

IMBIBING THE SPIRIT OF WASATIYYAH IN NIGERIA: A STUDY OF SUNNI- SHI'IT RELATIONSHIP

Ali Samaila¹, Babangida Muhammad Gidado², Haruna Ubaida³

^{1,2}Indonesian International Islamic University, Indonesia;

³Muhammad Buhari University of Transport Daura, Nigeria

Email: ali.samaila@uiii.ac.id , babangida.muhammadgidado@uiii.ac.id,
harunaubaida46@gmail.com,

Corresponding author: ali.samaila@uiii.ac.id

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.32332/moderatio.vxxxxxxx>

Received 10 January 2026	Revised 20 April 2026	Accepted 7 May 2026	Published 1 June 2026
-----------------------------	--------------------------	------------------------	--------------------------

Abstract:

The division of the Muslim world into Sunni and Shi'ite sects has long influenced the dynamics of Muslim societies, shaping intergroup relations across centuries. In Nigeria, this sectarian divide continues to affect religious interaction, coexistence, and communal harmony. The issue of misunderstanding and conflict between these sects calls for an approach rooted in Islamic moderation, or Wasatiyyah. With specific goals to determine the nature of their interactions, investigate factors influencing their coexistence, and evaluate how Wasatiyyah principles manifest in their religious and social interactions, this study aims to examine the relationship between Nigerian Sunnis and Shi'ites within the framework of Wasatiyyah (Islamic moderation). This study used a qualitative research design, gathering data from Sunni and Shi'ite communities in some Nigerian states through field observations, document analysis, and interviews using descriptive and comparative methods. The results show that although the relationship between Sunnis and Shi'ites in Nigeria is complicated, it is entwined by common Islamic values. The data show that many followers of both sects intentionally adopt Wasatiyyah principles of moderation, justice, and sincerity in their interactions, even though there are still cases of tension and misunderstanding. These actions help to promote respect for one another and lessen hostilities. This study's influence comes from its support of religious tolerance and harmonious coexistence between Nigeria's Muslim communities. The study offers a framework for promoting inter-sect harmony for policymakers, academics, and community leaders by highlighting Wasatiyyah as a unifying concept. The study concludes by highlighting the fundamental commitment to Islamic values shared by Nigerian Sunnis and Shi'ites, notwithstanding ideological differences. It recommends that improving Wasatiyyah's implementation can promote harmony, understanding, and collaboration among Muslims.

Key-words: Relationship, Sunnis, Shi'ites, Wasatiyyah

Abstrak

Pembagian dunia Muslim menjadi sekte Sunni dan Syiah telah lama memengaruhi dinamika masyarakat Muslim serta membentuk hubungan antarkelompok selama berabad-abad. Di Nigeria, perpecahan sektarian ini terus memengaruhi interaksi keagamaan, koeksistensi, dan keharmonisan sosial. Masalah kesalahpahaman dan konflik antara kedua sekte tersebut menuntut pendekatan yang berakar pada moderasi Islam, atau Wasatiyyah. Dengan tujuan khusus untuk menentukan sifat interaksi mereka, menyelidiki faktor-faktor yang memengaruhi koeksistensi mereka, serta mengevaluasi bagaimana prinsip-prinsip Wasatiyyah termanifestasi dalam interaksi keagamaan dan sosial, penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji hubungan antara kaum Sunni dan Syiah di Nigeria dalam kerangka Wasatiyyah (moderasi Islam).

Penelitian ini menggunakan desain penelitian kualitatif dengan mengumpulkan data dari komunitas Sunni dan Syiah di beberapa negara bagian Nigeria melalui observasi lapangan, analisis dokumen, serta wawancara dengan menggunakan metode deskriptif dan komparatif.

Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa meskipun hubungan antara Sunni dan Syiah di Nigeria bersifat kompleks, keduanya terjalin oleh nilai-nilai Islam yang sama. Data menunjukkan bahwa banyak pengikut dari kedua sekte secara sadar menerapkan prinsip-prinsip Wasatiyyah seperti moderasi, keadilan, dan ketulusan dalam interaksi mereka, meskipun masih terdapat ketegangan dan kesalahpahaman. Tindakan-tindakan tersebut membantu memupuk rasa saling menghormati dan mengurangi permusuhan.

Kontribusi penelitian ini terletak pada dukungannya terhadap toleransi beragama dan koeksistensi yang harmonis di antara komunitas Muslim Nigeria. Penelitian ini juga menawarkan kerangka kerja bagi para pembuat kebijakan, akademisi, dan pemimpin masyarakat untuk mendorong keharmonisan antarsekte dengan menonjolkan Wasatiyyah sebagai konsep pemersatu.

Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa, meskipun terdapat perbedaan ideologis, kaum Sunni dan Syiah di Nigeria memiliki komitmen yang mendasar terhadap nilai-nilai Islam. Peningkatan penerapan Wasatiyyah dapat memperkuat harmoni, saling pengertian, dan kerja sama di antara umat Islam.

Kata Kunci: Hubungan, Sunni, Syiah, Moderasi

Copyright © 2026, samalia, Et al
This work is licensed under the [CC-BY-SA](#) license



INTRODUCTION

Islam is a religion that was built upon moderation which preaches justice, balance and excellence the traits which makes individual to excel and attain his life goals. Allah the Almighty and messenger spelled to the believers how to achieve moderation in their lives for them to succeed. This research centralized on how to achieve moderation in the relationship the two broad Muslim sects namely; Sunnis and the Shi'ites with special consideration to Nigeria. The intent of this paper is not to cast aspersions on any of the admittedly exact sect in Islam or the adherents of the sects in the place of study. Rather, putting issues in their proper perspectives would save the scholarly procession from dissipating its time on issues that divide the Muslim nation more. Considering the volatile nature of the political atmosphere of Nigeria, the path to moderation must be adopted with a view to avoid losing this group to those democratic buccaneers among the Western nations that would not hesitate to put it to such satanic and highly destructive assignments. The current examples of their involvement in the Syrian political upheaval is close by, and the roles they had played in elongating the Afghani political tragedy in the late 1990s could never be forgotten. This study utilizes conflict theory to examine how the two groups exists and relate with each other through the lenses of Islamic moderation. Extensive research has been carried out on the relevant topic and the place under study which in some ways highlight the significance and complexity of this topic. For instance, Sule and Abdullahi¹ identified the influences of charitable endowments such as "The Razavi" in the spread of Shi'a in not only the Nigeria but also different part of the African continent. The authors use review methodology to uncover that Iranian government had for long spending funds to build mosques, schools, and granting scholarships of study in Iran to various countries of Africa arguing that ignorance of shia among Nigerian Muslim scholars and illiteracy among the villagers were the main reasons for its quick spread in the area. According to them, the spread of Shi'ites'

¹ Sule and Abdullahi's (2019)

belief created a wide hostility between Sunnis and Shi'ites. The research needs to be complemented in the area of cultural tolerance of Sunnis and Shi'ites.

On the other hand Ibrahim ² studied the growth of Shi'a as a minority Islamic sect in Nigeria with a specific reference to one Shi'a group Islamic movement in Nigeria (IMN) which is the largest Shi'a group in the country. The article unveiled how the IMN uses different strategies to disseminate Shi'a ideology in spite of vehement opposition from the Sunni majority. In a particular argument the author noted that the challenge imposed by the Sunnis to Shi'ites facilitates in the government's hostile relationship with Shi'ites and considering as bad egg or threat to the state security. The examples of Shi'ites tolerance as well as the Sunnis were also left untouched by the author.

Isa³presented an interesting research on the Sunni-Shi'ite's relationship in Nigeria. The paper discusses the birth of Shi'a sect in Northern Nigeria and the efforts by Shi'ite's clerics in the convert of different Sunni Muslims to their ideology. The author describes how the spread of Shi'a ideology created anxiety among the majority Muslim of the region as well as the Sunni *Ulama* responses to the spread of Shi'a as an alien and controversial sect through different ways of reactions such as public criticism and condemnation, invective songs, theological debates and literary antiphon. The consequences of *Ulama's* response precipitated the emergence of Sunni-reactive literatures written in different languages including Hausa, Arabic and English. The researcher also assessed some of the Hausa and English literatures written on the condemnation of Shi'ite's ideology.

Nasidi's paper⁴ establishes the existence of Shi'a in its Zaydi division in Nigeria since 15th century while the main stream Shi'ite branch was introduced to Nigeria in the 1980s via the activities of Islamic Movement in Nigeria. The paper discusses the dynamics of Nigerian civil-military relations and the background of Shi'ites activities in Nigeria and specifically paid attention to the extra judicial killing of Shi'a members by the Nigerian military in 2015. The article uses both primary and secondary sources arguing that violation of fundamental human rights by the Nigerian military was triggered by not only the resistance of Shi'a followers to cooperate with the Nigerian security apparatus, particularly in the conduct of their activities but also the military's Cordon and Search Operation at different Shi'ites' locations. The article highlights how pejorative statements on the Prophet's personality, his wives and companions made by IMN's members created friction and ideological clashes among the Sunnis and Shi'ites.

Ali and Imam⁵ conducted a study on the introduction of Shi'ism in Sunni dominated Nigeria and Gombe State in particular. The study found that Shi'a sect was accepted by the Nigerian aborigines in the early 1980s through activities of young Muslim revivalists known as brotherhood movement (*Yan Buraza*) under the tutelage

² Ibrahim (2022)

³ Isa (2018)

⁴ Nasidi (2020)

⁵ Ali and Imam (2023)

of Sheikh Ibrahim Ya'qub al-Zakzaky. The authors mentioned that the sect expanded to have about three different groups which share some similarities and differences. In addition they described the Sunni-Shi'a relationship as not cordial as it involves hatred and severe criticism. The research fall short of mentioning the good part of Sunni and Shi'ites' interaction in the country.

In conclusion, it is noticeable from the above that the aforementioned articles in spite their relevance to the topic under study they did not address both sides of the Sunni-Shi'i relationship. Most of them concentrate on the negative aspect of the relationship while this research would combine both the negative and positive aspects of the relationship with the view to recommend a proper way of addressing the negative side. Thence, this justifies the need to carry out the current research.

RESEARCH METHODS

In order to obtain the required and appropriate data of this study the researcher employed the following methods for their effectiveness in generating the needed information:

Research Design

The primary sources used in this research are in-depth interview and focused group discussion. The secondary method will be review of relevant literature. The study also utilizes the descriptive and comparative research approaches

Sampling Technique

In addition as far as the sampling is concern Gombe State of northeastern Nigeria was given a special consideration in the target population (eventhough the population is not confined only to the state) as it is one of the States that has concentration of Muslims. Gombe state consists of three senatorial districts (SDs): Gombe North, Gombe Central and Gombe South. Gombe North consists of five local government areas (LGAs): Dukku, Funakaye, Gombe, Kwami and Nafada while Gombe Central on the other hand, comprises of only two LGAs: Akko and Yamaltu-Deba while Gombe-South: comprises of: Billiri, Balanga, Kaltungo and Shongom. Stratified sampling technique was used to select one LGA from each of the (SDs). Thus, Gombe LGA was selected from Gombe North because it is the headquarter of the state capital and has the highest number of Muslims; Akko LGA from the Central because of its significance in terms of religious activities and Kaltungo from the South due to its highest number of Muslims in the senatorial district and as a center in the zone. Ten persons were interviewed from different Senatorial Districts making the total of thirty people.

Data Analysis

The data generated from this qualitative research were subjected to rigourous analysis employing content, thematic and discourse analysis techniques to underlines patterns, themes and meanings within the textual data.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Conceptualizing Wasatiyyah

Wasatiyyah originates from the Arabic term *wasat* which means just, middle, moderate or equilibrium between two opposite things and to be fair or just⁶.

The concept of wasatiyyah in its derived meaning from the Qur'an the Wasatiyyah concept signifies a deep commitment to justice and moderation between excessiveness and laxity. Some of the terms used to refer to wasatiyyah in Islamic literatures are *i'tidal* (fairness), *tawazun* (balance) and *insaf* (rightful).⁷ However, some of the Muslim Scholars assert that the meaning of wasatiyyah as it enshrined in the Qur'an and Sunnah comprises three key features: justice, excellence and balance/moderation⁸. Justice as the principle of wasatiyyah encompasses tolerance and peaceful co-existence with other religions and cultures⁹.

Moderation in Islam consist of understanding and practicing of religious teachings in a way that is not excessive and negligent¹⁰. It emphasizes that a person is not expected to be exerting his effort more than the level he can bear and he is not required to be negligence in terms of performance of *Ibadah*. In this context scholars mentioned the misconception in which some Muslims take the wasatiyyah as "justification for indulgence (*tasahul*), carelessness or an excuse to be negligent in the performance of religious obligations" or in other words, the non- practicing of Islamic obligations for the sake of being "moderate"¹¹. Wasatiyyah in its real sense is the adoption of a middle position in between two forbidden extremes often defined by Muslim scholars as the modes of excessiveness (*ifrat*) and laxity (*tafrit*). It is in this that Moderation is just, excellence and balanced concept. A genuine moderation is striving to uphold all that is good and commanded in Islam and to achieve excellence (*ihsan*) in everything. Therefore, adhering to mediocrity and being contented with an average achievement is against the teaching of Islam, and is not moderation¹².

Islamic Moderation encompasses every aspect of human conduct, interactions, and in the matter of religious obligation and worship. A notable example of moderation can be seen in the hadith of the Prophet who made sure that he and his Companions always behaved moderately. The Prophet consistently addressed any act of immoderate behavior whenever displayed by his companions¹³. In the light of this it clear that whoever needs moderation should copy the example of prophet and his companions.

⁶ Mohammad Redzuan Othman and Mashitah Sulaiman, "Inculcating the Essence of 'wasatiyyah' in Muslim Society: The State Promotion and Muslim Intelligentsia Responses in Malaysia," *Al-Shajarah* 19, no. 2 (2014): 173-213.

⁷ Taufiq bin Radja Nurul Bahri, "Understanding Islamic Moderation: The Wasatiyya Imperative" 4, no. 9 (2002): 18-20.

⁸ Muhammad H. Hassan, "Wasatiyyah as Explained by Kamal Hassan: Justice, Excellence and Balance," *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analysis* 6, no. 2 (2014): 24-30.

⁹ Hassan.

¹⁰ (Rahman et al 2023)

¹¹ Hassan, "Wasatiyyah as Explained by Kamal Hassan: Justice, Excellence and Balance."

¹² Hassan.

¹³ Othman and Sulaiman, "Inculcating the Essence of 'wasatiyyah' in Muslim Society: The State Promotion and Muslim Intelligentsia Responses in Malaysia."

Allah the Almighty described the Muslim nation as community of moderation. He said: "And so we have made you (believers) an upright community so that you may be witness over humanity and that the messenger may be witness over you". From the aforesaid verse, Allah made it clear that one of the distinctive features of Muslim nation is "Wasatiyyah" signifying the feature of being the "best" "moderate" and upright. The verse equally specifies the reason why the Muslim nation could be regarded as best which is assigning great responsibility to Muslims since they are appointed by God as the witnesses against mankind. This responsibility carries great impact for being a credible witness means a Muslim needs to understand and accept the truth, to have the courage to tell the truth, and to defend it against its enemies among the ignorant, liars and pretentious. A witness should not conceal the truth or choose to be indifferent, because an act of indifference contradicts moderation. This act also reflects ignorance, cowardice and insincerity or in essence, it is injustice. Justice, on the other hand, demands that what is true and right should be consciously promoted and defended, and what is false and wrong should be rejected and eliminated¹⁴

The above discussion of the Wasatiyyah concept can be summarized according to the following:

1. Wasatiyyah involves three characteristics justice, excellence and balance.
2. Wasatiyyah covers all the aspect of life.
3. The prophetic action and that of the sahabah depicts the true picture of Islamic wasatiyyah.
4. Negligence in the observance of religious commandment in the guise of being moderate is not part Wasatiyyah.
5. Tolerance and peaceful coexistence are Wasatiyyah concepts driven by justice.
6. Wasatiyyah is taking a middle position in between two forbidden extremes often defined by Muslim scholars as the modes of excessiveness (*ifrat*) and laxity (*tafrit*).

History of Sunni-Shi'a Divide

The contemporary Muslim world is broadly divided into two main schisms namely the Sunnis and the Shi'ites. The majority of the world's Muslim population follows the Sunni and almost 10-15% of Muslims follow the Shi'a sect. Shi'ite populations constitute a majority in Iran, Iraq, Bahrain, and Azerbaijan. There is also a good number of Shi'ites in Afghanistan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Syria, and Yemen.¹⁵ In the majority of these countries the Shi'ites have limited influence in the government. Sunnis enjoy the support of government in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Qatar. Shi'ites on the other hand has a specific government in the Islamic Republic of Iran, which was established during the 1979 revolution. Nevertheless, a

¹⁴ Othman and Sulaiman.

¹⁵ Emad Khalili, "Sects in Islam : Sunnis and Shias" 3, no. 4 (2016): 41-47.

small group of Alawi Shi'ite minority also dominates the Syrian government, and Shi'ites of Zaydi branch have a great relevance in the republic of Yemen as well.¹⁶

The separation of Islamic community into these two broad sects stemmed from a political distinction; while the Sunnis recognize the first four caliphs as the Prophet Muhammad's rightful successors, the Shi'ites believe that the Muslim leadership after the death of the prophet should belong to Ali Ibn Talib and his descendants alone based on their fundamental principle of belief known as the *imamate*¹⁷. However, there are several opinions regarding the time which Shi'ism began but the idea here is to state the main contention that led to the separation of the Muslims to these two groups without looking at the duration.

Differences between Sunni and Shi'ite's Worldviews

There exist significant differences between Sunnis and Shi'ites' perspectives relating both fundamental beliefs and ritual practices, some of which would be briefly discussed in the following lines:

1. *Imamate*: While the Sunnis believe in the caliphate and uphold that the rightly guided caliphs that were selected based on consultative political process and mutual consensus were rightful successors of the prophet, the Shi'ites in the opposite consider the caliphs as usurpers of the Imam Ali's authority that was based on obvious texts¹⁸. Imam in the context of Shi'ism is a person appointed by Allah to be a leader who occupies the function of giving guidance in Islamic government, Islamic injunctions, and leadership and innovative guidance in the spiritual life¹⁹. They are infallibles and are divinely protected from all sins and human weaknesses. Human society can never be without an Imam whether or not he is recognized and known.²⁰ The *imamate* institution is reserved for Ali (R.A) and his eleven pious descendants through Fatimah (R.A) and their veneration is considered religious duty.²¹
2. *Taqiyyah* (dissimulation) *Taqiyya* (dissimulation) can be describe as act of saving life, honour or property (either one's own or of other believers) by hiding one's belief or religion.²² The following Qur'anic verse is considered among the basis for *Taqiyyah*: "Whoever disbelieves in Allah after their belief—not those who are forced while their hearts are firm in faith, but those who embrace disbelief wholeheartedly they will be condemned by

¹⁶ Kamran Scot Aghaie, "The Origins of the Sunnite-Shi'ite Divide and the Emergence of the Ta'ziyeh Tradition," *TDR - The Drama Review - A Journal of Performance Studies* 49, no. 4 (2005): 42–47, <https://doi.org/10.1162/105420405774763032>.

¹⁷ Aghaie.

¹⁸ Aghaie.

¹⁹ Khalili, "Sects in Islam : Sunnis and Shias."

²⁰ Ali Abbas Syed, "The Imām and The Perfect Human – An Analysis between Ibn 'Arabī's Al-Insān Al-Kāmil and Shī'i Imāmology," 2021.

²¹ Aghaie, "The Origins of the Sunnite-Shi'ite Divide and the Emergence of the Ta'ziyeh Tradition."

²² Qusthan Firdaus, "Taqiyya: A Conceptual and Practical Examination," 2005.

Allah and suffer a tremendous punishment” Q16:106 *Taqiyyah* principle constitutes a central feature of the belief system of Shi’ites. According to them, any Shi’ite who denies *taqiyyah* has denied Shi’ism and Islam.²³ Additionally, the Shi’ites consider dissimulation as permissible, whether out of necessity or convenience. In fact, they make no distinction whatsoever between Muslims and non-Muslims when doing this act. They do not regard it as something to be used only under compulsion, and do not believe that it should only be resorted to in life threatening situations.²⁴ However, Sunnis on the contrary believe that dissimulation is only allowed under duress; when a Muslim's life is gravely endangered by the disbelievers and even view that it is desirable not to resort to dissimulation at all. They consider anything besides this as a lie which is prohibited in Islam.²⁵

3. Belief in the coming of the Mahdi: The Mahdi is believed by Sunni and Shia Muslims to be the divinely guided savior who will appear to restore justice at the end of time. Shiites believe him to be their twelfth Imam, Muhammad al-Mahdi, who is believed to have entered into occultation in 878 CE and will return at the end of time. Sunnis also believe in the coming of the Mahdi, but to be born closer to the end times. Despite these doctrinal variations, both sects agree that the Mahdi will be a descendant of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him).²⁶

The above two examples are just few among the fundamental differences between Shi’ites and Sunnis in the matter of belief. However, there are also significant differences in terms of religious observance between Shi’ites for example temporary marriage.

1. Temporary Marriage (*Mut’ah*)

Majority of the Sunni Muslims believe that even though *Mut’ah* was legalized at the Prophet time; it was abrogated later, as such they consider temporary marriage as an illicit sexual inter-course prohibited by the Sharia²⁷. Shi’ites in their world view legalizes the practices of temporary marriage.²⁸

2. Differences in prayer: Sunnis and Shi’ites differ in how both carry out their prayers: Shia Muslim often use clay tablets during *sujud* (prostration) and

²³ Seyyed Vali Reza Nasr Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Hamid Dabashi, “Shi’ism_ Doctrines, Thought, and Spirituality - Google Books,” n.d.

²⁴ Firdaus, “Taqiyya: A Conceptual and Practical Examination.”

²⁵ Brent L Iverson and Peter B Dervan, “Hiwar Hadi Bayna Sunnah Wa Shia A Calm Dialogue between Sunnah and Shi’a,” n.d., 7823–30.

²⁶ Muhammad Iqbal, “Sunni-Shia Division in Islam: Its Origin, Development, Political & Socio_Economic Implications & Contemporary Relations,” *Political Science, Sociology Social Science Research Network*, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3692983>.

²⁷ Isa, “Sunni Literary Responses to the Spread of Shia Ideology in Northern Nigeria1.”

²⁸ Ahmady (2020)

commonly combine some of the daily prayers such as *ẓuhr* with *‘aṣr* and *maghrib* with *‘ishā*, while Sunnis pray five times distinctly.²⁹

3. Acceptance of Hadith: Unlike Sunnis who accept genuine narration from any of the companions of the prophet, Shi’ites tend to give less credence to hadiths transmitted by figures like Abu Hurairah and Aisha emphasizing on the narrations and teachings of the Prophet Muhammad’s family, known as *Ahl al-Bayt*.³⁰

Over view of Sunni and Shi’ite Sects in Nigeria

The birth of Islam in the Nigerian soil according to one account could be traced back to 11th century when the King of old Kanem-Borno Empire Mai Umme Jilme embraced Islam.³¹ The religion subsequently grew rapidly to spread to various part of the country specifically with the aid of *Jihad* of Shaykh Uthman Ibn Fodiyo in the 19th Century and his subsequent establishment of the Islamic caliphate. Some researchers maintain that from the introduction of Islam up to the 20th century, the Nigerian Muslims inclined to Sunni sect following largely the interpretation of Islam based on Sufi orders of Tijjaniyyah and Qadiriyyah³². While in the contrary view³³ opined that Shia in its Zaydi branch was introduced to what is Nigeria today as far back to 15th Century through the Tran-Saharan trade, Isa argues that the Nigerian inhabitant did not accepted Shi’ism except during the aftermath of the Iranian revolution in 1979.³⁴ What was obtainable before that time was a Shi’ite foreigner’s community mostly traders from Lebanon who had no intention of selling their Shi’ite ideology to the people. Thus, Shi’ism was embraced by the Nigerian Muslims in the early 1980s when the ideology was imported by the young Muslim activists through their activities in the organizations of Muslim society of Nigeria and Muslim brotherhood popularly known as *Yan Buraza* (meaning those belong to brotherhood movement)³⁵. Thus, Muslims in Nigeria continue to live and practice their beliefs according to the world views of these two major Islamic sect.

The Sunnis constitutes the majority of the Nigerian Muslim populations where they have various institutions and organizations as well as prominent scholars who disseminate Islam based on the teaching of Sunni. Notable among these organizations are *Jama’atu Izalat al-Bid’ah wa Iqamati as-Sunnah* (Society for the eradication of Innovation and establishment of Sunnah) which pays attention on reformation based puritan and literalist approach and *Fityanu al-Islam* (organization of Muslim Youth) which spread Sunni- Islamic ideas based on the approach of *Tasawwuf* (Islamic mysticism). Shi’ites on the other hand risen up in the last three decades and attracted

²⁹ Iqbal.

³⁰ Iqbal.

³¹ Ali and Imam, “Incursion of Shi’ism in Sunni Dominated Societies : A Study of Gombe Metropolis Incursion of Shi’ism in Sunni Dominated Societies : A Study of Gombe Metropolis.”

³² Isa, “Sunni Literary Responses to the Spread of Shia Ideology in Northern Nigeria1.”

³³ Nasidi (2020)

³⁴ Isa, “Sunni Literary Responses , 1

³⁵ Ali and Imam, “Incursion of Shi’ism in Sunni Dominated Societies : A Study of Gombe Metropolis Incursion of Shi’ism in Sunni Dominated Societies : A Study of Gombe Metropolis.”

a great level of followership and have at the present time about three different groups such as Islamic movement in Nigeria which spread Shi'i ideas in a more revolutionary approach, *Rasulu al-a'zam* Foundation (Foundation of great Messenger) and *Muassasatu thaqafatu aththaqalayn* (*Thaqalayn* cultural foundation) which both preach Shi'ism without inclination to revolutionary intent.³⁶

Sunni-Shi'ite Relationship and the Need for Moderation Religious Interaction

In Nigeria, Sunnis (especially Sufis) and Shi'ites often participate together in shared religious events such as Maulud celebrations. They frequently pray in the same mosques. These joint religious engagements, despite strong sectarian identities, imply the potential for dialogue and cooperation between the groups.³⁷ Sunnis often express their doctrinal disagreements openly to Shi'ites, while many Shi'ites also assert their beliefs candidly without resorting to dissimulation (*taqiyyah*).³⁸ This demonstrates the concept of moderation at its peak level. As previously mentioned, truthfulness is essential for attaining *wasatiyyah* (moderation). Allah has entrusted this Ummah with the responsibility of being witnesses over humanity through adherence to truth and moderation. Among the defining qualities of moderation are honesty and steadfastness in upholding one's beliefs without excess or negligence. Even Shi'ites who adhere to the concept of dissimulation may still be considered moderate when they faithfully follow their own teachings without extremism. Moderation, therefore, includes the sincere practice of religious beliefs as one understands them, provided such practice avoids both fanaticism and apathy.

Another significant aspect of religious interaction is the occurrence of theological debates and public lectures between Sunnis and Shi'ites.³⁹ These exchanges, which aim to promote each sect's ideology and critique the other's views, are scholarly in nature and do not necessarily violate the principle of moderation. In fact, constructive discourse rooted in evidence and mutual respect can strengthen understanding and reduce prejudice. Allah the Almighty saddled this nation the responsibility of being witness over humanity for them to be moderate and become the best (Q2:143). Among the features or qualities of being moderate is honesty and unwavering commitment to the truth of what one knows and believes in. Therefore in this case both the Sunnis and Shi'ites attain a certain level of moderation.

Socio-Political Interaction

Social interactions between Sunni and Shi'a communities in Nigeria are largely peaceful and cordial, with occasional exceptions. Many live harmoniously in the same neighborhoods, form inter-sect friendships, intermarry, and share cultural practices.

However, inter-sect marriages face significant challenges. Sectarian differences, particularly in religious beliefs and family expectations, often create tension. During

³⁶ Ali and Imam.

³⁷ Adamu Lebanon, personal Interview on 27 October 2024.

³⁸ Personal observation. We attended so many preaching sessions for both Sunni and Shia organizations between September-December 2024.

³⁹ Theological debate between Sunni scholar Idris Abdul Aziz and a Shia scholar found at <https://youtu.be/qqwspEmdNP4?si=w7abikqsyVbtZE0g>

courtship, ideological concerns especially when the suitor come from a poor background, mostly lead to rejection. After marriage, theological disputes and conflicting rituals can cause stress, frequently resulting in separation or divorce.⁴⁰

In business, Sunnis and Shi'ites generally avoid unjust dealings with one another. Upholding justice is a core element of Islamic moderation; without it, moderation cannot be achieved. In this regard, both groups contribute to fostering moderation by conducting fair and honest transactions.

Nevertheless, in some social and professional settings such as government offices or universities sectarian bias can undermine fairness. It has been reported that candidates for employment or political office are sometimes denied opportunities simply because they belong to the minority sect. This occurs particularly among Sunnis who are the majority in the country, campaigning against Shi'ite candidates, even if those candidates are more qualified.⁴¹ Such actions represent discrimination and injustice, both of which contradict the spirit of *wasatiyyah* and violate the Islamic principles of fairness and tolerance.

As the Qur'an states:

"O you who believe! Stand out firmly for Allah and be just witnesses. Let not the hatred of a people prevent you from being just. Be just: that is nearer to righteousness..." (Qur'an 5:8)

Islam unequivocally condemns injustice. Thus, sectarian segregation and discrimination have no place in a society that seeks to embody Islamic moderation.

Sectarian Tension

Despite doctrinal differences, Sunnis and Shi'ites in Nigeria have historically coexisted peacefully, sharing many core beliefs and practices. Both communities profess belief in one God, His Messenger, the pillars of Islam, and the Day of Judgment. The interactions between Nigerian Sunnis and Shi'ites are shaped not only by theology but also by political developments, social contexts, and ideological shifts. While stereotypes persist due to sectarian biases, moments of cooperation and shared humanity still occur. Efforts toward open dialogue and inclusive problem-solving are essential for minimizing conflict. According to the Centre for Research and Evidence on Security Threats (CREST), Sunnis and Shi'ites share more theological similarities than differences. Yet, where power imbalances exist, the minority group often experiences discrimination, stigmatization, or even violence.⁴²

The fundamental disagreements often center on sensitive doctrinal issues, including the status of the Prophet's companions, the interpretation of the Qur'an, and the sources of Islamic law. Some Muslim might overlook the differences and look at the point of agreement such as belief in one God and His messenger, observance of the other pillars and belief in the last day and judgement and say that we are one and the same while others exaggerate by considering the fundamentality of the differences

⁴⁰ Ibrahim Muazzam, personal interview on 15th December 2024

⁴¹ Malam Saleh Deba, personal interview on 10th May 2019

⁴² Sunni and Shi'a Islam: Differences and Relationships," Centre for Research and Evidence on Security Threats (CREST)., n.d., [file:///C:/Users/PAVILION/Downloads/16-005-01%20\(1\).pd](file:///C:/Users/PAVILION/Downloads/16-005-01%20(1).pd).

such as belief in different sources of the Sharia like the contention on what is Sunnah, diverse views concerning the interpolation of Qur'an, attitude to prophet's companion and capitalized on them to preach hatred and abusive utterances that ignite violence. Both extremes contradict the principle of moderation: the former neglects critical distinctions, while the latter promotes divisiveness. Therefore, a balanced approach is needed, one that acknowledges differences without inflaming them, allowing for peaceful coexistence through mutual respect and the principle of "agreeing to disagree."

A major source of enmity between the two sects is their differing views on the Prophet's companions. Sunnis revere all companions, whereas Shi'ites are critical of some. This theological divide often fuels animosity. Both groups sometimes accuse each other of spreading misinformation, which fosters further resentment and obstructs efforts toward unity. Leaders from both sects often engage in subtle competitions to assert their influence, sometimes contributing to rivalry. Some Sunni movements especially the Izala-Salafi group actively oppose Shi'ism, viewing it as a deviation from true Islam. Their ideological campaigns have heightened anti-Shi'a sentiments within parts of the Sunni community. One pivotal moment in the Sunni Shi'a conflict in Nigeria was the 2007 assassination of prominent Sunni preacher Mallam Umaru Dan-Maishiye in Sokoto State. Following his death, three Shi'a members were killed during retaliatory protests. The Shi'a headquarters in the state was later destroyed, prompting the movement to relocate its base, Husainiyya Baqiyatullah, to Zaria, Kaduna State.⁴³

Shi'ites often accuse Sunni-majority governments of inciting discrimination and restricting their religious freedoms.⁴⁴ They consider Zaria massacre of December 2015 as a tragic example. Nigerian troops clashed with the Islamic Movement in Nigeria (IMN) after the convoy of Army Chief Tukur Buratai was reportedly blocked by IMN members. Although IMN denied this, the confrontation escalated and resulted in the deaths of at least 348 civilians, with some estimates suggesting up to 1,000. Sunnis hostile to Shi'ites often cite this incident as divine punishment for alleged Shi'ite disrespect toward the Prophet's companions.⁴⁵ Such inflammatory rhetoric deepens sectarian divides. True moderation demands that Muslims avoid mockery, suspicion, and violence, and instead work toward justice, understanding, and peaceful coexistence.

CONCLUSIONS

From the preceding discussions it is to be observed that Nigeria being the most populous Muslim country in Africa had reasonable percentage of Sunni and Shi'i Muslims in which the Sunnis became the dominant Muslim sect in the country because of its acceptance and wide practice since the advent of Islam in the eleventh

⁴³ K. E. Nnamani, Oranye H. U., and K. O. Ilo, "The Shia Sect Question and the Prospect of Nigeria-Iran Bilateral Relations". The International, *Journal of Interdisciplinary Civic and Political Studies* 16, no. (2), (n.d.): 1-20.

⁴⁴ Malam Saleh Deba, personal interview on 10th May 2019

⁴⁵ Human Right Watch, "Nigeria: Army Attack on Shia Unjustified," *Human Right Watch*, December 22, 2015, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/12/22/nigeria-army-attack-shia-unjustified>.

century up to the twentieth century when Shi'ism emerged through the activities of young Muslim activists in the early 1980s. Since that time up to the present time Nigerian Muslims continue to interact with one another according to what they believed to be the truest form of Islam between Shi'ism and Sunnism. The relationship between these two Muslim groups of different identities is built upon the spirit of moderation but sometimes associated with some traits of immoderate such as hatred and abusive preachings. Considering the prevailing immoderate attitudes of both the adherents of Sunnism and Shi'ism the research recommends avoidance of any incendiary utterances and adopt wisdom in their talks, justice in their deeds. Studies in the future should further look for impact of the Sunni-Shi'ite imbroglio in the context of national integration and development.

REFERENCES

- Aghaie, Kamran Scot. "The Origins of the Sunnite-Shi'ite Divide and the Emergence of the Ta'ziyeh Tradition." *TDR - The Drama Review - A Journal of Performance Studies* 49, no. 4 (2005): 42-47. <https://doi.org/10.1162/105420405774763032>.
- Ahmady, Kameel. "Swift Journals Temporary Marriage: An Approved Way of Submission," no. October (2020).
- Ali, Samaila, and Yahya Imam. "Incursion of Shi ' Ism in Sunni Dominated Societies : A Study of Gombe Metropolis Incursion of Shi ' Ism in Sunni Dominated Societies : A Study of Gombe Metropolis," no. August (2023).
- Firdaus, Qusthan. "Taqiyya: A Conceptual and Practical Examination," 2005.
- Hassan, Muhammad H. "Wasatiyyah as Explained by Kamal Hassan: Justice, Excellence and Balance." *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analysis* 6, no. 2 (2014): 24-30.
- Ibrahim, Musa. "The Formation of Muslim Minorities within a Muslim Majority Context: The Case of Shia Groups in Nigeria." *Islamic Africa* 13, no. 2 (2022): 220-49. <https://doi.org/10.1163/21540993-01302003>.
- Isa, Kabiru Haruna. "Sunni Literary Responses to the Spread of Shia Ideology in Northern Nigeria1." *Studies in African Languages and Cultures* 2018, no. 52 (2018): 113-30. <https://doi.org/10.32690/SALC52.5>.
- Iverson, Brent L, and Peter B Dervan. "Hiwar Hadi Bayna Sunnah Wa Shia A Calm Dialogue between Sunnah and Shi'a," n.d., 7823-30.
- Khalili, Emad. "Sects in Islam : Sunnis and Shias" 3, no. 4 (2016): 41-47.
- Nadir A. Nasidi. "BETWEEN SHI'AH MILITANCY AND THE NIGERIAN MILITARY'S EXTRA-JUDICIAL KILLINGS IN 2015" 29 (2002): 195-210.
- Othman, Mohammad Redzuan, and Mashitah Sulaiman. "Inculcating the Essence of 'wasatiyyah' in Muslim Society: The State Promotion and Muslim Intelligentsia Responses in Malaysia." *Al-Shajarah* 19, no. 2 (2014): 173-213.
- Rahman Tasnim Fitra, Devrian Ali Putra, Dan Sukma Nada Desmanto. "The Concept of Wasatiyyah in Fiqh Muhammadiyyah Perspective," 2023. <https://doi.org/10.15575/as.v24i2.19727>.
- Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Hamid Dabashi, Seyyed Vali Reza Nasr. "Shi'ism_ Doctrines, Thought, and Spirituality - Google Books," n.d.
- Sule, Mohammed Maga, and Muhammad Maigari Abdullahi. "The Spread of Shi'a

- and Its Activities in Nigeria." *Journal of Islamic Studies and Humanities* 4, no. 1 (2019): 28–41. <https://doi.org/10.21580/jish.41.1755>.
- Syed, Ali Abbas. "The Imām and The Perfect Human – An Analysis between Ibn ‘Arabī’s Al-Insān Al-Kāmil and Shī‘ī Imāmology," 2021.
- Taufiq bin Radja Nurul Bahri. "Understanding Islamic Moderation: The Wasatiyya Imperative" 4, no. 9 (2002): 18–20.