Table 1. Awareness of Islamic activism. |
|----------------------------------------|
| Level of Awareness | % |
| High | 60 |
| Low | 40 |

| Table 2. Issues addressed by community-related programme of the muslim organisations. |
|-----------------------------------------------|
| Issues Addressed | % |
| Human Right Concern | 12 |
| Education | 15 |
| Health | 5 |
| Moral/Religious Wellbeing | 41 |
| Political | 5 |
| Unity | 10 |
| Welfare | 12 |

In terms of Islamic activism involving communities, the interviews and website report both show that the emphasis is more on community participation and development. The top seven issues reported on the community-related programme from the interviews are shown below:

These issues mirror the peculiarity of the Nigerian socio-political and economic situations. As expected, most Muslim organisations in Nigeria did not miss out on any of these issues but they rather focus on some of the issues than others. This may not be unconnected to the reason or the aim of establishing some of these organisations. One of the organisations, for instance, in stating its major achievements highlighted the issue of education emphasising that with the support of numerous educationists and scholars, the organisation has provided elementary, secondary, and tertiary education for innumerable numbers of young men and women.

The number of primary schools built by the organisation is over 200 while its secondary schools’ number about 50. It has one of the foremost Muslim Colleges of Education in the country. The ex-students of these institutions have become eminent in various professions and leadership positions in the country (Imam, 2004). Muslim organisations have also contributed immensely to university education in Nigeria. For example, Al-Qalam University Katsina, Crescent University Abeokuta, Summit University Offa, Fountain University Osogbo, among others were established by Muslim organisations (Reichmuth, 1996; Rufai and Adedeji, 2011).

Another organisation included embracing girl's education as a means to eradicate poverty in its aim. Thereby it engages in programs to increase the retention rate of girls in school, continuing education for married women, and integrate literacy and vocational training into established Qur’anic schools (Fahn, 2017). Another Muslim organisation simply targets the development of an enlightened Muslim society nurtured by a true understanding of Islam to attain the spiritual upliftment and welfare of mankind (Imam, 2008).

In the area of health care services, Muslim organisations have also established health centres, hospitals, and recreational centres in various parts of the country. For example, there are Ahmadiyyah hospitals in Lagos, Ogun (Ijebu Ode), Oyo, (Ibadan), and Imo State. Also, FOMWAN hospital can be found in Kaduna State as well as the FOMWAN clinic in Plateau State. These health institutions provide in-patients, out-patients, antenatal and postnatal, surgical, laboratory, radiography, VVF repairs, and other services to the community (Kurfi, 2018).

In the area of politics, the Nigerian Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs (NSCIA) is known for protecting the interest of Islam throughout Nigeria. Its members are drawn from various Islamic organisations in across regions in the country. NSCIA serves as a channel of contact through which the Nigerian government address Muslim/Islamic issues affecting the country (Muhammed, 2020). Furthermore, Muslim organisations have also been concerned with the rights of the Nigerian citizens in general such as the plight of the 54 soldiers who were imprisoned for refusing to fight Boko Haram insurgents with poor weapons (Jimoh, 2018; Adeleke et al., 2019; Okonkwo, 2019). They have also shown support for the June 12 struggle especially for their tenacity, doggedness, and forbearance shown by Nigerians in the face of severe trials sequel to the annulment of the results of the June 12, 1993 election and its aftermath (Agency Report, 2019).

The following were identified by the interviewee as the top three main reasons for Islamic activism in Nigeria:

These reasons cannot be said to be unique to the country and maybe identified in other cultures as well. However, the point to note is that

| Table 3. Reasons for Islamic activism in Nigeria. |
|-----------------------------------------------|
| Reasons | % |
| Islamic propagation | 65 |
| Right concern | 25 |
| Economic concern | 10 |
similar reasons across communities may give rise to different Islamic activism responses, which further reinforces the argument that Islamic activism is a socially embedded construct and practice. For instance, in Hendrick's model of Islamic activism, he describes how Muslim organisations networks have taken advantage of economic globalization in order to transform the forms of social authority in contemporary Turkey. Making reference to the Turkish Gülen Movement (GM), Hendrick notes that GM is unique within the field of Islamic activism because of the organisation's interests in domestic social transformation by striving to outstrip rivals rather than to overcome them in political confrontation. This also substantiate studies (e.g. Bullock, 2005; Hashem, 2006) that have argued for heterogeneous and overlapping forms of contemporary Islamic activism. Thus, it can be said that the manifestation of Islamic activism in Nigeria does lead to the socio-religious development of the country.

The respondents all agreed that Islamic activism is necessary for Nigeria. Some of the reasons given are: seeking and promotion of welfare for all people, propagation of fairness and justice as taught by Allah and His Messengers, education for all, seeking and promotion of peaceful political inclusion in the country, and seeking and promotion of religious freedom of every Nigerian. Some also argued that without reaching out, the Islamic teachings would not be exposed to the unformed Muslims and non-Muslims. Also, it is through peaceful propagation that Islamic ideals could be established. This view is well reflected in one of the comments of the respondents:

Our understanding of Islamic activism is the belief in peaceful propagation of all the ideas that Islam has come to establish. The perspective hinges on “Call unto the way of thy Lord with wisdom and good exhortation, and argue with them in a way that is best. Surely, thy Lord knows best who has strayed from His way; and He knows those who are rightly guided” (16:126) [Missionary of a Muslim organisation]

While the above quote may be seen as a reasonable expectation, it will be meaningful to situate it within the context offered by the Nigerian socio-religious environment. In a nation such as Nigeria, the intermingling of religion with politics has brought more harm than good. While religion itself may not harm politics, however, the manipulation of religions for political gains often set the nation on fire. Recent cases of unrest in the country involving differences in political and religious views have led to killings and destruction of properties. Despite the universalistic outlook of most religions in the country and the tendencies for religion to elevate adherents to a high spiritual level, problems still crop up due to lack of understanding, the institutionalization of faith, corporate character, improper beliefs, and practices. There is a need for both religious and political leaders in the country not to abandon nation-building and rather work for the common good to bring beneficial change to society (Faseke, 2019). To underscore the need for the socio-religious development of the country, various Christian and Muslim Faith-Based Organisations are contributing to the development of the country. Due to the inefficiency of the Nigerian state to provide adequately for the common good of the citizens, Organisations are complementing government efforts to improving the standard of living of the people.

In summary, the results show that the understanding and practice of Islamic activism in Nigeria is the peaceful propagation of Islamic teachings in whatever form it can be achieved. Furthermore, most people think that Islamic activism is one of the ways Muslim organisations can contribute to the progress of society. This finding is in many ways at variance with the current understanding and practice of Islamic Activism in some parts of Muslim and non-Muslim countries, where Islamic activism is argued to “have led to considerable tensions and violent conflicts” beyond peaceful propagation:

The various manifestations of this phenomenon of ‘Islamic activism’ have led to considerable tensions and violent conflicts, not only within the Muslim world itself, but also in (relations with) the West and the Netherlands. The interrelatedness of what occurs outside and inside national borders means that what takes place elsewhere may also have consequences for the internal relationship between segments of the population. A climate of distrust and fear has arisen between Muslims and non-Muslims, and also within the Muslim community itself. Communication about ‘Islam’ now only takes place through intemperate images and inflated words, such as a ‘clash of civilizations’ or an ‘irreconcilability of Islam with democracy and human rights’ (Regeringsbeleid, 2006b).

7. Discussion

The current study aimed to investigated the meaning and practice of Islamic activism in Nigeria and how it affects socio-religious and national development challenges in remaking Nigeria. Based on prior research (e.g., Elischer, 2015; Hendrick, 2009), the study suggested that there is a positive relationship between Islamic activism and development, such that Muslim organizations through their activities promote socio-religious development of the people. In line with the earlier research findings, this premise was supported. This gives further indications that Muslim organisation networks have taken advantage of economic globalization to transform the forms of social authority in some countries as indicated by Hendrick (2009), and also socio-religious development (similar to Elischer, 2015).

Secondly, the relationship between the understanding and practice of Islamic activism and the peaceful propagation of Islamic teachings in Nigeria was also supported and in line with the above reasoning. Furthermore, this suggests that respondents tended to associate Islamic activism with peaceful propagation of their faith. In other words, it appears that Islamic propagation can be linked to Islamic activism.

Finally, there was also a significant import that can be deduced from the findings which is that most respondents think that Islamic activism is one of the ways Muslim organisations can contribute to the progress of society. In summary, these results suggest that Islamic activism has a small to moderately strong (Wiktorowicz, 2002) relationship with social movement as well as development. It could be argued that the Muslims organisations examined in this article contributed to various domains, ranging from education, health to politics. In line with this reasoning, Gramsci (1994) postulated that civil society movements, based on their interests can be divided into two categories; traditional intellectuals and organic intellectuals. Organic intellectuals have a concern for community empowerment when juxtaposed with the State organisation. The Muslim organisations examined in this study in their exertions of Islamic activism in Nigeria tend to empower the community rather than capitalising on political or ideological interests.

As was discussed above, the link between Islamic activism and socio-religious, economic, and national development has been suggested by several scholars (Hashem, 2006; Mandaville, 2011; Keskin, 2012; Hamid, 2016). Hence, one could theorize that there exists an underlying social construct in Islamic activism in Nigeria which can be linked to the role of Muslim organisations in the country. For example, as mentioned previously, there have been some attempts at explaining this link with theories such as the social movement theory (Wiktorowicz, 2004a, b) and, even democratization (Hendriks et al., 2006). Further research should focus on teasing out the most relevant explanatory links in this context in other parts of the world, especially the Western world.

8. Practical implications of Islamic activism in Nigeria

The fact that Islamic activism can be merged with social development warrants attention for the governance system in Nigeria. It is well established that despite the high religiosity among Nigerians, religion has not stimulated the desired corporate governance system in the country (Nakpoda et al., 2020). Therefore, based on the issues raised in the previous sections, these organisations need to intensify and show more
interest in the domestic social transformation by striving to outstrip themselves in areas of national development rather than to overcome each other in political or even ideological confrontations. This suggests that Islamic activism in Nigeria has heterogeneous and overlapping form of contemporary Islamic activism (e.g., Bullock, 2005; Hashem, 2006). It also emphasises Islamic activism has a way of cultivating social development, which supports this study’s proposition. Based on the current findings, it could be theorized that Islamic activism is necessary for Nigeria if based on the premise of seeking and promotion of welfare for all people, propagation of fairness and justice as taught by Allah and His Messengers, education for all, seeking and promotion of peaceful political inclusion in the country, and seeking and promotion of religious freedom of every Nigerian.

9. Limitations

The first important limitation of this study concerns the methodological design. Since it is based on selected Muslim organisations due to access, it means that one has to be very careful in extracting the results of the study to other contexts. A second limitation concerns the sensitive access, it means that one has to be very careful in extracting the results of this paper; involved in many domains, ranging from education, health to politics, could employ methods to explore and identify Islamic activism of these organisations based on the character of the organization to see which was more concerned with empowering Nigerian society. Although, the study was conducted exclusively on Nigerian Muslim organisations, there is need to explore a cross-national context, in order to know if the same types of domains apply to the organisations in those countries. Lastly, one could also conduct more applied research to get a better understanding of how the ideological background of these Muslim organisations plays a role in their decisions of Islamic activism.

10. Future research

Future studies based on the findings that the Muslim organizations in this paper were involved in many domains, ranging from education, health to politics, could employ methods to explore and identify Islamic activism of these organizations based on the character of the organization to see which was more concerned with empowering Nigerian society. Although, the study was conducted exclusively on Nigerian Muslim organisations, there is need to explore a cross-national context, in order to know if the same types of domains apply to the organisations in those countries. Lastly, one could also conduct more applied research to get a better understanding of how the ideological background of these Muslim organisations plays a role in their decisions of Islamic activism.

11. Conclusion

This paper investigated the meaning and practice of Islamic activism in Nigeria and how it affects national development. It showed that the perceived practice of Islamic activism is a way of addressing socio-religious development challenges in remaking Nigeria. The paper determined how a localised and socially embedded construct of Islamic activism practices seen among Muslim organisations in Nigeria affirmed organisations’ responses to the socio-religious reality of the country as well as development. The paper also explained how the socio-religious characteristics of Nigeria are unique and as such, the meaning and practice of Islamic activism amongst Muslim organisations in Nigeria would be affected by the socio-religious conditions in which many of these organisations operate. Moreover, the paper demonstrated the need to further question the understanding of activism as a standardized phenomenon. Finally, the paper suggested that the meaning and practice of Islamic activism in Nigeria is the peaceful propagation of Islamic teachings in various forms. Also, Islamic activism is one of the ways Muslim organisations can contribute to the progress of society. The findings of this paper have policy implications for Muslim organisations and open the way for further research in the area of Islamic activism in Nigeria.

Declarations

Author contribution statement

A. O. Fahm: Conceived and designed the experiments; Performed the experiments; Analyzed and interpreted the data; Contributed reagents, materials, analysis tools or data; Wrote the paper.

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Additional information

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