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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

FROM SECTARIAN DIVISION TO ISLAMIC BROTHERHOOD: THE ROLE OF NIGERIAN ISLAMIC SCHOLARS IN CONSTRUCTING MUSLIM UNITY

Maisuna Mustapha Yahya PhD

Faculty of Arts, Department of Islamic Studies,
University of Abuja, Nigeria.

yasminmaisuna06@gmail.com

mustapha.maisuna@uniabuja.edu.ng

Yakubu Zulaihat Mohammed

Postgraduate Student, Faculty of Arts,
Department of Islamic Studies, University of Abuja, Nigeria.

zeeyaqub2019@gmail.com

Abstract

For centuries, Nigerian Islamic scholars have combined faith and knowledge to shape society and provide moral guidance. They established centers of learning, authored useful works, and promoted values that fostered unity among diverse communities. Their legacy demonstrates how Islamic scholarship can serve as both a spiritual compass and a force for social change and cohesion. Of recent, Nigerian has experienced challenges of disunity which includes sectarian conflicts, ethnic rivalries, and the spread of extremist interpretations of Islam among others. These problems have weakened the impact of traditional scholarship and undermined the unity that earlier scholars like Shaikh Uthman bn Fodio, Muhammad Bello, Shaikh Adam Al Ilori, Shaikh Kamaldeen Al Adabi etc. had worked hard to achieve and preserve. The aim of this paper is to examine the legacy of Nigerian Islamic scholars as promoters of faith, conveyors of knowledge, and agent of unity, how their contributions can address the present-day challenges of division. The study employed qualitative approach, drawing on historical accounts, scholarly writings, and contemporary analyses of Islamic education and leadership in Nigeria. It uses case studies of selected scholars to show how they combined knowledge and faith in practical ways to build cohesive communities. Findings shows that Nigerian Islamic scholars integrated religious learning with social responsibility, which enabled them to mediate disputes, strengthened communal harmony, and achieved reformation. Their work extended beyond theological instruction to include contributions in education, governance, and moral development. Reviving this balanced model of scholarship where faith is linked to knowledge and service to humanity offers a pathway for overcoming current divisions and countering extremist narratives. The causes of division among scholars of today, includes among others monopoly of knowledge, envy, show off, political affiliation. The paper recommends that contemporary days scholars prioritize inclusive education, mentor younger generations, and adopt modern communication tools to promote unity. By upholding the legacy of faith and knowledge, Nigerian Islamic scholars can continue to strengthen peace, cohesion and national development.

Keywords: Contemporary, Disunity, Nigerian Islamic Scholars, National Development, Sectarian.

INTRODUCTION

Islamic scholarship in Nigeria has for centuries, stood at the heart of moral guidance, education, and social development. From the early spread of Islam in the Kanem-Borno to the intellectual reforms of the Sokoto Caliphate, scholars have been instrumental in shaping the religious and cultural direction of the society. Their classrooms, writings, and leadership inspired generations of Muslims to see faith not only as an act of worship but also, as a guide for living in peace with others. Though their deep commitment to faith and the pursuit of knowledge these scholars-built institutions that promote justice, tolerance, and communal harmony (Kani 12).

Yet, in today's Nigeria, the ideas that once united communities under shared values are increasingly challenged. Ethnic and sectarian tensions, political manipulations over religion, and the rise of extremists' ideologies have weakened the moral authority of genuine scholarship. In many places, loud and divisive voices overshadow the quiet but enduring influence of traditional Islamic learning. This situation has raised concerns about the fading link between faith, knowledge and unity that once defined Nigeria's Islamic heritage (Adamu 25).

This paper therefore, seeks to explore the enduring legacy of Nigerian Islamic scholars as custodians of faith and conveyors of knowledge who used their intellectual and spiritual influence to promote unity in society. It examines how teaching, writing, and community roles helped breed divides among people of different ethnic and regional backgrounds. The study argues that the harmonious blending of faith and knowledge, which characterized the work of these scholars, remains a timeless model for addressing Nigeria's contemporary challenges of disunity, moral decline, and social instability. By reflecting on their lives and ideas, the paper hopes to show that the moral light they kindled centuries ago still offers guidance for a united and peaceful Nigeria.

Historical Background of Islamic Scholarship in Nigeria

The emergence and growth of Islamic scholarship in Nigeria cannot be separated from the broader history of Islam's expansion across West Africa. From the earliest centuries of Islam, Muslim traders, clerics, and travelers moved across Sahara area, carrying not only goods, but the light of knowledge and faith. Islam first reached the region that is now northeastern Nigeria through Kanem-Borno around the eleventh century, where it was received by rulers who saw in it a system of justice, learning, and order that complemented their traditional institutions (Buba 23). The rulers of Kanem Borno, beginning with Mai Umme Jilmi and later Mai Idris Alooma, gave strong support to Islamic learning. They invited scholars from Fezzan and Egypt to teach jurisprudence, Qur'anic studies, and Arabic language. Qur'anic scholars flourished, and manuscripts were copied by hand, forming one of the earliest intellectual traditions in West Africa (Balogun 67). Islam at this time was not only a religion but a civilization its scholarship covered faith, language, law, history, and ethics, creating a literate Muslim society long before the arrival of European education.

From the Borno, Islamic studies spread westward into the Hausa city states. Kano, Katsina, and Zaria became renowned centers of Islamic teaching and Arabic studies. The Islamic scholars (malamai) played a dual role: as teachers of Qur'an and custodians of justice. Their knowledge of Fiqh (Islamic jurisprudence) and Hadith enabled them to serve as judges, advisers, and moral guides to the rulers. This period saw the rise of notable scholars such as Muhammad al-Maghilli, whose treatises on governance influenced Hausa rulers, emphasizing that leadership is a trust and must be based on justice and Shari'ah (Maghilli 52). A major transformation occurred in the nineteenth century with the rise of Sheikh Uthman ibn Fodio and his movement of reform. His jihad was not a war of conquest, but an intellectual and spiritual revolution aimed at restoring purity of faith and moral discipline. Uthman dan Fodio argued that ignorance was the greatest enemy of the Muslim community

and that knowledge was the key to social reform (Dan Fodio 33). His writings over one hundred in Arabic and Fulfulde cover areas such as theology, jurisprudence, and education. The Sokoto Caliphate that emerged from this reform became one of the most organized centers of Islamic learning in precolonial Africa.

The intellectual legacy of the Sokoto scholars was profound. Abdullahi den Fodio and Muhammad Bello expanded on Uthman's teachings, establishing schools and producing volumes of literature that defined Islamic governance, ethics and social relations. Nans Asma'u, the daughter of Uthman, became pioneering figure in women's education. She organized networks of yan taru (women educators) who taught other women Islamic knowledge, literacy, and moral discipline. Through her poetry and essays, she emphasized that education was a duty of every Muslim, regardless of gender (Asma'u 78).

This period also saw strong connections between Nigerian scholars and the wider Muslim world. Manuscripts and letters were exchange in scholars from Timbuktu, Cairo, and Medina, reflecting a pan Islamic intellectual network. Many Nigerians scholars performed Hajj and studied in Makkah or Madinah, returning with new perspectives and teaching methods that enriched local learning. Sheikh Gidado bin Laima, for example, was known for his correspondence with scholars in the Hijaz (Smith 91). During the colonial period, Islamic scholarship faced new challenges. The introduction of Western education and administration brought tension between traditional learning and colonial authority. However, scholars like Sheikh Abubakar Gumi worked to bridge the gap between classical Islamic education and modern systems. He emphasized the need for Muslims to acquire both religious and worldly knowledge in order to preserve faith while advancing in a modern society (Gumi 115). His works and radio sermons in the 1970s inspired a new generation of educated Muslims who valued both Islamic authenticity and intellectual progress.

In contemporary Nigeria, the legacy of earlier scholars continues to inspire. Modern Islamic universities, research centers and online institutions, now combine classical texts with modern methods of instruction. The influence of reformist movements such as the Izala group has also revived emphasis on the Qur'an and Sunnah as foundations for unity and moral renewal (Balogun 142). Despite differences in approach, the unbroken thread remains Islamic scholarship in Nigeria is guided by faith, sincerity, and the pursuit of beneficial knowledge. From the early Ulama of Kanem Borno to the reformers of Sokoto and the teachers of today, Nigerian Islamic scholarship has been a living tradition deeply spiritual, socially conscious, and intellectually vibrant. It has bound Muslims together across ethnic and regional lines, fostering unity through shared belief in Allah's word and the noble duty of seeking knowledge.

The Role of Faith in Promoting Unity among Nigerian Islamic Scholars

Faith as a Foundation for Collective Identity

In the Nigerian Islamic tradition for, faith (iman) functions, not only as a personal spiritual compass but also as a foundation for communal solidarity. Islamic scholars across generations have taught that authentic belief must manifest in ethical conduct, social harmony, and mutual responsibility. Nigeria's diverse Muslim communities that comprised of: Hausa, Fulani, Yoruba, Kanuri, Nupe, and others, faith has served as the principal force capable of transcending ethical and regional divides. The Qur'an emphasizes this unity of believers through the declaration:

(إِنَّمَا الْمُؤْمِنُونَ إِخْوَةٌ فَأَصْلِحُوا بَيْنَ أَخَوَيْكُمْ وَاتَّقُوا اللَّهَ لَعَلَّكُمْ تُرْحَمُونَ ١٠)

The believers are nothing else than brothers (in Islâmic religion). So make reconciliation between your brothers, and fear Allâh, that you may receive mercy (Qur'an 49: 10).

This verse has been central to the teachings of scholars such as Shaykh Usman Dan Fodio, who insisted that faith is incomplete; unless it produces justice, and collective uplift

(Dan Fodio112). Throughout history, Nigerian Islamic scholars have derived from this theological foundation an imperative to promote unity amid diversity. Sulaiman(145-146) postulated that both scholars utilized Islamic teachings, educational institutions and public preachings to reduce sectarian tensions and foster unity among Muslims, thereby functioning as effective peace makers in a pluralistic religious Society Their teachings demonstrate that faith driven unity is neither abstract nor passive; it is rooted in active engagement educating the masses. Mediating disputes, and reforming social practices. In their view, unity is not uniformity but a disciplined cohesion built upon shared moral values.

Qur'anic Foundation of Unity and Brotherhood

The Qur'an repeatedly emphasizes the moral and spiritual obligation of unity. Another foundational verse states:

﴿وَأَعْتَصِمُوا بِحَبْلِ اللَّهِ جَمِيعًا وَلَا تَفَرَّقُوا﴾

And hold fast, all of you together, to the Rope of Allâh (i.e. this Qur'ân), and be not divided among yourselves (Qur'an 3: 103).

Nigerian scholars have historically invoked this verse to counter sectarianism and communal conflict. Shaykh Muhammad Bello, the son of Usman Dan Fodio, argued that the "Rope of Allah" signifies adherence to divine guidance which binds individuals into a moral community (Bello 56). For scholars like Nana Asma'u, unity requires accessible knowledge. She translated religious teachings into local languages and organized women's scholars' circles, known as *yan-taru*, to foster a shared understanding of faith. By doing so she addressed the risk that ignorance could breed division among Muslims. Her approach affirmed that unity is sustained when believers share scriptural literacy and moral insight.

Thus, the Qur'an's insistence on unity was not interpreted as theoretical dogma but as a mandate requiring communal education, mediation, and social reform. Nigerian scholars saw division as permissible only when rooted in scholarly interpretation, not in egoism or tribal rivalry.

Prophetic Model of Unity in Diversity

Prophet Muhammad (SAW)'s teachings further reinforced the ethical basis for unity. A well-known Hadith states:

A believer to another believer is like a building, each part strengthening the other (al-Bukhari 481).

This metaphor of mutual support served as a guiding principle for Nigerian scholars striving to maintain cohesion among various Muslim communities. Sheykh Abubakar Gumi often referenced this Hadith when addressing communal disputes during the post-colonial era. He argued that the Prophet (SAW) established a society in Madinah that embraced ethnic plurality under a singular moral code rooted in justice, charity, and consultation (Gumi 88). Gumi emphasized unity as an ethical contract rather than political conformity.

Likewise, medieval scholars Muhammad Al-Maghili, whose influence penetrated pre-colonial Hausa land, advised West African rulers to emulate the Prophet's model by elevating justice and moral integrity over tribal loyalty (Maghili 72). In his counsel to the rulers of Kano, he stressed that unity is sustained not through coercion but through shared moral responsibility. Nigerian scholars later adopted this model as a framework for managing differences within emerging Muslim societies.

Interpretation of Unity by Nigerian Islamic Scholars

Nigerian Islamic scholars approached unity through different dimensions; educational, juridical, and social. Usman Dan Fodio viewed unity as inseparable from justice, famously stating, "there can be no unity in a society where oppression persists" (Dan Fodio 134). His *jihad* was not merely a military campaign but a reformist movement to

eliminate corruption and restore moral governance. Nana Asma'u expanded unity through inclusive knowledge dissemination. By teaching both men and women, she challenged elitist control of knowledge and created a participatory intellectual culture. Her poetry often appealed to themes of humility, compassion, and communal responsibility (Hiskett 201).

Sheikh Abubakar Gumi confronted modern sectarian tensions by advocating for moderation and discouraging harsh doctrinal condemnations (Takfir). He warned that theoretical rigidity could fracture the Muslim community and argued for mutual respect among different legal theoretical schools (Gumi 103). Collectively, these scholars interpreted unity as a dynamic process requiring education, moral discipline, and respect for diversity. Their legacies stand in contrast to contemporary form of division fueled by political manipulation, economic disparities and imported ideological conflicts.

Challenges to Faith Based unity in the Contemporary Nigeria

Despite this intellectual heritage, Nigerian Muslim's community faces ongoing challenges to unity. Ethno religious conflicts, partisan politics, and intra-faith disputes threaten communal cohesion. In some cases, communal ideological influences imported sectarian rivalries, has overshadowed indigenous traditions of tolerance. Furthermore, socio economic inequalities contribute to mistrust between different Muslims communities. While elite scholars and leaders preach unity, grassroots tensions, between communities remain unresolved. As a result, faith-based unity has become more aspirational than functional.

However, the writings of Nigerian scholars, offer guidance for navigating these challenges. Dan Fodio (157), warned against leaders who divide the people to preserve their power, insisting that true leadership unites through justice and mercy. Gumi (117), similarly emphasized that disagreement should never lead to mutual hatred, urging Muslims to maintain courtesy in debate and humility in scholarship.

Reconstructing Unity through Faith in the Modern Era

To revitalize unity today, Nigerian Muslim must return to the foundational teaching of the Qur'an, Sunnah and indigenous scholarly traditions. Faith based unity requires renewed investment in assessable education, inter-sect dialogue, and the promotion of justice in governance. Practical initiatives could include community study circles, inter-Madhab forums, and the revival of classical ijma' (scholarly consensus) as a mechanism for addressing disagreement. A return to ethical priorities, charity, consultation (shura), and social responsibility can reinforce in practice, not just in rhetoric.

As the Qur'an advises:

Help one another in righteousness and piety, but do not help one another in sin and aggression (Qur'an 5: 2).

This verse calls believers to redefine unity not as uniformity, but as collaborating righteousness. Ultimately, unity grounded in faith is not a nostalgic ideal but a continuous ethical duty. Nigerian Islamic scholars, past and present, have demonstrated that unity is sustained not merely by shared rituals but by shared responsibility. Their legacies provide not only historical reflection but practical frameworks for cultivating unity in an era of fragmentation.

Educational and Intellectual Contributions of Nigerian Islamic Scholars to National Unity

Education as a mechanism for unity

In the historical evolution of Islam in Nigeria, education has remained one of the powerful instruments for cultivating unity among diverse Muslims community. Nigerian Islamic scholars has long realized that shared knowledge create a shared identity, reducing divisions caused by ethnicity, region, or sectarian learning. The foundation of this intellectual

mission is rooted in the Qur'anic imperative:

Are those who know equal to those who do not know? (Qur'an 39: 9).

Islamic learning therefore, was not only an act of devotion but a social project aimed at nurturing moral responsibility and collective solidarity. Through Qur'anic schools, scholarly correspondences, and intellectual circles, Nigerian scholars fostered a culture of brotherhood anchored in religious education. Usman Dan Fodio, often called the "light of age," understood that ignorance (jahl) breeds division, while knowledge (ilm) fosters unity. He emphasized that "a nation is never united when its people are deprived of knowledge" (Dan Fodio 87).

Through the founding of learning centers across Hausa land during the Sokoto caliphate period he built intellectual networks that transcended tribal barriers and created a unified Muslim consciousness. His movement trained thousands of students, male and female, who later becomes judges, teachers, imams, and advisors, thus ensuring that unity was reinforced through learned leadership.

Scholarly Networks and the Legacy of Intellectual Circulation

One of the unique futures of Nigerian Islamic history is the establishment of scholarly networks across regions such as Sokoto, Kano, Kastina, Borno, and Ilorin. These networks were sustained through correspondence, exchange of manuscripts, and traveling scholars. The influence of North African scholar Muhammad al-Maghili in the 15th century laid the foundation for future intellectual exchange. His writings on leadership, justice, and community helped guide Hausa Muslim rulers, urging them to prioritize unity through fair governance (Maghili 54).

Centuries later, scholars like Muhammad Bello continued this tradition by sending letters to distant emirates promoting educational uniformity and the harmonization of legal practices. Nana Asma'u daughter of Dan Fodio, extended these networks through her *yan-taru* women's scholarly movements, which used poetry, storytelling, and mobile education to unite rural women under a single religious ethic. Hiskett (203) believe that, "A truly united community is one in which knowledge travels from the scholar to the commoner." By engaging women and rural populations, Nan Asma'u prevented educational elitism that could fracture the Muslim community.

Qur'anic Schools, Islamiyyah, and Mass Literacy Movements

From the precolonial era through the post-colonial period, Qur'anic schools (*makarantar allo*) served as the bedrock of Islamic education in Nigeria. These informal but rigorous institutions taught Arabic literacy, Qur'anic memorization, ethics, and basic jurisprudence. The uniformity of Qur'anic education created a linguistic and spiritual bridge among different ethnic groups. Children from Hausa, Fulani, Kanuri, or Nupe backgrounds recited the same verses, memorized the same chapters, and internalized the same moral lesson, reinforcing a shared faith identity above ethnic identity.

In the 20th century, reformist like Sheikh Abubakar Gumi advocate the modernization of Islamic education through Islamiyyah schools, which integrated Arabic grammar, *fiqh* (jurisprudence), and contemporary subjects. He stressed that a divided ummah is the result of unequal knowledge (Gumi 119). By promoting both classical texts and modern studies, he aimed to produce scholars capable of navigating new national realities without compromising Islamic unity. These institutions created a space where Sunni, Tijaniyya, and Qadiriyyah adherents studied side by side learning to coexist despite theological differences.

Contemporary Muslim academics at Ahmadu Bello University and Bayero University Kano have continued this legacy by promoting curriculum reforms that encourage inter-sect dialogue and national integration. The spread of Islamic, study circles (*halaqahs*), and national Islamic conferences has helped bridge generational gaps, uniting traditionalist

scholars with modern Muslims intellectuals.

Intellectual Responses to Colonialism and Modernity

Colonialism presented unprecedented challenges to Islamic unity in Nigeria, introducing Western legal systems, missionary education, and administrative restructuring. Many colonial policies aimed to fragment Muslim authority. In response, scholars adopted intellectual resistance rather than armed confrontation. Instead of abandoning Islamic learning, they structured it to survive under new conditions. Scholars like Sheikh Abubakar Gumi utilized radio broadcasting in the 1970's to promote unity and correct misconceptions about Islam, urging Muslims to avoid sectarian condemnation (Gumi 142).

Educational congress such as Jama'atu Nasrul Islam (JNI) meetings, became platforms where Sunni, Sufi, and reformist voices met to debate, reconcile, and collaborate. Rather than deepening division, Nigerian scholars emphasized *adab al-ikhtilaf* (ethics of agreement), teaching that difference in interpretation should not lead to hostility. These principle funds Qur'anic support in the verse that state:

And do not dispute, lest you lose courage and your strength depart (Qur'an 8:46).

Similarly, scholars drew from Hadith that:

The Muslim is the brother of another Muslim; he does not oppress him nor abandon him (Muslim 2564).

These prophetic teachings empowered scholars to caution against colonial divide and rule tactics and to urge the Muslim ummah towards perseverance in intellectual solidarity.

Contemporary Lessons: Knowledge as a Pathway to National Cohesion

In the present-day Nigeria, Muslims are faced with challenges of internal division, political manipulation, and socio-economic disparity, the educational legacy of earlier Islamic scholars offers essential guidance. Unity must not be built on slogans but on shared institutions of knowledge. Reviving majalis (study circles), inter- madrasah forums, and scholarly councils can facilitate respectful theological dialogue between different Muslim groups, Salafi, Sufi, Shia, and traditionalist.

Furthermore, contemporary scholars can draw inspiration from Nana Asma'u inclusion of women, ensuring that women's education becomes central to unity rather than peripheral. Likewise, Dan Fodio's insistence on justice as precondition for unity urges today's leaders to address poverty, corruption and inequality. Faith based civil society organizations can collaborate across sectarian lines to deliver education, health care and conflict mediation in line with Qur'anic instruction: "Help one another in righteousness and piety ".The intellectual tradition of Nigerian Islamic scholars, demonstrates that unity is not accidental, it is cultivated through teaching, writing, dialogue and ethical leadership. Without education, faith remains emotional; with education, faith becomes transformative.

Challenges to Unity in Contemporary Nigeria

Despite the rich legacy of unity established by classical Nigerian scholars, the contemporary Muslim landscape in Nigeria faces numerous challenges that threatened cohesion. These challenges extend beyond theological difference and penetrate ethnic, political, social, and generational domain. Understanding these obstacles is crucial if the lessons of unity from the past are to be truly revitalized in the present.

Doctrinal Fragmentation and sectarian Rivalries

One of the most pressing challenges to unity is the rise of sectarian identity over Islamic brotherhood. Within Nigeria, differing orientations-such as Sufi, Salafi/Izala, Shi'a

and modern reformist-sometimes engage in open conflict, both ideology and socially. This sectarian divine often manifests in takfir (declaring another Muslim a disbeliever). Accusation of bid'ah (innovation), and deliberate social exclusion. The Qur'an warns against such self-destruction:

﴿وَأَطِيعُوا اللَّهَ وَرَسُولَهُ وَلَا تَنَازَعُوا فَتَفْشَلُوا وَتَذْهَبَ رِيحُكُمْ وَاصْبِرُوا إِنَّ اللَّهَ مَعَ الصَّابِرِينَ﴾ ٤٦

And obey Allāh and His Messenger, and do not dispute (with one another) lest you lose courage and your strength departs, and be patient. Surely, Allāh is with those who are As-Sâbirûn (the patient) (Qur'an 8:46).

Early scholars like Shaykh Abubakar Gumi and Shaykh Dahiru Bauchi emphasized that differences in fiqh or spiritual practice must never lead to hatred. Shaykh Gumi famously stated, "we may disagree in understanding, but we must not destroy the Ummah over interpretation." yet, despite such warning, many contemporary preachers lack the tolerance and scholarly discipline of earlier scholars, intensifying fragmentation.

Ethnic and Regional Divides the Ummah

Nigeria's vast ethnic diversity, Hausa, Fulani, Yoruba, Kanuri, Nupe, Tiv, and others-presents a unique test for unity. Historically, scholars like Shehu Usman Dan Fodio preached against tribal arrogance, calling it 'asabiyyah (prejudice), which the Prophet (SAW) condemned.

He is not one of us who calls to tribalism. (Abu Dawud 5119)

Yet, in modern times, ethnic pride has subtly re-entered Muslim circles. Leadership disputes within Islamic organizations sometimes align not with merit but ethnic associations. For instance, Northern Muslims may suspect southern scholars of western influence, while Southern Muslims may believe Northern scholars monopolize religious authority. Such silent resentment weakens national Islamic unity.

Political Exploitation of Religion

Politics often exploits religious identity, turning Muslim leaders into instruments of partisan conflict. Some contemporary politicians fund scholars or religious groups to gain endorsements, leading to rivalry and mistrust. This contradicts the prophetic warning:

The most beloved of leader to Allah is the one who serves the people; the most hated is the one deceives them." (Hadith, al-Tarbarani nn).

Unlike early scholars such as Sultan Muhammad Bello, who refused political compromise for justice, many modern voices risk aligning the minbar with political ambition? When religion becomes a tool of political manipulation, Unity collapses under suspicion and division.

Social Media, Misinformation, and Digital Conflict

In the digital age, social media has become a battleground where young Muslims exchange theological insults, circulate unverified claims, and engage in online fatwas. The Qur'an provides an explicit Warning:

﴿يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا إِن جَاءَكُمْ فَاسِقٌ بِنَبَأٍ فَتَبَيَّنُوا أَن تُصِيبُوا قَوْمًا بِجَهْلَةٍ فَتُصِبُوا عَلَىٰ مَا فَعَلْتُمْ تَدْمِيمًا﴾ ٦٦

O you who believe! If a Fâsiq (liar - evil person) comes to you with any news, verify it, lest you should harm people in ignorance, and afterwards you become regretful for what you have done (Qur'an 49:6).

Contemporary scholars like Sheikh Ahmed Lemu repeatedly warned against "keyboard scholars" lacking traditional ijazah (scholarly authorization). The absence of adab (etiquette) in online discourse fosters hostility rather than guidance, damaging unity far more rapidly than debates held in physical scholarly circles.

Erosion of Traditional Scholarship and Loss of Adab

Historically, Nigerian scholars were trained under tarbiyah (spiritual discipline), emphasizing humility, respect, and silence in matters beyond one's knowledge. Today, informal religious platforms-blogs, YouTube, WhatsApp broadcasts-allow unqualified individuals to speak on matters of Shari'ah, often irresponsibly. Sheikh Dahiru Bauchi once remarked, "Knowledge without manners becomes a fire without light." when adab is abandoned knowledge becomes a weapon of division rather than a fountain of unity.

Economic and Social Inequalities among Muslims

Poverty, unemployment, and social neglect create fertile grounds for division. Where the wealthy elites build mosques yet ignore community hunger, resentment grows. This contradicts the Qur'anic emphasis on brotherhood:

The believers are but brothers, so make settlements between your brothers. (Qur'an 40:10)

Without economic justice and welfare-principles upheld by classical scholars through zakat and waqf (endowment)-unity remains rhetorical rather than practical.

Ways to Rebuilding Unity among Nigerian Muslims

The following are pathways to rebuilding unity among Muslims:

Reclaiming Qur'anic foundations of unity

The foundation of any meaningful attempt at unity among Muslims must begin with the Qur'an, where unity is not presented as a political convenience, but as a divine command. Allah declares:

And hold firmly to the rope of Allah all together and do not be divided. (Qur'an 3:103)

This verse lays down an unshakable principle; unity is not optional; it is an obligation tied to collective obedience to Allah. Nigerian scholars such as Shaykh Usman Dan Fodio frequently invoked this verse in his writings, emphasizing that the rope of Allah signifies revelation, justice, and communal responsibility. Contemporary efforts at unity must therefore reconnect Muslims with the Qur'anic vision of brotherhood (ukhuwwah), consultation (shurah), and justice ('adl). The Qur'an does not ignore differences; rather, it teaches believers to manage differences with wisdom and restraint. "Indeed, this community of yours is one community, and I am your lord, so worship." (Quran 21:29) Nigerian Muslims must rediscover this Qur'anic identity that transcends ethnic, linguistic, and sectarian boundaries. Unity must be rooted in spiritual obligation, not institutional rhetoric.

Reviving Intellectual Heritage and Ethical Scholarship

One of the greatest lessons from historical Nigerian scholars is that unity is impossible without knowledge during the Sokoto era, scholars' circles emphasized tarbiyyah (ethical training) alongside ta'lim (knowledge instruction). Scholarship was not mere intellectual pursuit-it shaped moral behavior, social leadership, and communal harmony. Nana Asma'u developed the Yan Taru system to ensure that knowledge reached the most remote women and villages, preventing ignorance from breeding division.

In contemporary time, however, the decline of traditional scholarly mentorship and the rise of self-taught public speakers have undermined scholarly ethics. There is an urgent need to restore the chain of knowledge (isnad) and revive the culture of ijzah (authorization), where only those who have studied under qualified scholars speak publicly on religious issues. Ethical scholarship guard against arrogance, argumentative preaching, and sectarian labeling. Sheikh Abubakar Gumi once stated, "knowledge without discipline divides; knowledge with humility unites." Reviving intellectual heritage also means encouraging research and documentation of Nigerian Islamic Scholarship, so that the legacies of Sokoto, Borno, Yoruba scholars, and modern institution remain preserved.

Dialogue across Sects and School of Taught

Doctrinal differences are inevitable, but conflicts are not. Historically, scholars debated vigorously while maintaining mutual respect. Imam Muhammad Bello engaged scholars of Borno and Hausa region in letters, disagreements and exchange of teases, but never resorted to public condemnation. Modern sectarianism in Nigeria, particularly the Sufi and Salafi movements, often escalate due to absence of healthy scholarly dialogue. The Qur'an instructs:

﴿ادْعُ إِلَى سَبِيلِ رَبِّكَ بِالْحُكْمَةِ وَالْمَوْعِظَةِ الْحَسَنَةِ وَجِدْلُهُمْ بِالَّتِي هِيَ أَحْسَنُ إِنَّ رَبَّكَ هُوَ أَعْلَمُ بِمَنْ ضَلَّ عَنْ سَبِيلِهِ وَهُوَ أَعْلَمُ بِالْمُهْتَدِينَ﴾ (١٢٥)

Invite (mankind, O Muhammad (صلى الله عليه و سلم) to the Way of your Lord (i.e. Islâm) with wisdom (i.e. with the Divine Revelation and the Qur'ân) and fair preaching, and argue with them in a way that is better. Truly, your Lord knows best who has gone astray from His Path, and He is the Best Aware of those who are guided (Qur'an 16:125).

It is pertinent to know that in this contemporaneous period, unity among Muslims is paramount and to achieve this, dialogue is a necessity where representatives from Tijaniyyah, Qadirriyah, Izala, Shi'a, and neutral scholars meet under the banner of La'ilaha illa Allah to address shared goals, education, poverty, security rather than focus solely on disagreements. Sheikh Ahmed Lemu consistently postulated that differences in jurisprudence must never become grounds for enmity. Dialogue does not erase differences, but it prevents differences from becoming strenuous. Nigerian Islamic organizations such as: Jama'atu Nasrul-Islam (JNI) Nigeria Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs (NSCIA) must see the need to promote unity statements in Mosques and schools.

Empowering Youth via Digital Engagement

A major challenge to unity today emerges not in Mosques or schools, but online. Young Muslims, often untrained, engage in theological battles on social media, issuing judgment and spreading misinformation. The Prophet warned:

It is enough falsehood for a person to repeat everything he hears (Muslim 4992).

To rebuild unity, Nigeria Muslim youth must be trained in digital ethics verification, restraint, and respect. Youth forums, Islamic unions, and campus fellowship should include modules on responsible da'awah, fact checking, and Adab of disagreement. Nigerian scholars must engage youth directly on platforms like YouTube and TikTok, not abandon them to influencers without Ijazah. Furthermore, mentorship programs should connect youth with real scholars-to creating bridges between generations. Unity will collapse if the intellectual gap between elders and youth continues unaddressed.

Socio-economic Justice for Islamic Solidarity

Unity cannot thrive an environment of economic inequality and social neglect. Historically, scholars like Shehu Dan Fodio implemented systems of Zakat and Waqf (endowment) to bridge class gaps. Today, however, in spite of wealthy Muslim, many communities suffer from hunger, unemployment, and lack of health-care breeding resentment. Chapra (2020) elucidated that many Muslim societies continue to experience widespread poverty and inequality despite being endowed with rich resources and wealthy elites, largely because Islamic economic principles are not effectively effected. The Qur'an commands:

﴿وَتَعَاوَنُوا عَلَى الْبِرِّ وَالتَّقْوَىٰ وَلَا تَعَاوَنُوا عَلَى الْإِثْمِ وَالْعُدْوَانِ وَاتَّقُوا اللَّهَ إِنَّ اللَّهَ شَدِيدُ الْعِقَابِ﴾ (٢)

...Help you one another in Al-Birr and At-Taqwâ (virtue, righteousness and piety); but do not help one another in sin and transgression. And fear Allâh. Verily, Allâh is Severe in punishment (Qur'an 5: 2).

Unity must manifest true shared economic programs such as cooperative education funds, community hospitals, joint relieve missions. Islamic organizations must collaborate across sects in charitable initiatives, showing unity through service rather than conferences. Socio-economic solidarity discourages the commodification of sectarian identity and rebuilds a sense of brotherhood beyond ideological labels.

Institutional Roles

Islamic institutions in Nigeria, such as Jama'atu Nasril Islam (JNI) and Nigeria Supreme council for Islamic Affairs (NSCIA) have great capacity to cause unity among Nigerian Muslims and beyond. They must establish Conflict Resolution Boards to meditate between sectarian groups, ensure balanced media representation, and issue joint communiques against hate speech, insulting and inciting public lectures etc. Zonal ulama councils in the North, south-west, and middle belt must integrate scholars from diverse traditions. Representations create trust. The absence of cross sect collaboration fuels suspicion and diversion.

Reaffirming the Ethics of Ikhwah (Brotherhood)

Unity is not achieved through agreements but through sincere hearts. The Prophet (peace be upon him) said:

None of you truly believes until he loves for his brother what he loves for himself (Bukhari 13).

Nigerian Muslims must revive Adab: avoiding insult, making excuses for others, greeting with peace, and praying for fellow Muslims. The ethics of ikhwah must be thought in schools, khutbas, and Islamic publications making unity a spiritual duty, not an academic topic.

CONCLUSION

The Nigerian Islamic scholars' sectarianism has great advert effects on Muslim Ummah and the entire nation. Unlike when the Prophet was alive, when he practically united Muslim nations when the emigrants and helpers (Muhajiruun and Ansar respectively) from different par became one and under an umbrella, in Madinah. Al-Mubarakpuri (nd) reiterated that the Prophet (P.B.U.H) created a system of brotherhood between the emigrants and the helpers, eliminating tribal divisions and establishing mutual care and solidarity among Muslims. In the same spirit, Uthman Danfodio, Muhammad Bello and others united Muslims despite distance and other differences. Through public lectures, teaching of students, during Friday sermons and at seminars, during Ramadhan Tafsir; scholars like Shaikh Adam, Shaikh Kamadeen, strove and worked assiduously toward uniting Nigerian Muslims without disunity.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Scholars should promote sound Islamic education that combines religious knowledge with moral values, tolerance and social responsibility.

Encourage dialogue and cooperation among different Muslim groups in order to reduce division and strengthen unity.

Support responsible leadership among scholars, community leaders, and institutions so they can guide people with wisdom and fairness.

Empower young people through mentorship, proper guidance, and the responsible use of social media and technology.

Strengthen community welfare through charity, and mutual support, and programs that reduce poverty, ignorance, and social inequality.

Muslim community must replace competition with cooperation among Islamic organizations.

Youth should avoid argument and verify information before sharing on social media. Scholars should Establish inter-sect scholarly forums for dialogue and avoid name-calling and tafir in sermons.

SUMMARY

The historical and intellectual legacy of Nigerian Islamic scholars reveals that unity has never been a theoretical ideal but a lived responsibility. Figures such as Shehu Usman Dan Fodio, Nana Asma'u, Shaikh Muhammed Bello, and modern reformers like Shaykh Abubakar Gumi and Shaikh Ahmad Lemu consistently demonstrated that the strength of the Muslim Ummah rests upon justice, knowledge, and mutual respect. Unity in Islam is not merely the absence of conflict, but the conscious pursuit of brotherhood grounded in faith, ethics, and service. This study revealed that contemporary Nigerian Muslims face substantial challenges, sectarian rivalries, ethnic fragmentation, and intellectual decline. Yet, these challenges are not insurmountable. They demand a return to Qur'anic principle that emphasizes cooperation (ta'awun), consultation (shura), and ethical disagreement (adab al-ikhtilaf).

The prophetic models confirm that differences in understanding are natural, but division is a choice; and division contradicts faith. To reclaim the future, Muslim leaders and institutions must restore scholarly integrity, build platforms for inter-sect dialogue, and empower youth with guidance instead of condemnation. Unity must be demonstrated in educational reforms, welfare programs and collaborative da'wah initiatives that transcend group identities. Institutions such as JNI, NSCIA, and regional council must move beyond ceremonial gestures and actively mediate disputes, promote digital ethics, and encourage joint humanitarian missions. Ultimately, the unity of Nigerian Muslims will not be achieved by slogan or conferences but by a revival of a prophetic character-sincerity, humility, and compassion. Every Muslim, whether scholar, student, leader, or layperson carries the responsibility to defend unity, not with force but with wisdom and patience.

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